



nacsa
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S

CHARTER SCHOOL PROGRAM

Investing in Students by Investing in Charter School Authorizing

One of the most powerful levers the federal government has to strengthen our nation's charter schools is making smart, strategic investments to improve authorizing.

This brief from the [National Association of Charter School Authorizers \(NACSA\)](#) highlights how the Charter School Program (CSP) State Entities Grant's seven percent (7%) set-aside for technical assistance has benefited public education by strengthening authorizing practices. The brief also recommends opportunities for improvement.

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL PROGRAM (CSP)

The Charter School Program (CSP) is a federal grant to expand opportunities for students to attend high-quality charters. CSP achieves this goal by:

- providing start-up funds for the opening of new schools or for the significant expansion of existing schools;
- gauging the impact of charter schools on students and their communities;
- sharing best practices between charters and other public schools;
- incentivizing states to provide facilities for charter schools; and
- supporting efforts to strengthen charter school authorizing.

There are multiple CSP award types, including the CSP State Entities program (CSP SE). This program allows the winning state entity (such as the State Education Agency, Governor, Independent Authorizing Board, or statewide Charter Support Organization) to award subgrants and to open and expand new charter schools. Any state receiving an SE grant must spend at least 7% of the grant funds either on:

1. providing technical assistance in the state, which can be directed to applicants opening new charters; or
2. expanding charters, improving authorizer quality, or both.

This 7% within the CSP SE grant is sometimes known as the 7% set-aside.

Investing in authorizer quality is critical, given how much authorizing matters, but investments as a part of the CSP program is relatively new, as of 2015, via the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

WHY AUTHORIZING MATTERS

Authorizers are the entities that decide who can start a new charter school, set academic and operational expectations, and oversee school performance. They also decide whether a charter should remain open or be closed at the end of its contract.

Who can authorize varies by state. While nearly 90 percent of authorizers nationwide are local school districts, they oversee slightly less than half of all charter schools. The other half of charters are overseen by other authorizer types, including state education agencies, independent boards, universities, mayors and municipalities, and nonprofit organizations.

Smart, proactive authorizing can transform public education. Good authorizers:

- make it their mission to give more students access to great public schools;
- protect student and public interests; and
- set clear expectations on the front end and use strong accountability on the back end.

If a school is not serving students, a good authorizer proactively addresses problems with the school including, when necessary, closing that school and working to ensure students can smoothly transition to better schools.

There is an emerging [body of evidence](#) that authorizing practices impact student achievement, the closing of opportunity/achievement gaps, financial stewardship, and overall portfolio quality. From this research, it is also clear that certain authorizing principles, policies, and practices promote stronger, more equitable schools. This is why it is essential that authorizers receive the support, training, and resources needed to help them excel in their duties.

The 7% set-aside continues to be an indispensable means of funding systemic improvements to authorizing. Without these dollars, many authorizers would be unable to afford the professional development and technical assistance they often receive via CSP.

HOW THE CSP SET-ASIDE ENHANCES AUTHORIZING¹

Despite [its importance](#) in facilitating quality schools, authorizing is sometimes overlooked. CSP has helped elevate authorizing by strongly encouraging states to actively improve their authorizing practices, as a requirement of the CSP SE grant.

There have been 28 CSP SE grants awarded since 2017, for a variety of authorizing improvement activities. For this brief, we interviewed six authorizers² of varying size and type, in states across the country where a CSP SE grant had been awarded. We asked these authorizers how state entities have rolled out authorizer supports and how authorizers believe they have, and have not, benefited from those supports. Overall, we found that the 7% set-aside advanced a variety of authorizer functions and helped authorizers improve and build their capacity, although not uniformly.

How the Set-Aside Was Used Effectively

Regular Technical Assistance

Many State Entities (SEs) have used set-aside funds to provide regular technical assistance (TA) to authorizers, often through monthly or quarterly meetings. This is important since many authorizers noted that they do not have additional opportunities for TA or professional development outside of what the SE provides through the CSP grant.

For example, a representative from the charter office at Prince George's County Public Schools shared that the Maryland State Department of Education has facilitated ongoing meetings where TA is provided. These quarterly meetings address basic authorizing practices, such as applications, performance frameworks, and handling appeals.

External Professional Development

Sometimes, in addition to or in lieu of internal TA, SEs have awarded subgrants to authorizers to attend and participate in external authorizer-focused professional development. This can be particularly beneficial in states where there are limited organizations with the knowledge and capacity to provide evidence-based assistance to authorizers.

The Minnesota Department of Education, that state's SE grantee, has used a portion of their funds as \$2,500 subgrants to authorizers for professional development. One authorizer, Osprey Wilds, has used these dollars to supplement their professional development budget and send staff to NACSA's annual

¹ We hope this brief complements a report being released by the U.S. Department of Education later this year. In May 2021, the Department stated that they plan to release a report in Summer 2021 on the use of CSP funds reserved for technical assistance. While the report has yet to be published, the Department did share that 18 of 19 grantees surveyed planned to use funds for technical assistance related to charter school authorizing and oversight. The Department also shared that more funds were being used for TA to subgrants (in this case, individual charter school applicants) than for authorizer improvement.

² Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board (MS); Rhode Island Department of Education (RI); Prince George's County Schools (MD); Edgewood Independent School District (TX); Ball State University (IN); Osprey Wilds (MN)

leadership conference. The Osprey Wilds representative said they find NACSA's professional development helpful, as it makes them “think about how we streamline processes for schools, how do we ask the right questions around school quality, how do we measure goals related to what the school is doing, and not just completely focused on statewide assessments.”

Elsewhere, the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board (MCSAB) has used its set-aside funds to hire a consultant who provides professional development related to the regular charter school application cycle. The MCSAB representative described the TA as “fabulous.” As a result, they have improved their application protocols to ensure that only quality applications make it through their multi-tiered process.

Networking and Partnerships

Multiple authorizers lauded the benefits of their SE bringing them together with other authorizers to learn, collaborate, and exchange ideas. One of the most structured and purposeful example is in Texas, where the SE has in part used set-aside funds to build the [Texas Authorizer Leadership Academy \(TALA\)](#)³—a cohort-model training for district authorizers in the [System of Great Schools \(SGS\) network](#). The cohorts meet four to five times a year, for two days each time, to participate in trainings that cover key areas of early life-cycle authorizing, such as setting up a high-quality application process, developing performance-based contracts, and leading robust pre-opening protocols. A representative from the charter office at the Edgewood Independent School District said the cohort program helped him build strong relationships with other authorizers whom he often reaches out to, to work through problems and brainstorm as issues arise.

Templates and Resources to Build Capacity

Creating systems and templates directly impacts authorizers and their capacity to perform. Thus, it was not surprising to learn that SEs have also used CSP set-aside funds to establish authorizer self-evaluations, common student application templates, and unified enrollment systems.

For example, in Rhode Island, set-aside funding is being used to build a common charter school student application and enrollment system to make the process more equitable for families and to help the authorizer better monitor the student application and enrollment processes.

In Indiana, some set-aside funds are being used to develop a voluntary self-evaluation tool for authorizers to determine in what areas they excel, as well as areas for improvement. A representative from Ball State said that the evidence provided as part of the self-evaluation helped them “realize what [they] had and didn't have, including some policies [they] didn't even know existed,” allowing them to move forward and see what needs to be updated in their policies and approach.

³ Note: NACSA has contracted to provide some programming support for TALA.

WAYS TO IMPROVE THE CSP SET-ASIDE

There are many examples of how the CSP set-aside is improving charter school authorizing. There are also, according to authorizers who access these resources, opportunities for improvement. Most areas for growth would be “light lifts”—easily encouraged or incentivized by the U.S. Department of Education simply noting these issues in their guidance.

Opportunity for Better Communication

Many authorizers interviewed were unaware of specific details related to the 7% set-aside. Many did not know about goals, plans, or funding levels for their respective SE grant award. In some cases, it was clear that SEs had not formally introduced or engaged authorizers in discussions about the set-aside or the associated TA.

On the front end, SEs should put more effort into sharing their plans with any stakeholder groups that would be likely recipients or beneficiaries of grant-funded TA. If appropriate, those groups, including authorizers, could be included in TA selection and design. Once awarded, SEs should go back to the authorizers in their state to announce the award, the timeline for implementation, and the specific resources that will be available.

Opportunity for Assessing Need and Differentiating Programming

Several authorizers mentioned the need for more nuanced and tailored TA based on their experience in and phase of authorizing. One said, “It’s possible that [the trainings] are helpful for authorizers that are relatively new,” but that many had been too basic for them.

This suggests that SEs need to work more to understand authorizers’ needs at the outset. There should also be continual evaluations—formal and informal—throughout the grant’s life cycle to understand if authorizers’ needs have changed, so SEs can adjust accordingly.

NACSA'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Great authorizing can transform public education, as evidenced by an emerging [body of research](#) that shows authorizing practices impact student achievement, the closing of opportunity/achievement gaps, financial stewardship, and overall school portfolio quality.

This is why it is essential that authorizers receive the support, training, and resources needed to help them excel. NACSA supports many of the recommendations to improve the Charter School Program (CSP) and its role in improving charter schools and their oversight more broadly, including those raised by [Bellwether Education Partners](#) and the [Center for American Progress](#). There are multiple ways in which CSP could be used to improve equity and help more students gain access to high-quality schools.

The 7% set-aside continues to be one invaluable source of funding to support systemic improvements to authorizing. Without these funds, many State Entities (SEs) would be unable to develop and deliver (or contract out for) technical assistance (TA) and professional development for their authorizers. Likewise, authorizers would largely be unable to afford professional development without SE assistance.

We encourage policymakers to consider the following recommendations:

Boost the Set-Aside to 10%

While nearly all states intend to use the 7% set-aside to take meaningful actions to support quality authorizing, NACSA's research for this brief shows that not enough grantees are spending the needed funds to pursue those activities well.

We encourage the Department of Education to change CSP's funding restrictions so that not less than 10% of funds would be reserved for new school TA and authorizer improvement. For a typical grant of \$40M, this would provide states with an additional \$1.2M over their grant's lifespan to engage in TA and quality improvement initiatives.

Then, states should be required to use 50% of these TA funds (equivalent to 5% of their grant) to promote and support high-quality authorizing, with grantees conducting a needs assessment to best direct that investment and periodic evaluations to spur continuous improvement (see more below). As indicated by the U.S. Department of Education, we believe some SE grantees may not be investing an adequate amount of their TA resources in authorizer quality improvement initiatives. This impacts the ability of the SE to invest in individualized authorizer supports.

In addition, several current and former SE grant administrators interviewed as background for this brief point to one cause of this shortfall: limitations in how the current distribution sequencing drips out TA funds to states only as they distribute subgrant funds. This unnecessarily hamstring meaningful projects that require a front-end investment and restricts the authorizer quality TA that SEs can design and implement.

That's why we also recommend the allowance for grantees to front-load spend—in the first two years of their grant—up to half of the TA funds they are slated to receive over their grant's life-span.

Continued investment in the CSP SE program will improve authorizing—a critical element to ensure that students, especially those in high-need communities, are served by high-quality public school options.

Require a Needs Assessment in the Application Process and an Implementation Survey in the Closing Out Process

→ Authorizer Needs Assessment

Many authorizers shared that the TA offered by the SE did not always align with their needs. Therefore, we recommend that all SEs be required to provide evidence they conducted an authorizer needs assessment prior to submitting their application.

Evidence suggests that authorizers with the strongest portfolios excel in these categories (for more information on specific activities within each category, see NACSA's [Practices That Matter](#) summary):

1. Authorizer culture
2. Applications and school openings
3. Monitoring and intervention
4. Renewal, expansion, and closure

When assessing need, grantees could first seek to understand how authorizers are performing in these categories. In addition to asking authorizers about their needs, it would be informative to ask authorizers' stakeholders (ex: school leaders, community members, etc.) in what areas they felt authorizers needed the most assistance.

→ Implementation Survey

Grantees should understand the impact of the assistance provided to authorizers. NACSA recommends that any state using the set-aside for authorizer improvement be required to report back on the effectiveness of their activities. This could be done through surveying authorizers or some other form of evaluation, to understand what activities led to the most behavior and practice changes, and the outcomes of those changes.

CONCLUSION

Authorizing matters for quality public charter schools. How can federal policymakers, the Department of Education, and SE grantees use the tools they have through the Charter School Program to help make public charter schools better?

They can seize the opportunity of a more substantial 10% set-aside to make smart, strategic investments to improve charter school authorizing.

These effective investments would be:

- a meaningful size;
- crafted and targeted for the authorizer needs in that state; and
- evaluated to help inform future programming and investments.

This will lead to a charter school sector that is accountable to the public, fosters transparency, and provides the autonomy needed to create and sustain great public schools that respond to community needs.

When you invest in authorizers, you invest in students.