



nacsa  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS



**INNOVATION AFTER THE PANDEMIC:**  
*Opportunities to Evolve Authorizing and School  
System Oversight*

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*As students and communities emerge from the ravages of a global pandemic, authorizing faces a key challenge: embracing its fundamental role of providing high-quality educational opportunities, while evolving to meet new demands and expectations, especially those created by the pandemic. How it navigates this tension will impact millions of students and families.*

## **Authorizing: The Most Consequential School Governance Reform of the Past Two Decades**

For more than 30 years, authorizing has helped create a new public education landscape, where school autonomy, balanced by fierce accountability and equitable access, could exist and thrive. Exceptionally strong student outcomes—[particularly for students of color, lower-income students, and students in urban locales](#)—are clearly evident. In addition, schools and classrooms saw [new and more diverse talent](#), and there was closer attention paid to family and community demand for excellent schools.

Yet, something else was also happening. Producing high-quality educational opportunities slowly began to cause a prescriptiveness in expectations, creating unintended consequences. As illustrated by NACSA's own research, we have seen a narrowing of the [kinds of educational opportunities being proposed and approved, a dwindling pipeline of new applications](#), and [a lack of strong indicators measuring if charter schools are achieving their unique missions](#).

The pandemic has pushed everyone—including authorizers—to re-think approaches to education, particularly in light of the immense decline in student learning and wellness. However, it also demonstrated the ability of the charter model to be responsive, adaptable, and flexible. As most public schooling shifted from in-person to virtual learning in 2020, by design, charters used their built-in autonomy to pivot faster and more effectively: charter schools were able to transition to virtual learning in 3.5 days, compared to most district schools that caught up later that spring, some not until May 2020. In addition, 97 percent of charter school staff surveyed reported to have received professional development related to online learning.<sup>1</sup>

As students and communities emerge from the pandemic, leaning into the foundational tenets of authorizing—providing talented leaders with more autonomy in exchange for strong accountability and access for all—authorizing can provide a powerful path to recovery. But for this to be true, authorizing has to evolve to embrace quality *and* innovation, especially from those communities with the most ground to make up—and with the most at stake—from the pandemic. We know that innovation, even when balanced with accountability and access, comes with some risk. But the potential it has to provide students, families, and communities with access to high-quality, innovative educational opportunities makes it a smart risk, and one worth taking.

What might that authorizer evolution look like? We looked at research both on families, to understand their experiences with their children during the pandemic, and school and community leaders—those who created new ways of organizing learning during the pandemic—to explore these opportunities to evolve.

## **A Driving Force: Family and Community Demands and Aspirations**

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.the74million.org/new-research-tracks-charters-early-moves-during-pandemic/>

Families cannot forget what they experienced during the pandemic, and its effects on education will be felt for years.

Some saw a more responsive, personalized, and self-directed learning environment, where children learned, even amidst physical isolation. Far more, however, experienced poor remote teaching and learning and unresponsive systems that struggled to provide even a basic level of instruction. According to a recent analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores by *Education Week*, “long-term trend data...showed that nine-year-old students scored, on average, five points lower in reading and seven points lower in math in 2022 than did their pre-pandemic peers in 2020. The declines represent the largest drops in decades.” Recovering lost learning and wellness must be the top educational priority.

But one fact is undeniable: families had a front-row seat for the educational experiences of their children, spurring a shift in attitudes toward approaches to teaching and learning. According to several surveys conducted by Morning Consult for Ed Choice, 36 percent of families have a more favorable opinion of homeschooling than before.<sup>2</sup> In another poll, while 84 percent of families said they were comfortable sending their students back to school, large majorities—including 74 percent of low-income parents and 81 percent of Black parents—said they thought “school should provide multiple learning options for students this school year.”

The poll also found an uptick to 34 percent in parents interested in learning pods, “comparable to interest levels seen in the early months of the 2021-22 school year,” with nearly 60 percent of Black parents saying they were likely to form or participate in learning pods.<sup>3</sup> A poll from the National Parents Union found 63 percent of all parents and 78 percent of Black parents surveyed agreed that “schools need to focus on rethinking education and coming up with new ways of teaching and learning as a result of COVID-19.”<sup>4</sup>

This creates a complex and nuanced post-pandemic landscape that emphasizes the need to cultivate teaching and learning innovations while facing these sobering learning losses, both of which impact students. That’s where authorizers’ can evolve in how they face these needs head on: to become more proximate to, and center the perspectives of, the families and communities they serve. Fortunately, there are some emerging pandemic-era innovations in authorizing already taking hold and some important opportunities to continue to grow and evolve.

### **Creating Our Way Out: Fostering High-Quality Innovation**

The charter sector rightly continues to face demands to prove strong student learning outcomes, usually measured by state tests. This creates inevitable pressure on authorizers to increasingly approve “sure thing” applications, and less inclined to take risks. The result has been a sector of strong schools and [fewer failed schools](#) but also lost opportunities to create and support the next great, innovative schools children need today.

Fostering the creativity observed during the pandemic alongside a commitment to quality, authorizing can enter a new era. We are already seeing some pandemic-era creative solutions that will have enduring impact:

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<sup>2</sup>PowerPoint Presentation (morningconsultintelligence.com)

<sup>3</sup>EdChoice Public Opinion Tracker: Top Takeaways April 2022 - EdChoice

<sup>4</sup><https://nationalparentsunion.org/2020/12/07/what-parents-really-think-about-their-childrens-education/>

- **Rigorous Measures of School Quality:** During the pandemic, state testing was put on hold, interrupting school evaluations and contract renewals based on standard test-based measures. Fortunately, before the pandemic, the authorizing sector was developing [innovative, rigorous, and evidenced-based measures of school quality that are more sensitive to school mission and student needs](#). The infrastructure to measure things like the degree to which a multi-language school is achieving its mission of multilingualism, or how well student wellness is being advanced, or student success with job-related internships, appropriately broadens how school quality is measured. While high and equitable outcomes on measures of literacy and numeracy must remain foundational elements of school quality, these multiple, rigorous measures allow for a more complete picture of school performance.
- **Small Learning Communities (SLCs):** Pods, microschoools, and learning hubs are three SLC models that gained prominence during the pandemic as an alternative to in-person or virtual learning models. These SLCs met student needs in a real way:

“Over two-thirds of families that responded to our survey cited tangible benefits for their child, such as being more engaged in learning, completing more challenging assignments or feeling happier overall compared with their previous school experiences. Nearly half of families felt their child was more deeply connected to instructors and peers in the pod and received more individualized instruction that met their needs compared with their pre-pandemic schools...One of the key benefits teachers and parents discovered in pods—the flexibility to tailor learning to students’ needs and interests—was undermined when students spent long hours tethered to online schools.”<sup>5</sup>

While the popularity and availability of some SLCs have waned, the benefits of creating smaller, more personal, and more flexible ways of organizing learning remain. The question for authorizers is how to embrace and signal an openness to new school applicants, or existing schools, who want to incorporate lessons of personalization, self-direction, and smallness into learning environments.

- **Multi-location and flexible learning:** Even when schools began to reopen, there were frequent times when school facilities were not available as learning environments. Schools developed plans out of necessity, sending individual students or entire classrooms home when outbreaks occurred, to continue students’ education. While this innovation means students can continue learning despite weather or other disruptions, it also has opened the door—literally—to rethink how to authorize learning arrangements that may occur in many different kinds of locations and how to organize the learning experience in new and different ways.
- **Creative partnerships with community:** When most public facilities, including schools and libraries, were forced to shut their doors, many students—especially children of essential workers—were left without access to an environment conducive to learning. Programs like the ones created by the Mind Trust and United Way of Central Indiana in Indianapolis brought schools and community groups together to benefit student learning. This program now has a lasting impact as the [Indy Summer Learning Labs](#).

## A Fresh Look: Authorizing Policy and Practice Opportunities

While these creative innovations will go a long way to meeting community demand and expectation, much more evolution is needed. Here are some aspects of every authorizer’s role that deserve a fresh look:

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<sup>5</sup>Analysis: Pandemic Pods Were Everywhere — Until They Weren’t. Here’s What Their Popularity Means for the Future of Education – The 74 ([the74million.org](http://the74million.org))

- **The application process for new schools**, which has become too prescriptive in some places, needs re-thinking. [Data on proposed and approved charter applications](#) illustrated that the application process has become bureaucratic and onerous in too many places, inappropriately privileging particular kinds of people, models, and operators. This results in a narrow group of educators and community members able to enter charter schooling, and a stifling of new and different approaches to teaching and learning. An improved application process must build on strengths cultivated over the last several decades and transform weaknesses, so that more excellent and innovative educational opportunities emerge, led by a more diverse group of educators and entrepreneurs. NACSA, along with key partners like [Transcend](#), [BES](#), [NACA Inspired Schools Network](#) and others, is re-thinking the new school application process, has identified a set of [key recommendations](#) for how it can be transformed, and is working with leading authorizers like the [Colorado Charter School Institute](#) on implementation.
- **How quality is defined** requires an update. When authorizers enforce narrow and ineffective ways of evaluating learning opportunities and school quality, they limit who opens new schools and their ability to meet community aspirations. As schools and authorizers have begun using multiple measures of school quality—while continuing to prioritize foundational measures of student literacy and numeracy—it is the role of authorizers to ensure these measures are implemented well and with rigor. Authorizers and school leaders can ensure this by listening closely to the aspirations of communities; by assessing their own cultural competence; and by gathering, analyzing, and publicizing the data. This should be done in a way that decreases unnecessary bureaucratic burdens on schools, and frees up leaders to continue building and running schools aligned with their vision. NACSA is working with key partners—like [SUNY](#) and the [National Charter Schools Institute](#)—on the infrastructure needed to make these changes, and has identified [some key implementation lessons](#).
- **Smart policy proposals are needed to enable innovation** to build a high-quality ecosystem, even beyond individual schools, networks, and districts. Several of our partner organizations have proposed policies that authorizers can champion. For example, 50CAN, an educational advocate, recently launched their Believe in Better Framework<sup>6</sup> that encourages policies that enable students to, “Earn credits from civic, non-profit, university, professional and government organizations, on a schedule that works for you.”
- **Innovation must be curated in and beyond charter schooling** so all students can thrive through access to high-quality educational opportunities. All schools, not just charters, should prioritize building and sustaining educational opportunities aligned to communities’ stated needs. Increasingly, district and state leaders are embracing the key tenets of quality authorizing as a strategy to unleash talent, innovation, and strong outcomes, even if they don't embrace charter schooling as currently configured in their locale. While in the early stages, partnerships created as a result of [S.B. 1882 in Texas](#) provide some examples of this work.

## Our Future: High-Quality Innovation

High-quality, innovative, and equitable educational opportunities that communities are rightly demanding have never been more important. As new models of schools led by diverse people continue to emerge, lessons learned from the pandemic must influence the future: evolving quality authorizing is essential to making quality innovation real and sustainable.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://50can.org/believe-in-better/>

But, as we see more proof points of innovation in education meeting student and community needs, authorizing needs to answer some tough questions to enable these innovations to be sustainable and replicable:

- **How do we know if pandemic innovations are successful at advancing student learning and wellness?** To date, there has been little rigorous study of whether and/or how these settings and new approaches to learning worked to advance student achievement.
- **How can we continue to ensure equitable access for all and foster autonomy while upholding high standards of accountability?** Some innovations, especially some elements of SLCs, were largely non-public in nature. We need to determine if and how such innovations work with open-enrollment, accountability, and civil rights laws, among others.
- **What school models are working well and how can we encourage expansion and renewal, without bureaucratic burden?** Finding the right balance of necessary evaluation of innovative approaches, without creating new unnecessary barriers to entry, has always been a tricky balance in authorizing, and one that will need to be navigated thoughtfully in this new era.
- **Instead of only accepting what new school applicants offer, should authorizers also actively seek and/or curate models that challenge the status quo?** While it is [best practice for authorizers to cultivate quality charter schools that meet identified educational and community needs](#), the extent to which that is done—and without inappropriately restricting new kinds of opportunities—is far from settled.

NACSA is working to help answer these difficult, nuanced questions,<sup>7</sup> not only to address these new times, but also to shape the future of authorizing. We already know leading authorizers are embracing less prescription, more innovation, and new ways of listening to the needs and aspirations of communities, while insisting on quality. But such an approach is far from uniform across the sector. The dual challenge is saying yes to existing models demonstrated to accelerate student learning, while welcoming new and different ways of organizing learning. It also means saying no to bad ideas and unprepared actors. The field cannot fall into the trap that innovation and quality are somehow at odds.

This moment presents a golden opportunity for authorizers to model, share learnings, and lead. Authorizers who balance autonomy, accountability, and access appropriately—based on what we've learned in the pandemic—can support schools to help students, especially students of color and low-income students, to not just recover, but thrive.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://newtimes.qualitycharters.org/>