ILLINOIS STATE
CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

BIENNIAL BEST PRACTICE REPORT

Access, Accountability, and Autonomy are the primary tenets of the charter school movement and the pillars upon which charter school authorizers establish policies and practices to support high-performing, successful charter schools.

As an independent, statewide charter school authorizer, the Illinois State Charter School Commission ("the Commission" or "SCSC") publishes, biennially, a Best Practice Report designed to support and advance the quality of the Illinois charter school ecosystem. Charter schools can serve as a vehicle for school districts to develop a diverse portfolio of high-performing school options.

The objective of the 2018 Report is to support Illinois school districts in successfully charting out a well-planned journey and navigating terrain toward alignment with the *Principles and Standards for Quality Authorizing*, as issued by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), and thereby fully supporting and serving the best interests of students and families of Illinois.

Charting a Course

The Illinois Charter Schools Law empowers school districts to create diverse portfolios of school options to meet the needs of all students, especially those considered to be at-risk students that will:

- **Create access to high quality educational options by proactively authorizing new and replicating charters;**
- **Foster autonomy for collaboration among high-performing schools; and**
- **Ensure that accountability standards are rigorous, transparent, and offer pathways for academic success for students.**

Across the nation, school districts oversee charter schools in addition to portfolios of direct-run schools. Strong district authorizers develop a clear plan for schools by communicating clear expectations, timelines for deliverables, and consequential actions for falling below standards.

No two authorizers are created the same; every district has diverse populations, priorities, needs, infrastructure, and resource challenges.

Proactive authorizers actively navigate charter applicants to meet the needs and priorities of the district, thereby increasing access and opportunities for students.

Reactive authorizers address charter school applications ad-hoc, which effectively places the charter applicant in the driver's seat.

Adopting a Charter School Policy and annual authorizing calendar can increase consistency, preserve resources, and allow districts to balance broader district goals and priorities with authorizing functions. Once a district has mapped out its plan and gathered a comprehensive set of tools, best practice is to codify a policy (or set of policies) which serve as the basis for opening and overseeing charter school performance.

The sample Annual Authorizing Calendar on p.14 presents a balanced annual approach to a district's role and work as an Authorizer, from proposal through renewal.

	A BASIC DISTRICT POLICY ON CHARTER SCHOOLS MIGHT INCLUDE:	SAMPLE SCSC RESOURCES AND TEMPLATES:
Access	Instructions for charter proposal submission and evaluation criteria	Model Request for New Charter School Proposals
	Description of programmatic, and geographic preferences for new schools	Model Completeness Checklist Model Evaluation Rubric
Autonomy	Explanation of the Charter Agreement Negotiation Process	Contract Template Pre-Opening Checklist
	Criteria for material modifications and process	Material Modification Application and Rubric
Accountability	Explanation of annual performance and reporting expectations and evaluation criteria	Accountability System including renewal expectations and process Site Visit Protocol

ACCESS ▶ PLANNING A ROUTE FOR NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The Illinois General Assembly specifies under the law that charter authorizing is a "legitimate avenue" to promote new options within the school system, improve and increase new learning opportunities for students, as well as create new professional opportunities for teachers, and provide parents with expanded choice.

105 ILCS 5/27A-2.

In Illinois, a non-profit organization may submit a proposal for a new charter school to any district, regardless of whether the district currently has a charter school portfolio. The charter law also prescribes, in effect, that school boards must decide whether to approve or deny any new proposal within 75 days. Districts that do not have a policy on charter schools must evaluate proposals reactively, whenever they are submitted, which can contravene district planning calendars and strain staffing resources. Districts can proactively control the process by establishing a specified timeframe for accepting and evaluating any potential new school proposal, which allows districts to preserve limited resources by planning ahead for the substantial work of evaluating a charter school proposal. This can be accomplished by establishing a charter school policy that includes a section on new schools and defines:

- **Timeline for proposal submission and decision;**
- **Format for proposals; and**
- **Evaluation criteria and process.**

The Commission has developed a comprehensive suite of tools for accepting and evaluating new school proposals including a model Request[1] for Charter School Proposals (RFP) with aligned Evaluation Rubric. Districts may consider utilizing these model documents as a guide to facilitate receipt and evaluation of charter school proposals.

Requiring applicants to follow a template for proposals provides consistent and transparent expectations. Using a rubric with criteria and formatting aligned to the RFP ensures a consistent standard for evaluation and well-organized written assessments from evaluators.

[1] https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ModelRFP2017.pdf

Districts are encouraged to customize these tools with relevant writing prompts, questions, and/or expectations as applicable to the district's priorities, needs, and expectations. For example, a district may want a new school to meet an identified geographic need or may wish to deepen its academic offerings via specific programs or academic models (e.g. dropout recovery, STEM, IB, classical). Issuing a formal Request for Proposals allows a district to:

- **Control the timing of proposal submissions;**
- **Proactively plan resource allocation for hearings and evaluation;**
- **Establish form and content of proposals.**

Regardless of whether a new school proposal is solicited or not, refer to the Commission's 2016 Best Practice Report for detailed information on developing and managing a high-quality process to request and evaluate charter school proposals.

MANAGING AN APPEAL TO THE COMMISSION

In general, the Commission has historically received fewer appeals of new school proposal denials from districts that use a formal, proactive RFP and evaluation process. Further, districts that have a transparent, established RFP process are well prepared to respond to appeals to the SCSC because there is a clear procedural record and articulated basis for their decisions.

During an appeal, a strong district response will demonstrate:

1. **The district followed state law and any local school board policy regarding charter schools;**
2. **The district acted in good faith and with the best interest of students in mind; and**
3. **The local school board made an evidence-based decision to deny the proposal.**

PRE-OPENING MONITORING

Once a local school board has voted to approve a new school proposal, district staff have two critical work streams:

1. **Negotiating the charter school agreement with the school's governing board; and**
2. **Monitoring the school's pre-opening period to ensure that the school has a successful opening.**

High-quality charter school authorizers utilize a uniform protocol to monitor a school during the pre-opening period (preferably one calendar year), often referred to as a **Pre-Opening Checklist.**

The Pre-Opening Checklist identifies readiness milestones which are specific and time-bound to help the school and the authorizer to efficiently maintain a common understanding of the school's progress towards a successful launch. The Checklist can also minimize the impact of monitoring work on district staff by providing a clear set of deliverables for the school, including a schedule for meetings and other status updates. The Commission's Pre-Opening Checklist is a simple protocol that districts can easily adapt and use to ensure that approved schools operate within their budget, opening on time in a well-prepared facility.

AUTONOMY ▶ NAVIGATING CHARTER AGREEMENT NEGOTIATIONS

The charter agreement is the contract between the charter school's governing board and the school district. It incorporates by referencing the approved charter school proposal and any district accountability metrics, but it is a separate and distinct document that should be executed by the authorizer and the charter school board. The charter agreement specifies those local, state, and federal regulations and policies from which the charter school is exempt, as well as reinforces those which the charter school must follow.

Districts may wish to adapt the Commission's contract template, including the documents included by reference such as its Accountability System. However, as with all contracts, the school and district must negotiate in good faith on a wide range of topics to complete the contract, for example: enrollment; the approved per capita tuition charge (PCTC) percentage; and the performance targets set forth in an accountability plan.

"Charter contracts make school-based autonomy and accountability real."

- National Association of Charter School Authorizers

Material Modification of a Charter School Contract

Autonomy provided by the charter agreement allows charter schools flexibility with academic, organizational, and financial operations in order to best meet the needs of students.

Schools may find it necessary to request modifications to existing agreements for many reasons, including enrollment increases, grade-level changes, and/or facility relocation. It is important for district authorizers to ensure that when a change is "material" to the agreement, the school (a) submits a formal request to amend the agreement; and (b) the authorizer performs an analysis to assess whether the amendment is merited.

In general, best practice in charter school authorizing indicates that in order to modify an agreement the charter school should:

- **Be in good standing with the authorizer across all performance areas; and**
- **Provide a solid, evidence-based rationale for the modification.**

An annual, transparent process and timeline for reviewing modification requests allows a district to manage resources and sufficiently consider implications of the modification request, not only for the district but also for charter school students and families.

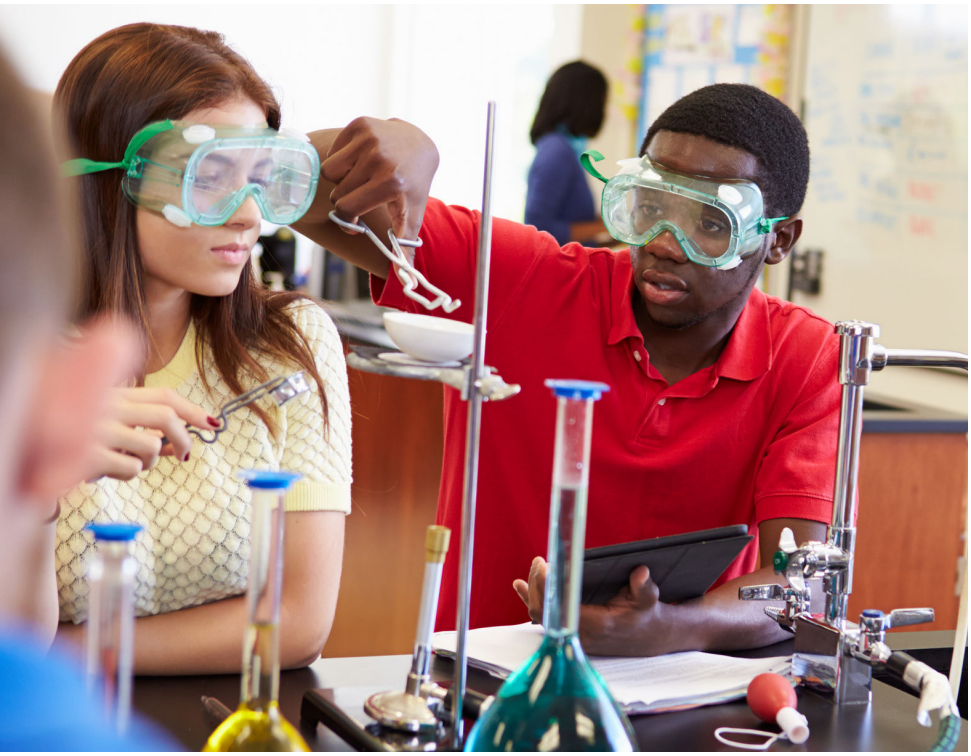
The authorizing district should evaluate the merits of the request with consideration of impact and overall school performance. If the district determines that a material modification is warranted, the board and the charter school must negotiate and approve the new language.

ACCOUNTABILITY ▶ MONITORING FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Transparent and consistent monitoring practices, throughout the term of a school's charter, are critical to protecting both the best interests of students and taxpayer dollars.

Accountability standards should be set forth in an Accountability Plan and/or Performance Framework. The Accountability Plan for Commission-authorized schools includes three distinct Performance Frameworks with clear metrics and performance targets, for the academic, organizational, and financial domains. National best practice suggests that authorizers should annually evaluate each school against the performance standards and publish each school's results as an annual report.

Results of school performance are used to determine a charter school's annual status with regards to its contract. Depending on whether the school is found to be performing well and in compliance or not, the school should be either celebrated for meeting or exceeding performance expectations, or, if the school is falling below expectations, supportive and/or corrective actions may be required.



Monitoring performance and compliance is a journey, not a destination.

Celebrating Schools that Consistently Meet or Exceed Standards

High-quality authorizers across the country leverage strong charter schools in their portfolios to provide increased access to high-quality academic options for as many students as possible.

In general, this is accomplished through three main routes:

1. **Encouraging best-practice sharing relationships between the highest performing schools and other schools (both charter and traditional) in the district;**
2. **Permitting enrollment expansion for high-performing charter schools; and/or**
3. **Granting replication requests to high-performing charter schools seeking to open a new campus.**

Before granting a replication or expansion of an existing school, the authorizing district must establish that the school will:

- **Continue to meet or exceed established performance standards;**
- **Have sufficient resources (including financial and facility) to serve new students; and**
- **Faithfully provide the same school experience for both new and existing students.**

Actions For Schools Not Meeting Standards

When charter schools do not meet the standards laid out in their contracts, authorizing best practice dictates that the authorizer should attempt corrective actions prior to deciding to close a charter school.

These actions may include:

- **Interventions, for example, requiring the school to develop and follow a strategic or performance improvement plan, assigning specific district supports to the school; or**
- **More aggressive strategies such as increased monitoring activity or withholding funds.**

COMPLIANCE CHECKLIST

Authorizers should clearly delineate what data will be collected from schools, when, and how the information will be received. Generally, the following will establish the evidence-base and compliance record needed to fully assess a school's progress annually. A planned and announced annual site visit to inspect the school facility, observe teaching and learning, verify and audit records, and meet with school leadership and staff provides essential context for the documents described below.

1. **Academic data, including, at minimum:**
   - **results from the school's interim assessments (NWEA or other) and annual assessments (PARCC or other);**
   - **high school graduation rate, SAT performance results, and college enrollment data;**
   - **differentiated lesson/unit plans; aligned grade-level benchmarks; and redacted IEP records;**
2. **Operational information such as:**
   - **student enrollment, attendance and discipline policies;**
   - **annual professional development plan and calendar;**
   - **governing board meeting schedule and approved minutes;**
   - **HR records including staff rosters, certification, background checks, and grievance policy;**
3. **Quarterly financial reports and annual audit.**

Renewed Charters are Passports for Expanded Choice

In making a renewal decision, the district must review the school's performance record over the full term of its charter. It is important that the charter school is assessed across a variety of measures, including:

- **Absolute performance: in empirical terms, is the school academically, financially, and organizationally successful?**
- **Comparative performance: does the school outperform comparison schools academically, providing a strong alternative to other schools in the district and state?**
- **Performance trend analysis: over time, has the school strengthened academic, organizational, and financial performance?**

The decision to renew a charter agreement is as important as the decision to open a new school, perhaps more so because students and families are depending on the school to provide a quality academic experience. Once a decision regarding a renewal application has been voted on by the local school board, the school moves forward to either negotiate a new contract for an additional charter term or moves into non-renewal status and closes at the end of the charter term.

A renewal process can last anywhere from three to nine months, depending on the extent of the district's analysis of school performance and engagement of school stakeholders. Again, districts engaged in annual oversight, monitoring, and reporting are more likely to manage a condensed, yet comprehensive process in three to five months.

Authorizers should note that the failure to meet or make reasonable progress toward achievement is predefined and agreed to by the authorizer and the charter school in the charter agreement and incorporated accountability plan. Annual performance reports clearly demonstrate a school's progression, and alert all stakeholders of performance before the renewal process begins.

A comprehensive renewal process includes the following:

Performance Audit
Review of past academic performance; achieved and anticipated growth rates.

Team of Renewal Evaluators
Content experts, authorizer staff, and at least one independent evaluator, if possible.

Renewal Application
Key questions and inquiry prompts to determine the school's performance during the term of the agreement, challenges anticipated and inquiry prompts, goals, objectives and plans for the future.

Evaluation Rubric
Set of metrics aligned to the application and made available to the school.

A Renewal Site Visit
One to three days of observations of classroom instruction, school climate and culture, professional development and teacher collaboration.

Capacity Interview
School leadership and governing board clarify any concerns presented in the application or observed during the site visit.

Public Hearing and/or Stakeholder Focus Groups
Input from school and community stakeholders provide valuable insights on demand and interest in the school.

REVOCATION, EXPIRATION, OR SURRENDER OF THE LICENSE TO OPERATE A CHARTER

Authorizers are obligated to ensure schools are meeting performance standards and serving the best interests of students. School Closure, by an authorizer, is mandated when schools consistently:

- **Fail to make reasonable progress toward achievement of pupil performance standards; or**
- **Commit material violations of terms set forth in the charter agreement; or**
- **Demonstrate non-compliance with GAAP standards, or**
- **Violate any provisions of the law.**

105 ILCS 5/27A-9(c)

In order to protect the best interests of students and responsibly steward taxpayer dollars, authorizers and the charter school's governing board and leadership should work closely to ensure a smooth and orderly closure and transition for students and families, and to protect public interests. A district should monitor the school's wind-down operations, support students and families to enroll in other high-quality public schools, and ensure appropriate allocation of the school's assets.

In general, charter schools close through one of two mechanisms, either:

1. **Voluntary surrender of the charter by the school's governing board; or**
2. **Closure decision by the authorizer, through either revocation or non-renewal at the end of a charter term.**

CONCLUSION

This Best Practice Report is intended to convey that school districts can effectively chart a course and navigate the work of charter school authorizing. The Illinois State Charter School Commission and other organizations, listed on p. 15, have accessible tools and offer support to districts developing charter school policies, practices and accomplishing the core tenets of Access, Autonomy and Accountability.

ANNUAL ANUTHORIZING CALENDAR

MONTH	NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS *Evaluating New Charter School Proposals and Pre-Opening Monitoring*	EXISTING SCHOOLS *Ongoing Monitoring, Charter Agreement Modification or Renewal*
January	Release Request for Proposals for new, replicating and/or expansion school opportunities and priorities	Ongoing Monitoring/Evaluation *Follow-up on findings from previous site visit* *Negotiate Renewed/Modified Charter Agreements*
February	RFP Information Sessions Letters of Intent to Apply due	
March	Charter School Proposal Submission	
April	Evaluation of Charter School Proposal Public Hearing	
May	Charter Applicant Capacity Interview and Site Visit, if necessary	
June	School Board Votes on Charter Agreement Negotiation	
July	Planning Year Begins for New Schools	Renewed, Replicating, Modified, Post-Planning Year Charter Agreements Effective July 1
August	Pre-Opening Monitoring	Renewed, Replicating, Modified, Post-Planning Year Charter Agreements Effective July 1
September	Pre-Opening Monitoring: Board Recruitment and Training	Conduct analysis of school performance - academic, fiscal and organizational *for prior academic year* Release Renewal and Material Modification Applications
October	Pre-Opening Monitoring: Board Recruitment and Training	Annual Monitoring Site Visits *current academic year* Request(s) for Material Modification and Renewal Applications Submitted
November	Pre-Opening Monitoring: Student Recruitment	Review Annual Audit *prior fiscal year* Publish Annual Performance Review Evaluate Material Modification and Renewal Applications
December	Pre-Opening Monitoring: Facility Readiness & Six-Month Update	Renewal/Material Modification Decisions

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SUPPORT FOR APPLICANTS AND AUTHORIZERS:

The Illinois State Charter School Commission provides technical assistance to authorizers and charter school applicants. For more information contact Shenita Johnson at state.charter.commission@illinois.gov or 312-814-1258.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) provides direct, professional services to improve charter authorizer practices, including application decision management, to local boards of education. For more information, contact Olivia Roser at oliviar@qualitycharters.org or 312-376-2365.

Illinois State Board of Education manages the federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant, which offers three grant opportunities to approved charter school applicants and existing charter schools. For more information contact David Turovetz at dturovet@isbe.net or 312-814-3222.

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) provides support and technical assistance to prospective charter school operators. For more information contact C. Allison Jack at ajack@incschools.org or 312-690-2708.

https://www.isbe.net/pages/illinois-state-charter-school-commission.aspx

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