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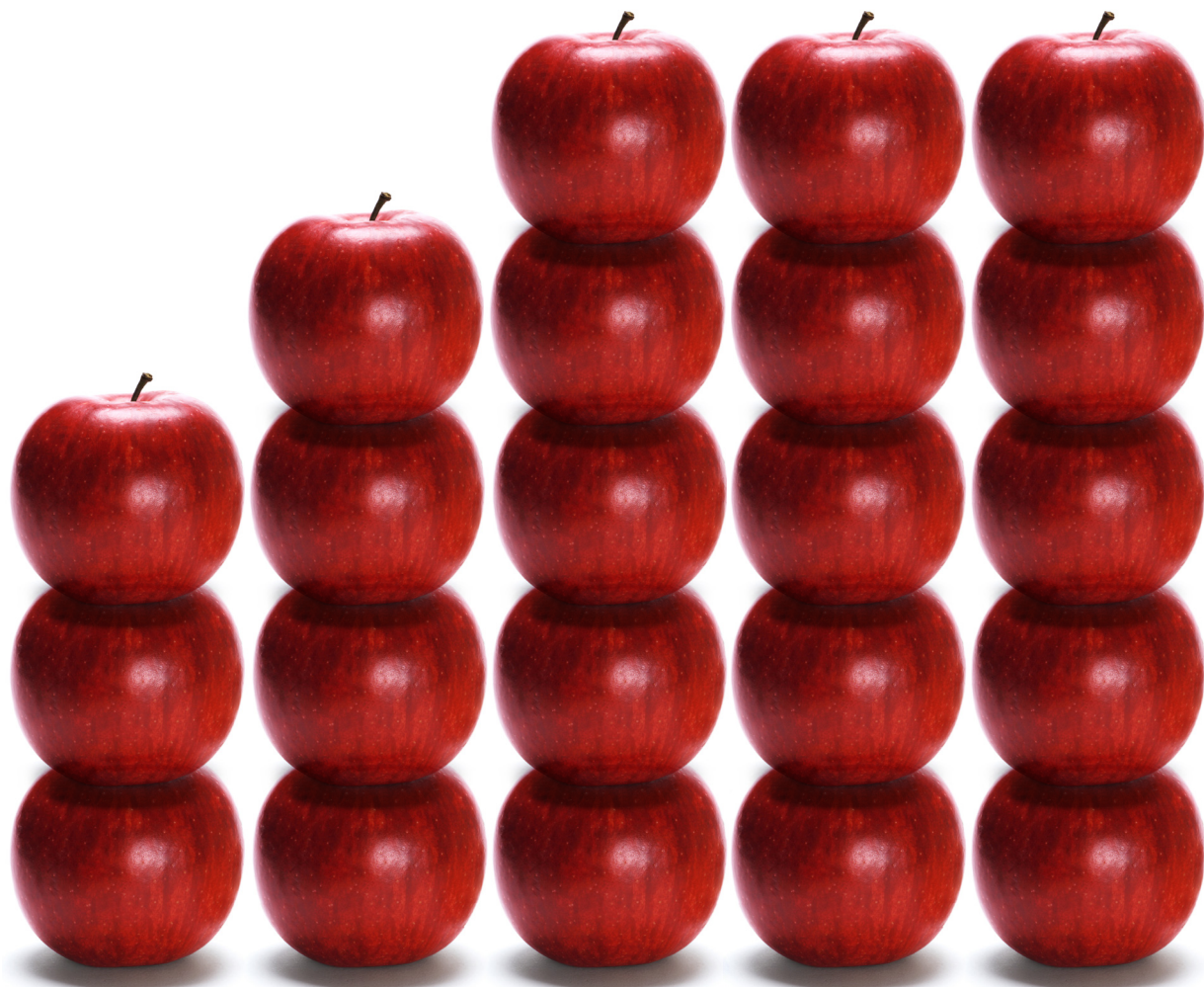CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

Charter School Growth Fund
Helping public education thrive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Replicating Quality

Policy Recommendations to Support the Replication and
Growth of High-Performing Charter Schools and Networks

At a Glance

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Replicating Quality

THE CHARTER SCHOOL SECTOR continues to expand as parents seek high-quality public education options. In 2012-2013, the sector served more than 2.3 million students in nearly 6,000 schools.[1] If recent growth trends continue, the sector could double in size by 2025, serving 4.6 million children and representing nearly 10% of all public school students.[2]

Research on charter school quality finds significant variations in performance across the sector.[3] Many charter schools achieve outstanding results for students. Most perform on par with traditional public schools, although a number do continue to underperform.

The question is: will growth in the charter sector reflect today's pattern of mixed quality? Or could adoption of judicious policies and practices create conditions that allow us to double the percentage of charter schools that provide an excellent education for students?

We believe that there should be many more great schools for children. Very simply, this means that the best performers should be able to grow more schools and the poorest performers should close down, thereby creating the potential for a dramatic shift in the quality of our K-12 schools over time. This shift could create *excellent opportunities for a million more students* over the next decade.

The charter sector must act now to identify and implement the policies and practices needed to seize this opportunity.

Drawing on deep expertise and diverse experiences in the sector, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) and the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF) have collaborated to identify a set of key policies and practices that could dramatically accelerate the replication and growth of high-performing charter schools and charter networks. The work has generated a set of detailed recommendations that legislators, authorizers, and state education agencies can use to build a policy environment that will substantially increase the prevalence and impact of high-quality charter schools.

The policy recommendations in this report articulate a strategy of modifying charter laws and authorizer practices that specifically benefit high-performing schools. While our organizations continue to advocate for operational autonomy and equal access to resources for ALL public charter schools, it is our position that the most effective way to expand quality school options for more communities is to quickly replace existing failing schools, and to establish new schools that are likely to succeed or that are already demonstrating outstanding performance. Lessons from the field and a growing body of research show that school and network academic performance tend to be relatively stable over time – i.e., schools that start strong tend to stay strong and vice versa[4] – thus justifying the proactive replication of high performers and early intervention for low performers.

Setting Expectations for Excellence

Authorizers set expectations for excellence, beginning with charter contracts tied to clearly defined performance frameworks. **NACSA's Core Performance Framework and Guidance** establishes criteria for objective, transparent, and consistent frameworks that address the academic, financial, and organizational dimensions of performance.[5] Authorizers should create a strong process for assessing performance and setting a high bar for excellence. Schools in the top performance tier should significantly surpass local schools serving similar student populations, for multiple years, on key measures of student achievement, growth, and college and career readiness.

Academic Performance. Authorizers may use academic indicators to identify performance tiers that support efforts to differentiate among schools in their portfolios. A robust set of measures should be developed to assess academic performance using multiple indicators that include student progress over time, student achievement, and post-secondary readiness.

Financial and Organizational Performance. Although authorizers should hold schools accountable for academic performance first and foremost, it is also critical that they assess financial and organizational health in evaluating the capacity of schools to operate and replicate successfully. Charter schools that fail often do so for financial or organizational reasons. Authorizers should develop specific and measurable metrics for evaluating financial and organizational capacity and viability.

Replicating Quality

Policy Recommendations

Charter sector leaders are gravitating toward policies and practices that differentiate among charter schools based on performance levels – facilitating the growth of high performers, halting the growth of low performers, and expediting the closure of failing charters. These strategies are needed to accelerate high-quality charter sector growth and demonstrate ways to build a higher-performing public school system that serves students better.

The policy proposals in this report are organized around four interconnected sector strategies:

1 Differentiate among charter operators based on performance levels

2 Build system capacity to cultivate and support high-performing individual schools and networks

3 Facilitate replication of high performers by reducing obstacles and adding supports

4 Accelerate closure of low performers

The first addresses performance-based differentiation and is a necessary precondition for many of the subsequent policy recommendations.

Differentiate among charter operators based on performance levels

For the last several years, leading authorizers and state policymakers have established stronger accountability and performance management systems that are primarily used to close or otherwise intervene in low-performing charter schools. An emerging and important practice is to use these same systems to identify the highest-performing schools, and to guide policies and practices that increase the proportion of excellent charter schools within authorizers' portfolios. This strategy requires that the charter market be "differentiated" based on the relative performance of schools and networks in a manner that provides a clear and defensible rationale for differentiated authorizer actions and state policies.

Policy Recommendation #1: Adopt authorization policies that differentiate among charter school operators by performance. It is essential for authorizers to adopt rigorous accountability systems that define clear metrics for placing schools into performance tiers. These performance frameworks are the foundation of performance-based differentiation. Policymakers should revisit charter laws to ensure that authorizers have both the authority and capacity to rigorously assess performance and differentiate actions and protocols accordingly. *Differentiation is a necessary precondition for many of the remaining policy recommendations.*

Build system capacity to cultivate and support high-performing individual schools and networks

Policymakers help high-performing operators serve more children by strengthening authorizer quality, minimizing the impact of charter caps, and encouraging targeted investments that build the sector's overall capacity to cultivate and support high-performing schools.

Policy Recommendation #2: Build a statewide community of authorizers committed to scaling quality. NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*[6] provides essential guidance for quality authorizer practices regarding school replication. All authorizers should be required to implement national industry standards for quality charter school authorizing to set a minimum quality standard for all authorizers in the state. States should also establish mechanisms

to evaluate authorizer adherence to quality practices, and apply sanctions to authorizers that fail to meet standards.

State policymakers should create statewide independent charter boards (ICBs) to provide an alternative to local authorizing districts, manage school growth plans across jurisdictions, and promote effective authorizing practices to support and cultivate high-performing schools and networks.

When states intervene in failing schools or districts, legislators should structure extraordinary authority districts (EADs), such as Louisiana's Recovery School District or Tennessee's Achievement School District, to attract high-performing charter operators to serve high-need communities and to optimally deploy public school facilities. Local districts that have adopted a portfolio strategy can likewise structure policies that align facilities and other resources to encourage the growth of high performers.

Policy Recommendation #3: Remove or modify charter caps that limit replication of high-performing charter schools within a state or locality. Charter caps are an obstacle to replicating quality charter schools. Charter schools in Boston, Massachusetts represent one of the highest-performing charter sectors in the nation,[7] but statutory caps and spending limits restrict growth of the sector to meet demand. In states where removing the charter cap is not politically feasible, policymakers should modify existing caps to permit growth based on quality.

Policy Recommendation #4: Invest in charter network incubation and accelerator funds to promote the creation and replication of high-performing charter schools and networks. High-performing charter schools must make significant investments in organizational systems and infrastructure to develop and implement successful growth plans. Policymakers can promote the growth of local, high-performing charter schools and attract external, high-performing charter networks by providing growth capital for charter school replication.

Facilitate replication of high performers by reducing obstacles and adding supports

States can accelerate high-quality growth by reducing certain barriers to expansion and by prioritizing resources, such as

facilities, for the highest-performing schools and networks.[8] These recommendations highlight differentiated authorization practices that, if applied to high-performing charter schools and networks, would accelerate the shift toward excellence. These policies should be implemented in a manner that does not delay or discourage the approval of strong applications for non-networked start-up schools that are likely to succeed.

Policy Recommendation #5: Differentiate and streamline application, renewal, and replication processes for high-quality charter schools and networks. Policymakers and authorizers should establish differentiated criteria and processes for the renewal and replication of high-performing charter schools. Differentiated processes should maintain high standards for both initial charter approval and renewal, while minimizing administrative burdens and ensuring that replication decisions are informed by appropriate and relevant information about the capacity of charter networks to replicate schools successfully. **NACSA's** *Core Replication Application Addendum*[9] details important supplemental application components that address the network capacity to open and operate high-quality schools.

Policy Recommendation #6: Establish policies that allow authorizers to approve high-performing charter schools and networks to open multiple schools over time. Charter laws and authorizer policy should allow charter operators to apply for and receive authorization to open multiple schools over a multi-year timeframe, while being held accountable for the performance of individual schools and overall network quality. Such multi-year, multi-school authorization can be structured as pre-approvals and should be contingent on continued strong academic, organizational, and financial performance results.

Policy Recommendation #7: Facilitate charter school governance structures that can efficiently and effectively operate multiple schools or campuses and fulfill public accountability functions. State policymakers and authorizers should permit successful charter operators to establish single governing boards to oversee the operation, replication, and expansion of multiple schools. This can be important for replicating and sustaining the success of an expanding charter network because it facilitates consistency

of programs across schools, and reduces the complexity and bureaucratic burden of operating a high-performing network of schools. The optimal organizational structure will vary depending on state charter laws and the structure of the particular charter network, but it should ensure school-level accountability and community access, while avoiding conflicts of interest. As a charter network expands to a large scale, it may become impractical for the board to include members from every school community. Charter networks must develop governance and management mechanisms that are appropriate for the school and network's mission and local context, and that facilitate meaningful community access and engagement.

Policy Recommendation #8: Prioritize additional resources and reduce administrative burdens for high-performing charter schools and networks. All charters should operate as autonomous schools and receive a basic level of per-pupil funding equivalent to traditional public schools. Beyond these core requirements, additional incentives could be judiciously employed to encourage the sustainability and growth of high-performing schools and networks. For example, competitive grant programs could award additional growth or facility capital funding. State policies should improve facility access for high performers, including provisions that prioritize access for replicating and stand-alone operators educating the most underserved student populations.

Accelerate Closure of Low Performers

Policymakers can take steps to accelerate the closure of low performers. A strategy of closing low performers will enable students and families to access better choices, and will dramatically increase the success of the charter sector by shutting down the lowest-performing schools, thus making room for new, high-performing schools to open and serve students.[10]

Policy recommendation #9: Adopt legislation that establishes a process for automatic (default) closure of underperforming charter schools. Effective closure processes begin with identifying the minimum acceptable performance threshold for charter schools. Schools performing below this threshold at the time of a renewal decision, or that remain below this level for a certain amount of time, should automatically face closure, subject to authorizer actions to

prevent closure in exceptional cases. Furthermore, authorizers should be accountable for decisions to renew schools identified for default closure.

Policy Recommendation #10: Establish policies and processes that allow high-performing charter schools and networks to replicate as part of a charter "restart" strategy. Authorizers can accelerate improvement in the overall quality of the charter sector by "restarting" low-performing charter schools: transitioning the charter – and responsibility for governance and school management – to a high-performing charter school or network, while maintaining the existing population of students. While this strategy is also intended to accelerate the closure of low-performing charter operators, it simultaneously expands options for how high-performing charter schools may replicate within communities. In communities where high-quality charter replication is constrained by access to facilities and charter caps, charter restarts provide a mechanism to transfer the charter and underlying charter assets. This strategy can significantly reduce start-up costs typically associated with school replication and minimize disruption to students and communities.

Conclusion

These recommendations provide a roadmap for systematically improving the quality of the charter sector, as well as a valuable approach to managing the broader K-12 system. With coordinated efforts, legislators, authorizers, and state education agencies can significantly accelerate the growth and replication of high-performing charters, increasing the share of families attending outstanding schools, scaling up success, and increasing the potential for providing a high-quality education to more than a million additional children nationally. The full report provides examples and specific steps that legislators, authorizers, and state education agencies can take to dramatically increase the number of students obtaining an excellent education in charter schools.

Endnotes

1 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2013). "Dashboard: A Comprehensive Data Resource from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools." Washington, DC Available online at: http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/year/2013 and http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2013

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10 Kowal, Julie and Bryan Hassel. April 2008. "Closing Troubled Schools." National Charter School Research Project. Working Paper 2008-8. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Available online at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/wp_ncsrp8_closingtrouble_apr08_0.pdf

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