
Partnerships: The Next Evolution of Charter Authorizing

Charter schools have enabled students to learn in schools where they also fly airplanes, steward the environment, take classes in museums, and enroll in college early. Authorizers—or sponsors—are the caretakers of the charter school community and the public agencies that review charter applications, oversee charter schools' performance, and hold charter schools accountable for fulfilling their promises.

At the heart of the charter school movement is the idea that public education can and should continuously improve. Through partnerships, authorizers are working to improve their processes making them better suited to support charter schools and the students who attend them.

New, innovative public schools have emerged in the 45 states and the District of Columbia that have embraced the charter school vision. These schools provide students with high quality learning opportunities while, at the same time, catalyzing a positive paradigm shift in the public education system. Simply put, the

current education environment allows more people and organizations to contribute to public education than in the past. Today, a group of citizens with a promising vision for a new public school can bring one to their community, whereas 30 years ago, it was unimaginable.

Streamlining the reauthorization workload

Determining whether a charter school's contract will be renewed is one of an authorizer's most important responsibilities. Most authorizers are small agencies that typically charter five or fewer schools and the reauthorization process is laborious and rigorous. It includes document reviews, onsite visits, and subsequent debriefings—all of which take an enormous amount of time and effort. Delivering the type of oversight that the public expects necessitates authorizers continuously looking at new ways to approach their work.

Choosing the right partner

When considering potential partners, authorizers should look for one with experience and credibility in the field of regulatory oversight and continuous improvement. Credible partners garner respect from schools and make it easier to participate in the regulatory process.

Cognia is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement for schools across the globe. For more than 125 years, Cognia's work has been to review schools' systems and procedures and accredit them if they have the right things in place to position them for continuous improvement. This work is closely aligned with the reauthorization process.

These two processes are a natural fit between organizations with shared values and high standards. They also set the foundation for a thoughtful, groundbreaking alignment of authorizers' and their partner's standards.

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Building a culture of improvement

Charter school leaders, especially at smaller independent schools, value the feedback and recommendations they receive from the reauthorization process—it helps them improve their administration and instruction. By partnering with Cognia, schools could go through the process once and obtain feedback from two organizations on what they're doing well and how to improve. Cognia's detailed feedback on systems and operations will help schools continuously improve and deliver actionable suggestions for improving the “nuts and bolts” of school operation.

This approach is a win-win-win-win.

It's a win for the authorizers because they can devote more of their evaluation to the classroom and stakeholders' contributions because of Cognia's assurance that core systems and procedures are in place. It's a win for school leaders who can spend less time on administrative tasks like gathering and submitting documents for review. Because accreditation is one part, but not the only part, of a continuous improvement process, it is a win for taxpayers because it catalyzes the types of improvements they should expect in public schools. And, most importantly, it is a win for kids because of the increased time and attention this allows the adults in the building to spend on academic performance.

Aligning processes with a partner will allow small authorizers to access the same services as bigger ones, eliminating the need to develop systems and procedures in-house. New authorizers can get up-and-running faster through such partnerships, allowing them to quickly implement the charter idea in their state in a way that gives the public confidence.

Public education can and should always strive to get better and partnerships between charter authorizers and Cognia could be the next improvement leap forward in the charter school movement.