

# READY TO OPEN PLAYBOOK



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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

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# Why Ready To Open<sup>1</sup> Matters

For a new school founding team, it is a joyous occasion if the charter school authorizer votes to approve their new school application. It is certainly a time to celebrate and recognize all the hard work that led to that moment.

Many authorizers follow their congratulatory wishes with: “Now the hard work begins.” This statement couldn’t be truer. This is the moment at which the founding team’s plans, capacities, vision, and engagement with community all must be activated to bring the ideas on paper to life.

Authorizers implement rigorous new school application review processes to ensure they approve only those applications that demonstrate a strong educational vision and plan; a viable financial model; evidence of community engagement, need, and demand; and a strong organization plan. The authorizer also ensures that the founding team has the capacities to open and operate a quality school, consistent with the identified mission. Once the authorizer decides to approve that school, however, that rigorous review process means nothing if the school opens before it is ready to serve students.

A strong Ready To Open (RTO) process is critical to setting schools up for success to meet the aspirations and needs of their communities once they open their doors.

A strong Ready To Open (RTO) process is critical to setting schools up for success to meet the aspirations and needs of their communities once they open their doors. If schools open before they are actually ready, they will likely struggle from the start and potentially never achieve the vision laid out in their application. In some situations, they may close within a year or two, or even within months, causing great harm to students and families. A 2013 study from the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) found that, *“For the majority of [failing] schools, poor first-year performance will give way to poor second-year performance. Once this has happened, the future is predictable and extremely bleak. For the students enrolled in these schools, this is a tragedy that must not be dismissed.”*<sup>2</sup> CREDO’s subsequent 2023 study found that since the 2013 study, *“new schools opened with stronger results than at any time in the past.”* These better school openings were due in part to, “strengthening authorizer standards and practices” of which RTO is a part.

A strong RTO process allows for authorizers and schools to be on the same page. It is both the authorizer’s and the school’s board and leadership team’s obligation to make sure that a school has completed the necessary preparations and largely satisfied RTO criteria before the school is allowed to open. If RTO criteria are not met, the charter school board should delay the opening, or the authorizer must not provide the school with final authorization to open. The delay in opening will be in effect until the authorizer can confirm that the school has satisfied all necessary RTO requirements. The decision to delay or suspend opening can be as challenging and emotionally and legally fraught as a decision to close a school. However, as challenging as it may be, a school that welcomes students before it is ready can have detrimental impacts on each child as well as the community.

<sup>1</sup>Ready To Open (RTO) is a term used in this playbook to refer to the quality systems and practices to prepare a school to open. Time periods within this playbook are referred to as year zero, the planning year, start-up phase, and/or pre-opening. Throughout this playbook, NACSA may use these terms interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2013) Charter School Growth and Replication: Executive Summary. Retrieved from [https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/cgar\\_growth\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/cgar_growth_executive_summary.pdf)

NACSA's own analysis of first-year closures indicates these primary reasons for closure, many of which can be prevented with strong Ready To Open practices:<sup>3</sup>

- Failure to enroll enough students to financially support the school's academic, staffing, and operational obligations;
- Schools operating in potentially unsafe facilities and/or facilities not approved by the authorizer or state officials;
- Highly problematic structural relationships with school boards and their management organizations; and
- Illegal and/or unwise decision making in school board policy and operations, most often related to human resources actions or financial management decisions.

According to NACSA's *Quality Practice Project* (QPP) findings, authorizers with both strong and average portfolios have a pre-opening process to identify whether a school has demonstrated that it is ready to open. They aren't afraid to hold schools accountable for not successfully completing pre-opening processes, including by not allowing a school to open.<sup>4</sup>

Readiness to open is more than a school completing a checklist of compliance requirements. It is about a school being prepared to provide a quality education and a safe environment for students, consistent with a school's mission and charter requirements. The practices outlined in this playbook facilitate opportunities for expectation setting, communication, and feedback between authorizers and new schools so schools are able to ultimately determine if they are ready to open and serve the community.

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<sup>3</sup>National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2015) Analysis of Reasons for 1st Year Closures. Retrieved from [http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/QualityOpenings\\_FirstYearClosures\\_Handout.pdf](http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/QualityOpenings_FirstYearClosures_Handout.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2018) Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing – Findings from the Quality Practice Project. Retrieved from <https://qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/practices-that-matter/application-school-opening/>





## Ways This Playbook Will Help

This playbook aims to provide authorizers with knowledge and resources that support the planning and execution of a quality RTO process. This playbook is also useful for new school developers, incubators, and others involved with opening new charter schools. The playbook contains compiled learnings from conversations with authorizers, school founders, and support organizations, as well as an analysis of the policies and protocols currently in place across the country. The *Promising Practice* sections highlight different strategies authorizers use during the Ready To Open process. While this playbook aims to be comprehensive, it does not address all the components of a quality RTO process for each authorizer's unique context.

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This *Ready To Open Playbook* assists authorizers in developing and implementing their own high-quality RTO process. **Here's what you'll get in this playbook:**

- Rationale for RTO;
- Strategies and practices for a high-quality RTO process;
- Examples from the field; and
- Resources you can adapt to fit your context.

## Ways This Playbook Is Grounded

After 30 years, the profession of authorizing has evolved. This playbook is grounded in all that we have learned and know from more than three decades of practice:

- [\*Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing\*](#), to ensure best practices in the application process, the Ready To Open process, and ongoing oversight;
- [\*Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing – Findings from the Quality Practice Project\*](#), to ensure these researched characteristics of strong authorizers are exercised;
- [\*Performance Frameworks\*](#), to ensure alignment of the Ready To Open criteria to ongoing and transparent performance expectations; and
- [\*Communities at the Center\*](#), to ensure schools meet their local needs, aspirations, and context.



## Principles & Standards for Quality School Authorizing

NACSA has worked with authorizers to build and codify this gold standard for quality authorizing. *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* helps authorizers set high expectations for the schools they charter, while recognizing there are many ways for schools to meet those expectations.

The principles articulate a set of beliefs: quality authorizers maintain high standards for schools, uphold school autonomy, and protect student and public interests. Authorizers must maintain a balance among these principles. The cornerstone of quality authorizing is that schools commit to providing quality education for all students, managing public funds responsibly, and complying with legal obligations; in return, authorizers grant schools broad autonomy to meet those standards.

The standards identify core authorizer responsibilities that uphold these principles.

The Ready To Open process is a noted best practice within the standards and is also an important opportunity to navigate the balance of autonomy and accountability, as well as providing support to schools where it is needed.

### A Quality Authorizer...

Executes charter contracts that clearly: State reasonable pre-opening requirements or conditions for new schools to ensure that they meet all health, safety, and other legal requirements prior to opening and are prepared [to effectively serve students].

- *NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*

## Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing—Findings from the Quality Practice Project

Great authorizers—those with strong community-focused school portfolios and performance outcomes—implement foundational authorizing best practices. But to achieve outstanding outcomes, more is needed. When compared to others nationally, great authorizers also share certain additional unmistakable characteristics that come into play with RTO:

- **Leadership:** Great authorizers are hands-on in the Ready To Open process, including directing schools on areas for change, collaborating with school support organizations, providing explicit informational and step-by-step resources for schools, and advocating on behalf of schools when necessary. This pushes authorizers to approach RTO through the lens of support.
- **Commitment:** Great authorizers reflect their institution's commitment to quality authorizing. Authorizing is visible, transparent, championed, and adequately resourced. The people responsible for day-to-day authorizing functions have influence over decision making. This necessitates that RTO is valued and resources are dedicated to supporting this process.
- **Professional Judgment:** Great authorizers are not bound by protocols, templates, or other authorizing tools that limit their decision making. Staff have a clear belief and orientation that such tools assist, not dictate, decisions (a high degree of professional judgment is used in decision making). This reinforces the need for RTO systems and policies while also requiring authorizers to remain flexible. Great authorizers also create and use protocols and processes that allow for nuanced discussions, and collect evidence to inform and justify decisions.

## Centering Communities

Charter schooling has the opportunity to provide many more charter models that reflect the diversity of community demand and need, and meet the aspirations of students and communities. Authorizers play a crucial role here: they are in a position to set an example of what's possible through the relationships they build with communities. By using a rigorous RTO process in partnership with a school and in a manner that respects and values the diversity of aspirations of communities, authorizers encourage community centeredness.



## Performance Frameworks

Authorizers use Performance Frameworks (PFs) to strike the right balance of school autonomy and accountability and to answer: Is the school academically successful? Is the school financially healthy? Is the school organizationally sound? Authorizers use PFs to establish and communicate clear and transparent evaluation criteria and use the information gathered to inform and support their own actions throughout the charter lifecycle.

PFs are the central tool in the work of authorizing and they help guide all aspects of an authorizer's work, from the new school application, to the RTO process, to ongoing oversight and monitoring, to renewal and closure decisions. PFs outline what an authorizer and school agree to (through the charter contract) and directly connect to the performance criteria and expectations for renewal.

These same criteria and expectations must also inform the new school application and RTO processes. Authorizers approve new schools and allow them to open if the authorizer has evidence that the school is well positioned to meet the criteria and expectations laid out in the Performance Frameworks. Said differently, why would an authorizer approve a new school application and/or allow a school to open, if that authorizer does not believe (and have evidence that suggests) that the school can meet the performance expectations for renewal?

As such, authorizers should ensure strong alignment between the performance expectations in their PFs and the expectations in the RTO phase. The sample RTO criteria included in this playbook is aligned to guidelines outlined in NACSA's [Guide to Performance Frameworks](#).

## A Bridge Between Applications and Ongoing Oversight

For schools, the RTO phase is the bridge between the theories and plans of the new school application and the day-to-day responsibility of operating a school and educating students. For authorizers, it is the bridge between the new school application evaluation and decision and the ongoing oversight and monitoring of an operating school.





## From New School Application...

The elements of an authorizer's new school application have a direct impact on the RTO criteria, particularly as authorizers rethink the new school application and, [“align the application process to how schools actually develop.”](#)

Authorizers determine what they need to know (and what schools must demonstrate), and by when, in order to approve schools to serve students:

***Example 1:*** An authorizer must see evidence of [community engagement, need and demand](#) for, and family interest in, the proposed school, at the application phase. After approval but before allowing a school to open, an authorizer must see evidence that the school will meet enrollment targets and that actual families have committed to send their children to the school.

***Example 2:*** At the application phase, an authorizer requires a plan for securing a facility that supports the school's education programs. However, before allowing the school to open, the authorizer must have evidence of an actual facility, a lease, compliance with health and safety requirements, a certificate of occupancy, etc.

The types of evidence collected in the application phase and the RTO process will be different (e.g., letters of support vs. enrollment forms or sample facilities plans vs. a signed lease).

## *Rethinking the New School Application*

Authorizers are **RETHINKING THE NEW SCHOOL APPLICATION**. This includes shifting some elements from the application phase to the RTO phase to better align the application to how schools develop. For example, some authorizers have required a curriculum scope and sequence at the application phase in the past, but are realizing this is better placed at the RTO phase, given that schools typically create such resources four to eight months (not 16-20 months) before the school opens.

Authorizers are also considering NACSA's recommendation to, "shift rigor from paper to people." NACSA identified **CAPACITIES OF CHARTER SCHOOL FOUNDING TEAMS** that are keys for school success. During the application phase, authorizers seek evidence of these founding team capacities. During the RTO phase, authorizers can see these capacities in action (or not). Authorizers must have confidence (and school founding teams must understand) that these capacities continue to be critical during RTO and into school operations. As such, authorizers should continue to look for evidence of these capacities during RTO.

One capacity identified is **CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING. HEAR FROM ONE SCHOOL LEADER** who shares the importance of creative problem solving during the Ready To Open process.

**Promising Practice:** Buckeye Community Hope Foundation is working to shift rigor from paper to people and align the application to how schools actually develop. They are reducing the burden of the new school application by moving some items into their pre-opening, such as policies, detailed curriculum selections, handbooks, and extended financial projections, because they believe these are more meaningful if they are completed after the application is approved. Listen to this **PODCAST** to hear their story.

## ...To Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

No new school application is perfect. During the application evaluation process, authorizers identify areas of strength and areas needing further development. The evaluation findings inform the RTO process: authorizers can adjust their areas of focus, support, and oversight during this phase.

Then, authorizer actions and Ready To Open criteria should align to the expectations set forth in the contract and Performance Frameworks, while ensuring schools maintain autonomy in how they meet these expectations. The charter contract is an essential document that establishes a legally binding agreement and terms under which the school will operate and be held accountable. The PFs are a tool that authorizers use as part of their comprehensive accountability system to answer fundamental questions around academic success, financial health, and organizational soundness.

While schools are not fully operational during their Ready To Open year(s), they are setting up the systems and structures that should enable them to deliver the academic model they proposed and meet performance expectations outlined in the contract and PFs.

## Assess Based on Evidence, Not Assumptions or Biases

The assessment of a founding team's readiness to open involves the use of policies, practices, and professional judgment. As with other authorizer practices, those responsible for assessing a founding team's readiness to open should have adequate training in the criteria and types of evidence. The authorizer staff supporting a school's readiness to open must assess based on concrete evidence and data—what they have captured in the criteria, heard, observed, read, etc.—not on how personable (or not personable) the school team members are, for example.

Because Ready To Open practices leverage relationships, founding team capacities, and professional judgment, bias can play a role in how staff observes and understands a founding team's capacities to launch and run a successful school and the evidence needed to demonstrate they are ready. Authorizing staff may (consciously or unconsciously) expect more evidence of student enrollment (or higher enrollment numbers) from a standalone school versus a school that is part of a network, for example. Or, staff members may make assumptions about a founding team's knowledge and skills in education and finance (and therefore the school's readiness to open), because English is not the first language of many members of the founding team. Authorizing staff should seek to understand, make conscious, and then attend to their own biases and assumptions so they can fairly see the full evidence of a school's readiness to open.

A range of useful professional development resources, trainings, and activities can help an authorizer improve their practices and mitigate bias. Click [here](#) for a list of resources to get you started.

# STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES



The following strategies and practices have been drawn from effective practices in the field, as well as conversations with authorizers, school leaders, incubators, and other stakeholders, to support authorizers in developing and implementing an effective RTO process.



ADAPT TO FIT  
YOUR CONTEXT

Authorizers are encouraged to adapt NACSA's *Ready To Open Playbook* guidance and resources to fit their own needs and context. Authorizers make critical choices based on their legal authority and responsibility, their own capacity, and their mission. For example, an authorizer who is the Local Education Agency (LEA) for their charter schools will have a different context than those who are not. Furthermore, authorizers should align the RTO criteria to their Performance Frameworks, and consider the relationship between the new school application and RTO.

Authorizers can use the following key questions to develop their own approach to RTO based on their individual context.

## **What does state law say, or not say, about Ready To Open?**

As with many authorizing practices, it is important to understand the law before developing policies and systems. For RTO, some state laws require schools to demonstrate readiness to open based on specific criteria and explicitly allow authorizers to implement consequences, such as delayed openings, if requirements are not met. Other state laws remain silent.

Authorizers should examine their state's laws and regulations related to RTO, using the following questions:

- *Does your state require Ready To Open criteria?*
- *Does your state explicitly allow the authorizer to implement consequences if the Ready To Open criteria are not met?*
- *Is there a timeline for executing a contract once a charter school is approved?*

In states where the law is silent on RTO, such as California and Indiana, NACSA recommends that authorizers still incorporate RTO criteria in the charter contract and develop systems and policies if a school does not demonstrate preparedness to open. (Examples of relevant state laws can be found in the Appendix.) See [Leverage the Charter Contract](#) and [Ready To Open Criteria](#) sections below.

## **What is the authorizer's capacity to support the Ready To Open process?**

Authorizer capacity matters, but it should not lower standards or limit the authorizer's authority to make important decisions about school openings. Even the most well-resourced authorizers may have more they'd like to do to support schools during the Year 0 (pre-opening year) period. Understanding the staffing and resources available will allow authorizers to prioritize Ready To Open tasks appropriately.

When adapting the Ready To Open resources based on your capacity, consider your priorities. In NACSA's conversations with the field, authorizers recommended these priorities (in no particular order):

- *Enrollment*
- *Facilities*
- *Financial Systems*
- *Governance/Board Oversight of School Performance*
- *Staffing/ Recruitment*

When staffing and implementing these Ready To Open resources, leverage the strategies described in the following sections. For example, identify a main point of contact for schools, with the expectation that other staff will be tapped as needed throughout the Year 0 period.

## How does a school get approved or enter the portfolio?

The ways in which a new school enters your portfolio is a consideration when building a quality Ready To Open process, as it can impact the amount of time a school has to prepare for opening. While NACSA's *Principles & Standards* emphasize the need for quality authorizers to provide sufficient time, it is sometimes out of an authorizer's control. For example, if an appellate body approves a school on appeal, this often results in a much shorter planning year for that new school. In this case, a delay in opening may be more common, and the partnership between the authorizer and school becomes even more important. Remain grounded in the ultimate goal of RTO: that the school is prepared to serve students on Day 1. If a school is not prepared, create a longer timeline through a delayed opening.

### A Quality Authorizer...

Allows sufficient time for each stage of the application and school pre-opening process to be carried out with quality and integrity.

- *NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*

## Who has the authority to defer or suspend opening?

A strong RTO process helps a school and authorizer get aligned on a decision to defer or suspend opening, if needed. In some cases, authorizing staff have the authority to defer opening. In other institutions, authorizing staff must bring a recommendation to the authorizing board for action. Still, other authorizers have no authority to defer or suspend opening—it is up to the school to propose deferral to the authorizing board. In these cases, the relationship formed between the authorizing staff and the school board and leadership, as well as the data collected throughout Year 0 (aligned to the criteria) should be leveraged to help school teams decide that extra time would support a higher-quality opening. See [Cultivate Positive Relationships](#) and [Develop Resources](#) sections for more information.

## How do I go about aligning our Performance Frameworks, application, RTO, and ongoing oversight practices?

NACSA recommends beginning with a review of your Performance Frameworks, written application, and Ready To Open criteria to inventory the information you are collecting from schools at each stage of the charter lifecycle. The ultimate goal is alignment. The results of this exercise should help launch conversations with your authorizing staff, leadership, and board to determine what (and when) information is needed from schools and how this aligns or misaligns with the organization's definition of school quality and autonomy.

For example, the staffing section of your Organizational PF certainly includes requirements related to background checks and teacher licensure. At the application phase, you might ask the school to share its plan to ensure compliance, while during the RTO process you will seek evidence of approved policies, appropriate licensure for staff that has been hired, and completed background checks for all staff, board, and volunteers. During ongoing oversight, you will periodically seek evidence of ongoing compliance, and take appropriate action if the school is not in compliance.



LEVERAGE  
THE CHARTER  
CONTRACT

The charter contract is a powerful document that dictates the terms and expectations for the authorizer and school. NACSA recommends embedding language in the charter contract that makes opening conditional on meeting Ready To Open criteria. Charter schools must understand what readiness to open looks like, not only to satisfy authorizer requirements, but also, and more importantly, to actually be ready to serve students. As such, RTO criteria ensure schools understand what they need to do and by when to receive the green light to open and what actions the authorizer is permitted to take if a school has not satisfied these requirements. By doing so, there is greater transparency between the authorizer and school board on Year 0 expectations and consequences.

Examples:

- [Alabama Public Charter School Commission](#) (Section 1.3)
- [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#) (Section D.1.k)
- [State University of New York Charter Schools Institute](#) (Section 3.1)

If contract amendments aren't a viable option in your context, consider alternative strategies, such as leveraging board motions, that make meeting Ready To Open criteria a condition for new school openings.

NACSA recommends embedding language in the charter contract that makes opening conditional on meeting Ready To Open criteria.

### Authorizer Spotlight

The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) provides conditional approval to schools and waits to execute the contract once the Ready To Open requirements are met. These conditions are school-specific as well as standard (e.g., securing a facility, creating a discipline policy). Learn more about DC PCSB's processes [here](#).

*Note: Some state laws require the execution of a charter contract within a certain number of days following approval of a charter. Consult your charter school law and/or internal policies to understand if this applies in your context before considering a similar practice in your office.*





CULTIVATE  
POSITIVE  
RELATIONSHIPS

The new school application process sets an important tone for the nature of the school/authorizer relationship. Approval of a charter marks the beginning of what could be a long-term relationship between the authorizer and school board and leaders. The Year 0 period is an opportunity for the authorizer and founding team to cultivate (and build on) the positive relationship that ideally began to form during the application phase, based on the shared goal of a high-quality school opening.

Here are some considerations for authorizers:

- **Establish regular check-ins with the founding team.** **Founding teams include the school board and other key personnel helping to prepare the school to welcome students and families.** These check-ins should have an agenda and be tailored to align with the checklist and known needs of support for the school as they prepare. These check-ins should start as soon as possible after approval.
- **Create staffing continuity from the application evaluation phase to RTO.** Authorizing staff that were part of the application review team will have a much deeper understanding of a new school's strengths and needs. If internal capacity allows, consider utilizing the same staff for RTO so they can understand where support may be needed and customize the process based on the application.
- **Assign a point of contact.** A main point of contact on the authorizing staff team removes guesswork when a new school has questions or encounters challenges and needs support. This person does not need to be an expert in all areas and can leverage the expertise of other authorizing staff to support the school during RTO.

Frequent touchpoints and open lines of communication foster a culture of support between the authorizer and school team.

### Promising Practice: Meeting Observations

East Baton Rouge Schools invited a newly approved school to join district-level meetings—for example, meetings with building principals or special education staff—to allow the new school an opportunity to observe how East Baton Rouge does business. Authorizing staff said this was a welcome opportunity for the new school and a successful way to begin building positive relationships.

### Cultivating School-to-School Relationships

School leaders of existing schools have a wealth of experience and expertise, often having gone through the Ready To Open process themselves. Consider harnessing this by exploring these ideas:

- **Peer Mentors:** Pair new school leaders with existing school leaders from your portfolio. For example, the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) has utilized experienced school founders/leaders as mentors for new school founders during Year 0 and Year 1. This is supplemental support for the school, in addition to the CSI staff member overseeing the RTO process.
- **Planning Year Residency:** Similarly, authorizers can partner with high-performing schools in their portfolio to provide opportunities for new school leaders to engage in part-time residencies in existing school environments. This experience will help them better understand the challenges they can anticipate during Year 1 and beyond and impact how they prepare during the RTO process.



DEVELOP  
RESOURCES



This section provides an overview of the resources that can be developed to support the RTO process. While the development of these resources is important, it is just as crucial to ensure that new schools are aware of them. By sharing these resources and supports, the authorizer allows schools to plan how they will leverage all that authorizer has to offer. Consider making these resources publicly available by posting them on the organization's website or providing links and dates/times for trainings in one place.

Here are examples of resources currently provided by authorizers:

- [Colorado Charter School Institute](#)
- [Denver Public Schools](#)
- [Georgia State Charter School Commission](#)
- [Nevada State Public Charter School Authority](#)
- [Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center](#)
- [State University of New York Charter Schools Institute](#)

### **New School Application Approval Decision Letters**

Many authorizers send a decision or welcome letter that codifies the board decision and describes the Ready To Open process. These letters are typically customized and include the criteria that must be met prior to opening. They can also include feedback on the new school application, including areas of strength and areas for improvement, before the school begins serving students.

#### *Example:*

DC Public Charter School Board's [Decision Letter](#) contains conditions that must be satisfied for the new school approval to go into effect. To learn how this letter fits within DC PCSB's larger process, access their [Planning Year Playbook](#).

## Ready To Open Criteria

NACSA reviewed Ready To Open checklists and resources of authorizers from across the country to develop the sample criteria in this playbook, which is also aligned to NACSA's *Guide to Performance Frameworks*. The criteria is an essential tool that authorizers use to communicate expectations and monitor a founding team's progress.

### *Developing and Implementing the Criteria:*

This tool is designed to be a customizable and functional tool for your office to clearly communicate to schools what the Ready To Open process looks like and to support monitoring progress made. The tool is organized by indicators and measures (categories of work) aligned to the Performance Frameworks; it can also be sorted by due dates or individual(s) responsible.

This tool can be a starting point for authorizers to take their individual contexts and capacities into consideration and develop a list of criteria that supports this process. NACSA encourages authorizers to create or refine RTO criteria in alignment with your PFs to create a clear, consistent, and transparent understanding of expectations for schools in your portfolio.

Timelines are a critical aspect of the RTO criteria. Authorizers use their professional judgment to consider when they can and cannot be flexible with timelines, and they should clearly communicate when they can no longer extend deadlines for key Ready To Open criteria. For example, authorizers must determine at which point the lack of a secured facility or inadequate enrollment indicates the school will not be able to successfully open.

### *Customizability:*

The resource was created in Excel to allow for easy customization. The document does not contain due dates for all items since many are context specific and can depend on factors such as the length of the pre-opening period, state department of education timelines, enrollment timelines, facility availability, and state, local, and county timelines.

Consider the inclusion of state- and authorizer-specific requirements (as well as federal Charter School Program [CSP] grant requirements for schools that may have received such funding) that may also be key items for schools to complete in the RTO period. Quality authorizers review statutes, policies, contracts, and their own Performance Frameworks to identify items that may need to be added to the criteria as well as areas of deficiency in the application, as appropriate.

Access NACSA's Ready To Open Criteria [here](#).

See [Differentiate and Streamline](#) section for examples of Ready To Open criteria.

## Trainings

Many authorizers host a new school orientation for founding teams and school leadership to provide key information related to school operations and expectations. These can occur virtually or in-person and be synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the capacity of the authorizer and needs of the founding team. These sessions are an opportunity for founders to meet authorizing staff, and learn about legal requirements or known areas of need for new schools. They also provide an opportunity for new school leaders to meet one another and develop networks of support.

These trainings can vary depending on the legal structure of the relationship between the authorizer and schools (i.e., Local Education Agency status). While the authorizer may not provide all trainings, they should support the coordination of trainings from State Education Agencies or charter support organizations to ensure that schools are provided with a necessary foundation and clear expectations.

### **Promising Practice: Online Training**

Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (AZSBCS) offers three online training modules to schools following approval to cover the compliance expectations of new schools. These training modules are comprehensive and new schools must complete them during Year 0. AZSBCS staff have reported a marked improvement in compliance for new schools that have completed this training.

### **Ready To Open Site Visit Protocol**

A strong RTO process includes multiple touchpoints at which the authorizer and school work together to review evidence that demonstrates a school is ready to serve students. While that evidence is collected and documented over time—through school/site visits, meetings with school leaders, review of document submissions, etc.—sometimes a concluding site visit is necessary to ensure the school facility is safe, adequate, and ready for students. Additionally, authorizers can use this visit to make sure any final issues are adequately resolved. It could coincide with a final determination of readiness to open.

Criteria associated with facility readiness can be included in the RTO checklist or be a standalone document.

Examples:

- *SUNY (State University of New York) Charter Schools Institute includes a separate list of requirements starting on page 13 of their [Pre-Opening Visit Facility Checklist](#).*
- *Nevada State Public Charter School Authority has identified items that must be completed during the walkthrough or site visit in the [Pre-Opening Checklist](#).*





IDENTIFY,  
DEVELOP,  
AND LEVERAGE  
ECOSYSTEM  
PARTNERS

A healthy charter ecosystem consists of quality authorizing organizations as well as other entities including Charter Support Organizations (CSOs), State Education Agencies (SEAs), CSP State Entity grantees, education champions, incubators, and charter school associations. All of these organizations want the same thing: quality school options for students and families. These organizations can work in concert to support the successful opening and ongoing operation of charter schools.

A new charter school with a CSP grant may be subject to specific grant-related requirements. The authorizer should be aware of these requirements and if they overlap with RTO criteria. Additionally, the entity administering the CSP grant may have supports, training, or resources to aid the school. Authorizers should have strong relationships with their state's CSP state entity grantee, if there is one.

Similarly, if a school is part of a collaborative that provides LEA services to the school (e.g., Special Education Local Plan Area [SELPA] or Boards of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES]), the authorizer should connect with the school to better understand the roles and responsibilities the school shares with these organizations.

Providing a deeper level of support to new schools in particular areas may not be feasible, either due to capacity limits or a boundary your authorizing office holds around levels of autonomy and support. Leveraging external organizations to provide trainings or guidance can be helpful, as they are often designed to provide direct support to developing and new schools and have a shared interest in strong new school starts.

While leveraging partners can be impactful, not all organizations see the same path to achieving strong options for students and families. This isn't necessarily a reason to work in isolation, but acknowledging this dynamic is necessary.

Examples:

- *The Minnesota Department of Education's Charter Center hosts a [Charter School Boot Camp](#) for new and existing schools to better prepare school leaders for their role.*
- *The Georgia State Charter School Commission (SCSC) contracts with a technical assistance consultant to provide support to schools in their start-up year. This practice allows SCSC to ensure support for their new schools, while also managing their own capacity and approach to school autonomy. The SCSC has also partnered with the Georgia Charter Schools Association which provides [facility-specific support](#) during the start-up year.*
- *The Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers hosts a variety of [Year 0 resources](#) for authorizers to leverage.*

### **NACSA's Quality Practice Project (QPP) Finding:**

Authorizing often exists in a supportive charter school ecosystem with support organizations that help with application and new school development, often explicitly aligned with the authorizer's written expectations (application areas and pre-opening spaces).

While leveraging relationships with ecosystem partners is helpful for supporting individual schools that have received approval, the relationship can also support the continuous improvement of systems, processes, and policies associated with RTO. For example, schools supported by incubators have their own checklist they must complete during the planning year. As a result, incubators are intimately aware of the successes and challenges that their schools encounter and may be able to provide useful insight.



DIFFERENTIATE  
AND STREAMLINE

According to NACSA's QPP findings, authorizers with strong portfolios are more hands-on (sometimes, quite intensively) in the pre-opening process, including directing schools on areas for change, collaborating with charter support organizations, providing explicit informational and step-by-step resources for schools, and advocating on behalf of schools, when necessary.<sup>5</sup> The extent of an authorizer's support depends on a variety of factors, including capacity, state law, number of schools, leadership, and organizational philosophy.

### **New Start vs. Existing Operator**

Authorizers should consider differentiating the process to allow varying levels of support for new schools. Typically, a new start school will require more Year 0 support than an existing operator who is replicating an existing school or opening another school as part of their organization.

Authorizer support can also be differentiated based on the start-up experience of the founding team. For example, if a school is part of a network or being supported by a Charter Management Organization (CMO), the authorizer should understand the supports the team will receive as part of those relationships so they are not duplicating efforts or making assumptions. This collaboration with other organizations can help to support the new school but, ultimately, the authorizer is responsible for ensuring RTO criteria are met prior to school opening. While the level of support and the process might look different for schools based on their experience, the criteria a school must complete to demonstrate they are ready to open remains the same.

While the CREDO 2023 study highlights the strong performance of CMOs overall, they also found that "size or age of a CMO does not relate to their quality, which means some CMOs are growing poorly performing networks of schools." This underscores the importance of the RTO process for all schools, including those that are part of CMOs.

### **LEA Status**

Another area for differentiation is based on the Local Education Agency (LEA) status of the authorizer and schools and corresponding legal responsibilities. For example, while all schools must understand special population requirements and provide services to all students consistent with legal requirements and quality practices, schools that are their own LEA will require additional compliance, oversight, and reporting instruction.

Examples from the Field:

- *Tennessee's Charter Commission differentiates based on type of school:*
  - » [New Operator Checklist](#)
  - » [Existing Operator Checklist](#)
  - » [Transitioning Authorizer Checklist](#)
- [Massachusetts Department of Education](#) differentiates based on 18 or 12 months to opening.
- [Florida Association of Charter School Authorizers](#) includes citations of the source of each requirement to clarify an authorizer's authority to require that item.

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<sup>5</sup>National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2018) Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing – Findings from the Quality Practice Project. Retrieved from <https://qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/practices-that-matter/application-school-opening/>

# CONCLUSION

***If the plan doesn't work, change the plan but never the goal.***

*- Daniel Hurst*

Authorizers approve new school applications that have demonstrated a strong school plan and evidence that the founding team has the capacities to open and operate a school.<sup>6</sup> That approval marks the beginning of a new phase and a time to put into action those plans and capacities during the start-up year(s).

Plans put forth in the written application and/or capacity interview will no doubt change from the time of approval to the first day of school. And while the plan can change, the goal—ensuring only schools prepared to serve students open—does not. The founding team will certainly need to lean on their capacities (e.g., creative problem solving) as they adapt to changing circumstances and overcome start-up obstacles, while authorizers support and monitor their progress towards readiness, leveraging the tools and approaches in this playbook.

The celebration of an application's approval, followed by this deliberate and guided Ready To Open process, can then lead a charter school founding team and community to their ultimate goal: a new school set up for success and ready to serve students and families.

<sup>6</sup>National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2024) *The Capacities of Charter School Founding Teams – How to Identify and Assess for School Success*. Retrieved from <https://qualitycharters.box.com/s/76c7zi9ppvlu4ncds5ajtmg2xjzgbwiy>

# APPENDIX

Below are examples from states that have laws and regulations addressing the Ready To Open process, and examples of other approaches in states with no such requirements in law.

Laws and regulations utilize the term “pre-opening.” As such, the examples below will reference pre-opening rather than RTO.

For more comprehensive information on RTO policies, contact [Christina Ricordati](#).

## **Example of a pre-opening checklist requirement in statute:**

In Washington, authorizers shall establish reasonable pre-opening requirements or conditions to monitor the start-up progress of newly approved charter schools, ensure that they are prepared to open smoothly on the date agreed, and ensure that each school meets all building, health, safety, insurance, and other legal requirements for school opening. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.710.160>

## **Example of a pre-opening checklist requirement in regulation:**

In Kentucky, an authorizer shall include pre-opening requirements or conditions in the charter contract. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/law/kar/titles/701/008/020/>

## **Example of a pre-opening checklist requirement when one does not exist in state law:**

In Maine, the Charter School Commission uses a checklist. [https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov/doe/files/inline-files/ME%20Start%20up%20Plan\\_0.docx](https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov/doe/files/inline-files/ME%20Start%20up%20Plan_0.docx)

## **Example in statute of states that explicitly allow the authorizer to implement consequences if the pre-opening requirements are not met:**

In Hawaii, an approved applicant governing board that fails to satisfactorily meet the pre-contracting criteria and enter into a charter contract with its authorizer within the period initially established or subsequently extended by the authorizer shall be considered to have withdrawn its application. [https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/hrscurrent/Vol05\\_Ch0261-0319/HRS0302D/HRS\\_0302D-0014\\_0005.htm](https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/hrscurrent/Vol05_Ch0261-0319/HRS0302D/HRS_0302D-0014_0005.htm)

## **Example in regulation of states that explicitly allow the authorizer to implement consequences if the pre-opening requirements are not met:**

In Georgia, if the SCSC Executive Director determines that a state charter school has failed to demonstrate adequate preparation to begin operations, the Executive Director may suspend the state charter school's opening until the SCSC Executive Director determines that the state charter school has demonstrated adequate preparation to begin operations. <https://casetext.com/regulation/georgia-administrative-code/departments-691-rules-of-state-charter-schools-commission-of-georgia/chapter-691-2-practice-and-procedure/rule-691-2-10-state-charter-school-suspension-and-probation>

## **Example of states that implement consequences if the pre-opening requirements are not met, when there are no statutory requirements:**

In Tennessee, the state board of education has a pre-opening checklist with consequences. [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/charter\\_schools/our\\_schools/Exhibit%203.%20Pre-Opening%20Checklist\\_as%20of%202.27.18.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/charter_schools/our_schools/Exhibit%203.%20Pre-Opening%20Checklist_as%20of%202.27.18.pdf)

## **Different statutory timeline requirements for executing a contract on an approved charter school:**

Over half of states do not have a contract timeline requirement. For the rest, timelines vary greatly, with some as short as 30 days (New Mexico), and some as long as 90 days (Colorado, Virginia, and others).

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