Charter School Authorizers

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Introduction

Charter school authorizers are government-designated agencies responsible for deciding which charter schools open and close. Through the process of authorization, a private operator is granted a fixed-term contract, or charter, to operate a public school. These contracts dictate operational and academic achievement standards that must be met for the school to continue operating. Though the specifics vary by state, charter school authorizers are responsible for the administration of these contracts through three key responsibilities: (1) granting authorization for schools to open, (2) overseeing the charter schools that open, and (3) making decisions regarding contract renewals.

- *Authorization.* The authorization process typically includes a written application and an interview with the school's founding team. While authorizers generally have their own application template or guidelines for submission, applications typically describe who the school will serve, what will be taught, how the school will operate, and what qualifications and experience the founders have.[1] These applications are usually reviewed by external evaluators with expertise in running charter schools. Taking these evaluations into consideration, authorizers then determine which applicants are interviewed and ultimately approved. Most initial contracts are approved for 5 years, though allowable contract lengths vary by state and typically range from 3 to 10 years.[2]

- *Oversight.* After a charter is granted, authorizers are responsible for overseeing school operations and ensuring compliance with state regulations and appropriate use of public funds. Oversight is commonly carried out through school reporting requirements, authorizer visits to the school, collection of parent feedback, monitoring of student test scores, and informal communication between the authorizer and school leadership.[3] In some cases, authorizers also provide charter schools with technical assistance including school development workshops, data management modeling, professional development, and facilities planning.[4]

- *Renewal.* When a school's charter comes up for renewal according to the term designated in the original contract, its authorizer is tasked with evaluating the school's success. Schools can be closed for issues including low student achievement or enrollment, school leadership problems, and financial mismanagement. When a charter is renewed, authorizers can grant contracts with durations between 2 and 15 years, depending on the strength of the school's performance and the state's legislation.[5]

Through their responsibilities of authorization, oversight, and renewal, charter school authorizers operate as a bureaucratic accountability system for the charter school sector. While authorizers are responsible for ensuring charter schools provide quality educational options to families, some charter advocates argue that the role of authorizers should be minimized. These advocates suggest that authorizers limit educational innovation through selective authorization decisions. Additionally, some argue that charter schools should be primarily accountable to the families they serve rather than authorizers. These competing views are reflected in each state's charter legislation, which dictates the scope of authorizers' authority and responsibilities.[6] State law also determines which institutions are eligible to serve as charter authorizers; these may include independent charter

boards, local or state education agencies, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, or noneducational government entities. While the formal responsibilities of authorizers are generally similar across institutional types, the manner in which authorizing authority is exercised may differ. For example, independent charter boards are typically dedicated solely to charter oversight, whereas local or state education agencies may approach authorizing as part of a broader portfolio management role encompassing multiple types of public schools (more on this topic can be found in the chapter on portfolio management of schools).

While charter authorizers shape educational options for students in 45 states and the District of Columbia,[7] there is little research on the direct effect of their decisions—the small body of existing studies comprises mostly correlational quantitative studies or qualitative case studies. This small body of descriptive research on charter authorizers contrasts with the large body of causal research dedicated to charter schools' effects more broadly, which is reviewed in the chapter on charter schools. Given the comparatively limited research on charter school authorizers, the findings presented below reflect areas of consensus within a small body of studies and should therefore be interpreted with more caution than findings on charter schools more broadly.

Key findings

Key finding #1: *Student achievement is generally similar across different types of charter school authorizers, though schools authorized by nonprofit organizations tend to have slightly lower performance and more uneven results than other charter schools.*

Six studies have examined how student achievement varies between authorizer types. While most studies identify minimal differences between schools with authorizers of different types, two studies find statistically significant differences for schools authorized by nonprofit organizations. One study identifies that students in nonprofit-authorized schools have lower standardized test scores than similar peers in other charter schools, while another study finds greater variation in student achievement among nonprofit-authorized schools.

Key finding #2: *The limited research available suggests that authorizers are somewhat effective in approving schools that later demonstrate strong performance.*

The limited research available suggests that authorizers can sometimes, at the application stage, identify characteristics of charter schools that will later demonstrate strong performance. While authorizers do not always base approval decisions on indicators that predict low school performance, their overall votes that take into consideration factors beyond the written application materials have been found to predict students' math growth and on-time opening of a new school. However, the recommendations of external evaluators—which authorizers sometimes also take into consideration—do not predict academic achievement.

Key finding #3*: Authorizers have varying priorities for the charter schools they approve but tend to prefer generalist and network-affiliated schools, which limits the representation of racially minoritized founders.*

Authorizers tend to approve generalist charter schools and those affiliated with networks at higher rates than others, likely because of a preference for the opening of schools with a demonstrated history of success. In some cases, these preferences can limit the representation of racially minoritized founders; however, some authorizers counterbalance this trend by intentionally prioritizing equity in their authorization decisions.

Key finding #4: *Authorizers' responsibilities are often not well defined by state legislation, which leads to substantial variation in how and the extent to which oversight is carried out.*

Charter school authorizers tend to have a great deal of flexibility in how they carry out oversight. While their oversight and enforcement of financial management tend to be robust, authorizers less

consistently set strong and enforceable expectations for educational and operational performance. The overall degree to which authorizers carry out oversight is also influenced by their organizational capacity and state context.

Key finding #5: *Charter school closures by authorizers are relatively uncommon but disproportionately impact Black communities.*

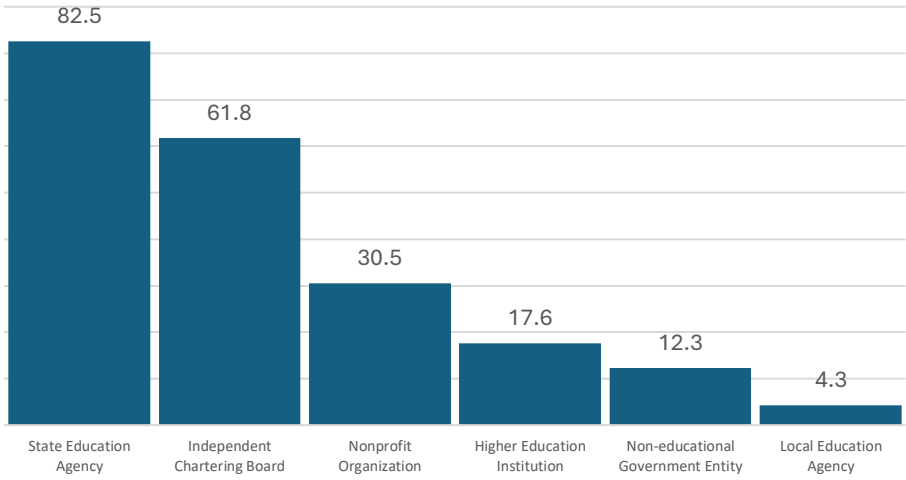
Approximately 7% of charter school contracts are not renewed on an annual basis, and an additional 2.4% of charter schools are closed mid-term. While charter closures are relatively infrequent, those with Black founders or those that serve predominantly Black student populations are closed at disproportionately high rates.

Background: Types of charter school authorizers

Each state with a charter school law designates the institutions eligible to be a charter school authorizer. While some states have established an independent charter board that acts as the sole charter school authorizer, other states give permission to existing institutions to authorize charter schools. These institutions include local education agencies that govern traditional public schools, state education agencies, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and noneducational government entities. States may decide to assign only one type of institution to act as charter authorizers or to allow many.

Each type of institution may have varying capacity and desire to carry out the responsibilities of charter authorization.[8] Based on national data from active charter authorizers, Figure 1 shows the average number of charter schools overseen by each type of authorizer as of 2021.[9]

Figure 1: Average Number of Charter Schools by Authorizer Type



- *Local education agencies:* Nearly 90% of authorizers across the United States are local education agencies,[10] operating in 33 states.[11] Local education agencies include both school districts and county offices of education. While these agencies are the most common type of charter school authorizer, they oversee only 47% of charter schools[12] and are often restricted to authorizing schools within their geographical jurisdiction. Given the responsibility of local education agencies to also oversee traditional public schools, it is likely that many have limited

staff dedicated to charter authorization responsibilities,[13] and some may oppose the opening of charter schools that would compete with their traditional public schools for student enrollment.

- *State education agencies:* Fifteen states have their state education agency designated as a charter school authorizer.[14] While these agencies may have limited desire to authorize new charter schools because of their continued oversight of existing traditional public schools, they do tend to have the ability to develop infrastructure necessary for authorizing and oversight (hiring of staff, protocol development, etc.).[15] On average, the state education agencies oversee over 82 charter schools each—the highest average across all authorizer types—and together cover 21% of the charter schools in the United States.[16]

- *Independent chartering boards:* Fifteen states have independent chartering boards whose singular focus in most cases is their responsibility as a charter school authorizer.[17] These boards typically have strong charter authorization infrastructure and face no competing responsibility to oversee traditional public schools.[18] In some states, independent chartering boards have been created as part of achievement recovery initiatives created to address persistently low-performing schools; examples include the Achievement School District in Tennessee and the Recovery School District in Louisiana. Across the United States, independent chartering boards oversee approximately 17% of all charter schools.[19]

- *Higher education institutions:* Twelve states permit higher education institutions to serve as charter school authorizers.[20] These institutions have considerable educational expertise and, relative to other authorizers, have the advantage of operating independently of state governments, which means they do not have to align their decisions on which charter schools open and close with the preferences of state leaders.[21] Overall, higher education institutions oversee around 9% of all charter schools.[22]

- *Nonprofit organizations:* Only two states—Ohio and Minnesota—have designated nonprofit organizations as permissible charter school authorizers.[23] On average, nonprofit organizations oversee around 30 charter schools each and account for 5% of charter schools nationally.[24]

- *Noneducational government entities:* Noneducational government entities can include mayors' offices and other municipal authorities. These institutions are the least common type of authorizer—the Indianapolis mayor's office is the primary example of this category of charter school authorizer. Across the United States, only 1% of charter schools are authorized by noneducational government agencies.[25]

While this section provides the most current information about charter school authorizers that we are aware of, the landscape of authorizers is continuously changing. States can change the institutions permitted to authorize at any time. For example, Wyoming allowed the State Loan and Investment Board to authorize charter schools until 2023, when legislation transferred supervision of existing schools to the newly established Charter School Authorizing Board.[26] Further, not all institutions that are permitted to be authorizers actively approve charter schools but may opt to do so at any given time. In Tennessee, Rutherford County became the fifth local education agency to authorize charter schools in 2024–though all local education agencies have had authorizing authority since 2002.[27] This evolving landscape of charter authorizers is further complicated by stipulations of special case-authorizing authority, such as rules allowing some state education agencies to approve charter schools only when a previous denial by another authorizer is being appealed.

Evidence supporting key findings

Charter school authorizers remain under researched relative to charter schools, which are the subject of an expansive body of research. During the early expansion of charter schools, researchers described the roles of authorizers and explored the influence of organizational and state context. More recently, researchers have conducted studies of how authorizers shape schooling options and student outcomes—these studies are mostly correlational quantitative studies or qualitative case studies. This limited research on charter authorizers is reviewed in the following sections.

Key finding #1: *Student achievement is generally similar across different types of charter school authorizers, though schools authorized by nonprofit organizations tend to have slightly lower performance and more uneven results than other charter schools.*

One of the central goals of the charter authorization process is to approve new schools that improve the educational opportunities available to families. However, as we discussed above, authorizers differ in both their capacity for and commitment to carrying out this work. These institutional differences matter because the quality of authorizers' decisions can, in theory, shape student achievement outcomes at the schools that they allow to open. Primarily in states where multiple kinds of institutions can authorize charter schools, researchers have examined how authorizer type influences student achievement. Currently, we are aware of six studies that have evaluated these differences. The findings are mixed but generally suggest that student achievement may be lower at charter schools authorized by nonprofit organizations.

The strongest evidence of authorizers' effect on achievement comes from studies that utilize student-level achievement data rather than grade- or school-level information. These studies can more accurately account for how student characteristics shape standardized test scores. To make the most accurate comparison between authorizers of different types, one study of elementary and middle school students in Ohio charter schools between 2004-05 and 2007-08 uses propensity score matching of students. This study looks for differences between charter schools authorized by public school districts, county-based educational service centers, the state, and nonprofit organizations—students in each group are matched to a charter student under a different type of authorizer on the basis of grade, gender, race, and prior achievement. The study finds minimal differences between authorizers of different types, but the math and reading scores of students at schools authorized by nonprofit organizations were 0.09 standard deviations (s.d.) lower on average—while these effect sizes are relatively small, the differences are meaningful and were larger for Black students (0.11 s.d.).[28]

Another study using grade-within-school achievement scores for 1999–2000 through 2008–2009 in Minnesota finds greater variation in student achievement among schools authorized by nonprofit organizations than among schools authorized by other types of institutions (school districts, higher education institutions, and the Minnesota Department of Education).[29] This finding indicates that student achievement among nonprofit-authorized schools was less consistent than that of schools in other types of authorizers' portfolios, with some schools producing strong results while others performed poorly. Similarly, the study from Ohio finds high variance among charter schools authorized by nonprofit organizations; however, it was not significantly different from the variance observed among schools authorized by public school districts or county-based educational service centers. Rather, the study finds state-authorized charter schools to have the lowest variation in student achievement—though all the groups of charter schools exhibited higher variation than traditional public schools.

Comparison of charter schools' and traditional public schools' performance is important given the intention of charter schools to improve educational opportunities for students. However, these comparisons are complicated by the fact that students who opt into charter schools may be inherently different from traditional public school students, introducing selection bias. A recent study from Indiana deals with selection bias through the comparison of students who switch into

charter middle schools to students who attended the traditional public school that they switched out of and who have identical demographic characteristics and similar baseline achievement. Through this approach, the study reveals that students who switched into charter schools authorized by higher education institutions experienced negative effects on academic achievement while students who switched into schools authorized by the Indianapolis mayor's office experienced relative increases in their math and English scores.[30] However, this study also finds that the negative effect of attendance of a charter school authorized by a higher education institution on English achievement held true only for some higher education–based authorizers. This finding suggests that the effect of attendance of a charter school authorized by a higher education institution may vary from authorizer to authorizer.

In addition to this research, evidence from four studies generally suggests that there is no significant difference in the average achievement of charter school students by authorizer type. Although one study from Michigan finds that schools authorized by local education agencies produced the lowest academic achievement outcomes on average, this study does not control for any student characteristics.[31] When student controls are utilized in a study based in Minnesota[32] and another with a sample of 15 states,[33] no statistically significant differences between schools with different authorizer types are identified. Similarly, a study that compares statewide measures of charter school performance across 30 states finds no statistically significant differences associated with the presence of a second authorizing authority (e.g., state education agency, independent chartering board) in states where local education agencies authorize charter schools.[34] These findings suggest that nonlocal education agencies were likely not more or less effective in supporting charter student achievement in these states. However, the study does find that the presence of an additional authorizer reduces the odds of a low-performing charter school closing.

Together, these studies suggest that, in most cases, student achievement likely does not substantially vary with authorizer type but may vary by individual authorizer both across and within authorizer type. There is some limited evidence that student performance may be weaker or more varied at charter schools authorized by nonprofit organizations. While only two studies contribute to this claim, they do span the two states that allow nonprofit organizations to authorize charter schools—Ohio and Minnesota. Overall, more research is needed to understand how student achievement varies between and within various authorizer types.

Key finding #2: *The limited research available suggests that authorizers are somewhat effective in approving schools that later demonstrate strong performance.*

Through authorization decisions, charter school authorizers inherently prioritize some school characteristics over others. The goal of these priorities is to prevent low-performing charter schools from opening. Three studies have examined the approval decisions of charter school authorizers to understand whether their preferences support student and school academic success. While the question is important, the findings of these studies are limited by the fact that outcomes are observed only for schools that are approved and open. As a result, these studies cannot assess whether authorizers' decisions effectively distinguish high- from low-quality proposals since the counterfactual outcomes of rejected schools remain unobserved. Instead, the studies speak only to variation in academic outcomes conditional on a school's passing the authorization process.

Two studies have used correlational regression analyses to examine which school characteristics are prioritized by authorizers and how these characteristics predict future student achievement. In a study of 127 schools that opened across Colorado, Indiana, North Carolina, and Texas between 2009–10 and 2014–15, researchers find three proposed-school characteristics that predict a school's probability of low academic performance in its first two years of operation.[35] These characteristics include child-centered learning models (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Paideia), plans to serve at-risk students without adequate supports, and the absence of identified school leadership. However, when the initial authorization decisions were evaluated, authorizers paid little attention to these factors and instead were likelier to reject applications that lacked external funding sources,

rigorous educator evaluation plans, tutoring services, plans for data-driven decision-making, cultures of high expectations, and plans to hire a charter management organization (CMO) or education management organization (EMO). Given that many of the proposed schools missing these characteristics never opened, we do not know whether these characteristics may have also led to low academic performance had the schools actually opened.

While the previous study suggests authorizers do not always adequately consider predictors of student achievement in their approval decisions, a study of the New Orleans Recovery School District between 2001 and 2013 finds that authorizer priorities were directly aligned with the interests of student success.[36] The study finds that applications naming a nonprofit partner were 22 percentage points less likely to be approved than those that did not. Additionally, when examining 13 characteristics listed in the applications of 28 charter schools that were approved, the study finds that only the identification of a nonprofit partner predicted lower school performance scores.

In addition to proposed-school characteristics, authorizers consider the advice of external evaluators, who typically provide individual approval recommendations for applications. While the study from New Orleans finds that the number of external evaluators who recommended application approval was predictive of the authorizer's ultimate approval decisions, the same study and another from North Carolina[37] find that these evaluator recommendations are generally not predictive of students' academic achievement. These findings suggest the importance of authorizers making informed approval decisions independent of the advice provided from external evaluators.

On the basis of written application materials, the advice of external evaluators, and interviews, authorizers vote on whether to approve an application. The study from North Carolina tests whether the number of passing votes received from the state-level charter school board predicts students' growth in math and reading. The correlational study finds that for applications reviewed between 2013 and 2017, one additional passing vote from the board was predictive of a small (0.03–0.04 s.d.) increase in students' math growth in the first two years of operation but not of students' growth in reading. The study also finds that schools that received more passing votes were likelier to open and open on time but no likelier to meet enrollment targets. Further, simulations find that an increase in the stringency of criteria for approval would have had little effect on student or school outcomes.

The current evidence suggests that authorizers can sometimes identify characteristics of charter schools that will be successful at the application stage. While authorizers do not always catch indicators for low school performance, their overall votes that take into consideration factors beyond the written application materials have been found to predict marginally better performance on some indicators of student and school success in North Carolina. However, the recommendations of external evaluators that authorizers do take into consideration are not evidenced to predict academic achievement. Further research is necessary to better understand the alignment of authorizer priorities with the future success of schools and develop stronger recommendations to guide authorization decisions.

Key finding #3: *Authorizers have varying priorities for the charter schools they approve but tend to prefer generalist and network-affiliated schools, which limits the representation of racially minoritized founders.*

Charter authorizers' freedom to decide which schools may open gives them substantial influence over the educational options available to families. Each authorizer brings its own priorities regarding the missions that schools should pursue and the students they should serve. These priorities not only vary across authorizers but also reflect the broader state and institutional contexts in which they operate.

While some proponents argue that charter schools are intended to foster innovative educational practices, the number of specialist schooling models (focused on, e.g., vocational education, fine arts, or culturally relevant curricula) proposed and authorized has dwindled over time.[38] This trend

has been validated by an observed decline in specialist charter school mission statements at the national,[39] state,[40] and city levels.[41] A national study that utilizes linear growth models finds that, on average, the percentage of charter schools with specialized missions in a given state declined by 0.78 percentage points each year between 1993 and 2005.[42] This trend is partially explained by an increase in permissive state charter laws that decrease expectations for innovation in the charter sector and make it generally easier to open a new charter school. Another study of 26 states finds that a one-point increase in a state's regulatory score (as assigned by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers on the basis of the stringency of authorizer standards, performance frameworks, and closure policies) is associated with a 0.014 s.d. decrease in a school's innovation score (calculated on the basis of the number of specialist characteristics listed in charter applications and school websites)[43]—which suggests that, in especially stringent contexts, authorizers may be driven by risk aversion to favor schooling models with track records of success. Although there may still be variation in authorizers' preferences for innovative school models within states, research from Detroit—a city with a high concentration of charter schools—revealed a lack of diverse mission statements across all authorizer types.[44] This trend of supporting generalist charter schools is criticized for limiting the kind of innovation that some advocates believe the charter sector is intended to facilitate.

Similarly, authorizers tend to prefer network-affiliated charter schools because they have track records of academic achievement.[45] While intended to support student success, authorizers' preference for network-affiliated proposals disadvantages racially minoritized founders, who are less likely to partner with networks.[46] In general, applications from racially minoritized founders are approved at lower rates than those proposed by White founders. One study of charter school authorization in New Orleans and Memphis finds that approval rates for applications with majority racially minoritized boards increased only when the application proposed connections to a charter network.[47] The exclusion of racially minoritized communities from charter school governance is further amplified in states with strong regulatory environments. One study finds that a one-point increase in a state's regulatory score is associated with an additional 1.2- to 1.9-percentage-point decrease in the likelihood of approval for applications submitted by Black or Latino founders relative to the approval likelihood of those submitted by White or Asian founders.[48]

Although authorizers generally approve applications from racially minoritized founders at low rates, some authorizers prioritize a commitment to equity in their mission. One study that includes interviews and a systematic review of charter applications with nine authorizers in five states finds that seven authorizers prioritized equity.[49] This generally meant they encouraged the enrollment of racially minoritized students at charter schools; however, some authorizers were also concerned with equitable instruction and student opportunities. Further, this study finds that authorizers who signaled strong equity goals subsequently received applications for charter schools with stronger equity orientations.

Some researchers have suggested that higher education–based authorizers may have strong equity goals due to the social justice commitments of some higher education institutions;[50] however, two studies have shown evidence against this claim. One study finds that only five out of the nine higher education–based authorizers in the authors' sample encouraged the enrollment of racially diverse student populations.[51] Another study in Detroit finds diversity to be mentioned less often in the mission statements of schools authorized by higher education institutions than in those of schools with other types of authorizers.[52] Together, these findings suggest that the equity goals of authorizers may not be tied to their institutional structures.

In some cases, authorizers' priorities can be shaped by their state context. Some states allow charter school authorizers to keep a percentage of the per-pupil funds allocated to the schools they authorize, which may incentivize them to authorize more or larger schools.[53] While influenced by their context, authorizers' priorities are also not inherently static and may be influenced by experience or politics.

Key finding #4: *Authorizers' responsibilities are often not well defined by state legislation, which leads to substantial variation in how and the extent to which oversight is carried out.*

Once a charter school opens, the authorizer is responsible for overseeing school operations and performance and for guaranteeing compliance with state regulations and appropriate use of public funds. While the regulatory role of authorizers is important for ensuring that charter schools meet their goals, state charter laws often do not provide a robust explanation of these responsibilities.[54] Given this flexibility, there is a great deal of variation in how charter school authorizers oversee schools.[55]

Authorizers utilize a diverse array of tools for overseeing charter schools and measuring their success. These tools include school reporting requirements, authorizer visits to the school, collection of parent feedback, monitoring of student test scores, and informal communication between the authorizer and school leadership.[56] These tools can be used to evaluate schools' academic, financial, and operational performance—all aspects that contribute to school success. However, an evaluation of 46 large authorizers between 2012 and 2015 reveals that authorizers' oversight tended to primarily focus on the documentation and enforcement of financial management, with key weaknesses in the setting of strong and enforceable expectations for schools' educational and operational performance.[57]

Authorizers' capacity to conduct robust oversight likely depends on their organizational context. A survey of 48 authorizers from 1999 reveals that larger authorizers and those that are not local education agencies are likelier to have well-defined accountability systems.[58] This suggests that the organizational capacity of larger authorizers[59] may support more rigorous monitoring of charter schools' compliance with regulations and their outcome-based contracts. In addition to organizational context, the state that authorizers operate in can influence the extent to which they prioritize oversight. One study featuring interviews with authorizers in Arizona and Michigan during the late 1990s finds that the political environment of each state shaped oversight expectations.[60] In Arizona, authorizers were scrutinized when they partnered with government offices for accountability purposes because of the state's desire to create a mostly independent charter sector. In Michigan, however, authorizers were encouraged by the state to carry out thorough oversight to ensure charter schools improved the quality of educational options available. This study suggests that the purpose state leaders assign to charter schools influences the actions of authorizers despite a lack of clear legislation dictating how oversight should be carried out.

Key finding #5: *Charter school closures by authorizers are relatively uncommon but disproportionately impact Black communities.*

Although charter school closures are relatively rare, they affect a large number of students because of the size of the charter sector. Closures can occur either at the end of a contract term when an authorizer declines to renew a school's charter or mid-term when issues of noncompliance are identified by the authorizer or state agency. Additionally, a school's governing board may voluntarily surrender its charter at any given point in time, closing the school. Between 1991 and 2019, the annual closure rate for all charter schools was approximately 5.1%, over four percentage points higher than the rate observed for traditional public schools.[61] Notably, the annual closure rate for charter schools also slightly increases when we consider only schools whose contracts were up for renewal. Between 2011 and 2016, the national nonrenewal rate remained around 7% each year.[62] While these year-to-year closure rates are relatively low, approximately 39% of the charter schools that opened between 1998 and 2022 closed within 10 years.[63] In this timeframe, charter school closures have affected over 1.1 million students across the United States.

Black students and Black charter school founders are disproportionately affected by charter school closures. A recent study examines racial inequities in charter closures with a national sample of 5,952 charter schools that opened between 2010 and 2019.[64] This study finds that 31.1% of schools with majority-Black student populations did not see their contracts renewed whereas 22.2% of all other charter schools faced nonrenewal. Using data for 925 charter schools in 24 states where

founder's race was available, a separate analysis in the study finds that 31.1% of charter schools with Black founders closed while only 14.6% of schools with founders of other races did. These findings tied with other research suggest that Black charter school leaders are less likely to have their applications accepted and, conditional on approval, likelier to see them taken away. Additionally, this study considers the role of state automatic closure laws (observed in 18 states), which stipulate the required closure of schools whose student academic achievement falls below a specified threshold. Regression analyses indicate that the probability of school closure increased by 23.7 percentage points when the school had a Black founder in states with automatic closure laws and that a 10-percentage-point increase in Black student representation was associated with a 4.5-percentage-point increase in the probability of school closure in those states. These findings suggest that when only academic achievement benchmarks are considered in renewal decisions, Black communities are disproportionately affected.

While automatic closure laws exacerbate racial inequities in school closures, academic achievement does not tend to be the primary driver of charter school closures across the county. At present, we are aware of only one study, set in New Orleans, that has found a statistically significant correlation between a charter school's achievement and an authorizer's renewal decisions.[65] Alternatively, most descriptive studies have found that issues with school operations precipitate nonrenewal decisions and school closures. A recent study estimates that between 2022 and 2024, about 13.7% of charter school closures were driven by academic achievement issues while 46.8% were determined by low student enrollment and 21.6% by fraud or mismanagement.[66]

In some cases of nonrenewal, a lack of operational support from the authorizer prior to the nonrenewal decision has been shown to perpetuate community harm. A qualitative case study of the closure of a predominantly Black charter school reveals that the district authorizer created a narrative of community and school shortcomings despite the authorizer's failure to provide adequate support prior to the renewal period.[67] Research has also documented concerns regarding the fairness of renewal decisions in New Orleans.[68] While the renewal process is intended to ensure schools provide adequate schooling opportunities to students, communities are concerned by the racial inequities that arise through authorizers' decisions.

Policy considerations

Charter school authorizers serve an important role in deciding which charter schools open and close. However, there is substantial variation in how they carry out these responsibilities. While some education leaders advocate for standardization of authorizer roles, the needs of the charter sector often depend on contextual factors such as the number of charter schools served by the authorizer, school size, and school mission statement, among others. Despite this context dependency, the collection of research reviewed in this chapter suggests it would be appropriate to consider policies that achieve the following goals:

- Alignment of the factors authorizers rely on to make approval decisions with those that support strong student performance.
- Standardization of the oversight process and the conditions under which authorizers provide technical assistance to charter schools.
- Added consideration of achievement gains in states' automatic closure laws.
- Incorporation of community feedback into oversight processes and renewal decisions.
- Expanded consideration of innovation (i.e., specialist mission statements) in authorization and renewal decisions.

Future research

The key findings of this chapter highlight pertinent trends in charter authorization that lend relevant policy insights. However, the evidence base that these insights are derived from consists primarily of correlational quantitative studies or qualitative case studies. The fact that the amount of literature is limited is partially driven by the high variation in authorizer types, structures, regulations, and practices across and within states, which creates complexity for the description of consistent trends. However, this variation can also be leveraged in some cases to identify differences among authorizers that meaningfully change charter school outcomes. Researchers should consider the following areas for future research:

- Previous studies have sought to identify differences in student achievement across authorizer types; however, the majority of studies have found that achievement varies more across authorizers within institutional types. Future studies should aim to identify meaningful differences between authorizers that explain variation in student achievement —factors to consider include the number of years an authorizer has been active, the geographical proximity of authorizers to their charter schools, and the number of staff members within an authorizing office.

- Applications submitted to charter school authorizers are rich with information on the characteristics of proposed schools. Future studies should leverage this text to further identify the characteristics on whose basis authorizers make approval decisions and how these decisions shape subsequent student achievement.

- Research on charter school authorizers' oversight responsibilities has primarily described the tools used to monitor school operations and performance—assessments of the quality of these tools are necessary. Researchers should also seek to describe the extent to which authorizers provide schools with technical assistance and the efficacy of these offerings in improving school functions and student outcomes.

- The charter renewal process is partially intended to close charter schools that are not meeting academic performance standards; however, not all low-performing schools are closed. Further study of authorizers' incentivizes for closing (or not closing) low-performing schools is needed.

Conclusion

While there is a large body of research dedicated to charter schools, the set of studies focused on the actions and effects of charter school authorizers is currently significantly smaller. Through their responsibilities of authorization, oversight, and renewal, authorizers are intended to ensure that the charter sector provides quality educational options to families. At present, a small number of studies have shown preliminary evidence that authorizers' approval decisions may help prevent low-performing schools from opening and that—except among nonprofit organizations—authorizers' efficacy is generally not tied to their institutional category (e.g., local education agency, higher education institution). However, it is notable that authorizers' focus on academic achievement does seem to have a direct tradeoff with school innovation, as feared by longstanding critics of bureaucratic regulation in the charter sector. More recently, concerns regarding the perpetuation of racial inequities through authorizers' discretionary decisions have also come to light and are validated by a small number of recent studies on charter authorization and renewal decisions. More research is necessary to understand the authorizer conditions and actions that best support the charter school sector in terms of promoting equity, strong academic achievement, and innovation.

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