



# LEADERSHIP, COMMITMENT, JUDGMENT: ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZING

*Findings from the  
Quality Practice Project*

# KEY FINDINGS

Great authorizers—those with strong school portfolios and performance outcomes—implement foundational best practices that NACSA has promoted for years. But to achieve outstanding outcomes, more is needed. When compared to others nationally, great authorizers also share certain additional unmistakable characteristics:



## LEADERSHIP

Great authorizers are dedicated to a mission of giving more children access to better schools through the proactive creation and replication of high-quality charter schools and the closure of academically low-performing ones.

- **The State University of New York's Charter School Institute (SUNY)** sent a clear message early in its existence with several high-profile closures of failing schools, which signaled it would put the interests of students above all else and that trustees and staff were serious about upholding standards. These early moves helped improve the quality of their portfolio in another way: stronger charter school operators who value tough but supportive oversight have flocked to them, while those desiring to fly under the radar or not interested in strong accountability have tended not to apply to SUNY.
- **Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools** created a successful, well-vetted application process that is the key to the quality of its portfolio. With smart application and opening tools in place, the authorizer was able to successfully recruit both homegrown operators that grew into networks and national charter management organizations to the district. It was also able to remain focused on quality during a period of increased application activity that followed sweeping education reforms in Tennessee in 2009-11. In addition, their Office of Charter Schools advocates for charter schools within the district, helping them navigate intra-district issues and ensuring that schools receive the resources and support to which they are entitled.

*"We authorize strong schools that not only create a love of learning, but actually ensure students learn. If still more parents want that program, we replicate it. When schools fail to live up to their mission, they close."*

*—Susie Miller Carello, Executive Director, SUNY Charter Schools Institute*



## JUDGMENT

Great authorizers make decisions based on what will drive student outcomes, not based on checking boxes or personal beliefs.

- Leaders and staff at the **Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education** and its Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign have created a strong culture of professional judgment. Despite having created many of the processes and tools now regarded as best practices in charter authorizing, key application and intervention decisions—to a remarkable extent—are grounded in the professional judgement of staff. The highest value is often the collective wisdom of an experienced and highly-skilled team, whose understanding of quality is well aligned and routinely fine tuned. As a senior staff member put it, "Authorizing isn't paint by numbers."
- When collecting key accountability data, **Washington, D.C.'s Public Charter School Board** allows schools to correct erroneous data, even if the deadline

has passed. This ensures that high-stakes accountability is based on accurate information. They engage in a holistic approach to reviewing new and expansion charter applications, using a balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses of leadership, academic program, finance, and equity that a scoring rubric would not. Board and staff join together for a final evaluation called “defense day,” where they debate what the decision should be. They have built a strong procedural foundation while building flexibility and discretion into decision making.

*“Outcomes in authorizing matter: you have to know whether, and to what extent, you’re impacting student outcomes and changing lives. Specifically, are the resources—time, money, people, professional development—substantially changing the education landscape for the better?”*

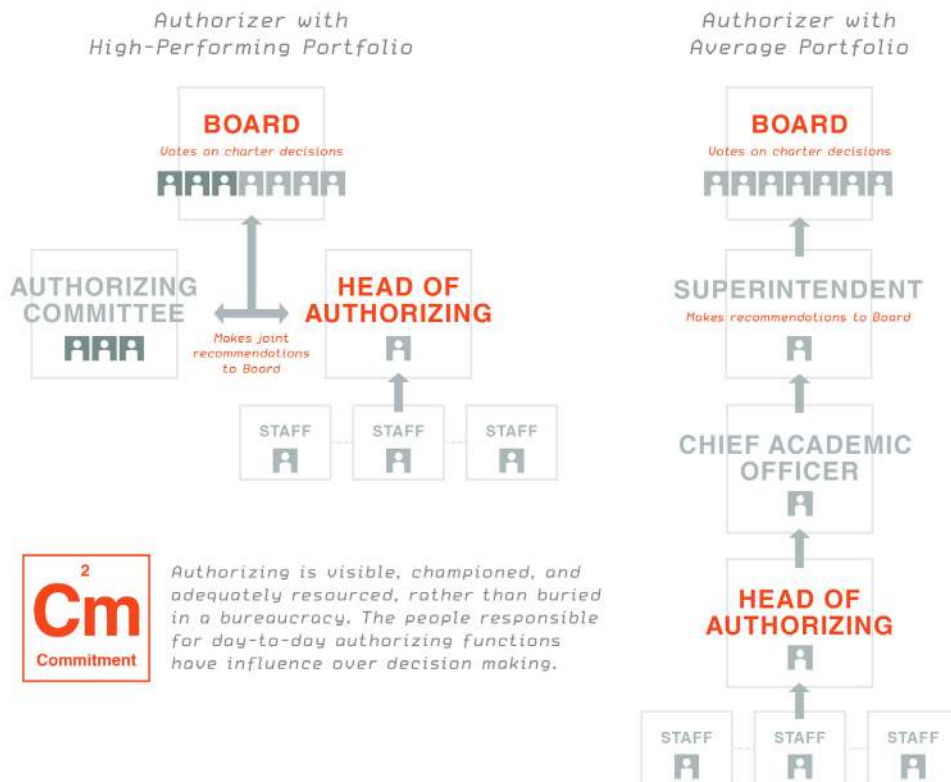
*—Kathryn Mullen Upton, Vice President of Sponsorship & Dayton Initiatives, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation*



**COMMITMENT**

Great authorizers reflect their institution’s commitment to quality authorizing. Authorizing is visible, championed, and adequately resourced, rather than buried in a bureaucracy. The people responsible for day-to-day authorizing functions have influence over decision making.

**Sample Organizational Charts:**



- The **State University of New York (SUNY)** Charter School Institute’s commitment to expanding quality options has been fostered by its structure of political accountability. The Institute is not part of the State Education Department, home of New York’s other statewide authorizer. The Institute’s leadership reports directly to SUNY’s Trustees (the final decision makers on high-stakes authorizing functions and decisions), providing important, direct influence on these decisions. The governor appoints the Trustees to seven-year terms, which provides the Institute with a layer of electoral accountability, as well as some insulation from influences and agendas unrelated to the Institute’s mission. This political independence gives the organization a kind of nimbleness.
- Authorizing is one of three ways the **Thomas B. Fordham Foundation** works to increase school quality. The Foundation has maintained this organizational commitment to quality authorizing since 2005 by supporting—financially and in terms of human capital—a largely autonomous, highly visible authorizing operation. While day-to-day decisions are left to the authorizing staff, Fordham has an experienced and engaged leadership team (which includes head authorizing staff) and board of trustees. Their input helps to guide staff work and is critical to high-stakes decision making. Fordham’s commitment goes beyond quality authorizing of great schools: it seeks to be an exemplary authorizer for others to emulate.