



September 2025

AUTHORIZER WELCOME KIT

Visit Our Website

www.coauthorizers.org



Section 1: Introduction

Key Links:

- [CACSA Website](#)

The Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (“CACSA”)¹ is a member-driven organization designed to support authorizers through various strategies, including networking meetings, model materials, personalized support, peer-to-peer connections, and serving as a voice for quality authorizing. With CACSA support, authorizers are better able to:

- Determine the quality and viability of charter applicants;
- Create effective performance management systems that allow them to track the quality, performance, and appropriate operation of charter schools;
- Support equitable access and appropriate services for all students; and
- Make sustainable high-stakes decisions about the charter schools they oversee that are in the best interest of students and their community.²

The supports CACSA provides align with both national best practices for quality charter school authorizing, documented by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (“NACSA”)³ and practices that are reflected in the *Colorado Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* as adopted by the Colorado State Board of Education.⁴

This “Authorizer Welcome Kit” is designed to further CACSA’s mission and vision by providing a repository of best practice-aligned materials that new authorizers can leverage in their contexts. The first sections of the toolkit outline general authorizer best practices, while the remaining sections walk through the authorizer’s role across a charter school life cycle. Each section includes a narrative description and links to key documents and resources.

¹ Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers, “About Us,” <https://coauthorizers.org/>

² Colorado Department of Education, “Colorado Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing,” <https://coauthorizers.org/resource/standards-for-charter-schools-and-charter-school-authorizers-updated/>

³ National Association of Charter School Authorizers, “Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing” (2023), <https://qualitycharters.org/principles-and-standards/>

⁴ Colorado State Board of Education, “Adoption of Colorado Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing” (2019).

Section 2: Role of the Authorizer

Key Links:

- Colorado Standards For [Charter Schools and Charter School Authorizers](#)
- [CO Principles and Standards PowerPoint](#)
- [NACSA Principles and Standards](#)

Authorizers play a critical role in ensuring students have access to high-quality schools by “ensuring that schools have both the autonomy to which they are entitled and the public accountability for which they are responsible.”⁵ The following three responsibilities lie at the heart of the authorizing endeavor, and authorizers should be guided by and fulfill these core principles in all aspects of their work: maintain high standards for schools, uphold school autonomy, and protect student and public interests.

In Colorado, authorizer practice is guided by the State Board of Education's adopted Standards for Charter Schools and Charter School Authorizers,⁶ which are themselves grounded in national principles and standards published by NACSA.⁷

The following visual gives an overview of these standards of best practice; more information can be found in the linked documents.

Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Each standard is categorized within the following five categories:



Agency Commitment and Capacity

A quality authorizer fosters excellent charter schools that meet identified community needs. They prioritize a commitment to excellence in education and in authorizing practices, and creates organizational structures, including human and financial resources, to conduct their authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.



Application Process and Decision Making

A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that includes clear application questions and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants demonstrating a strong capacity to establish and operate an effective charter school.



Performance Contracting

A quality authorizer executes contracts with charter schools that articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, funding, administration, oversight, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms. The contract is an essential document, that establishes the legally binding terms under which the school will operate and be held accountable.



Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

A quality authorizer evaluates performance and monitors compliance; ensures schools' legally entitled autonomy; protects student rights; informs intervention, revocation, and renewal decisions; and provides annual public reports on school performance.



Revocation and Renewal Decision Making

A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive academic, financial, and operational performance data to make merit-based renewal decisions, and revokes charters when necessary to protect student and public interests.

⁵ National Association of Charter School Authorizers, Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing (2023), <https://qualitycharters.org/principles-and-standards/>

⁶ Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing, <https://coauthorizers.org/resource/standards-for-charter-schools-and-charter-school-authorizers-updated/>

⁷ Colorado State Board of Education, Adoption of Colorado Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing (2019).

Section 3: Colorado Specific Context

Key Links:

- Colorado Standards For [Charter Schools and Charter School Authorizers](#)
- Colorado Charter Schools Act [PPT Overview](#)
- [CDE Charter School Office](#)
- [CDE Triennial Report](#)
- [Colorado Charter Schools Institute](#)

Colorado is fundamentally guided by the Charter Schools Act, first passed in 1993. The statute outlines the purpose of charter schools:

- To improve pupil learning by creating schools with rigorous standards for pupil performance;
- To increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low-achieving;
- To encourage diverse approaches to education and the use of innovative, research-based, or proven teaching methods;
- To promote longitudinal analysis of student progress;
- To create new employment options and professional development for teachers and principals;
- To provide parents and students with expanded choice and promote community involvement and an avenue for participation in the education process; and
- To hold charters accountable for performance.⁸

The statute also codifies who can authorize charters in Colorado—local school districts and the Colorado Charter Schools Institute. Unlike other states, these are the only entities allowed to authorize charter schools; other states allow nonprofits and higher education institutions to authorize charters as well.

An applicant cannot apply to a district unless a majority of the proposed students reside in the chartering district or contiguous districts. Most districts in Colorado have Exclusive Chartering Authority, (ECA) which means that charters must be authorized by the District unless the District agrees to release them to CSI, and they are approved by CSI. A local school district never loses its ability to authorize charter schools in its district by releasing

⁸ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-102 (2024). (*Legislative declaration / purpose of charter schools*).

an applicant to apply to CSI. Instead, in some cases where the district already oversees charter schools, the district and CSI may have concurrent chartering authority.

The State Board can revoke a district's ECA if it fails to demonstrate continued fair and equitable treatment of its charter schools or does not follow state laws.⁹ Key decisions by local authorizers (notably new school denial and non-renewal) can be appealed to the State Board of Education; if schools are successful in their appeals, they remain authorized by the local district (or CSI if appealing a CSI decision).¹⁰

The Charter Schools Act also outlines specific requirements for schools and authorizers across the life cycle, from application to oversight to closure, which will be cited in relevant sections of the toolkit.

⁹ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-504 (2024). (*Exclusive Chartering Authority — revocation*).

¹⁰ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-108 (2024). (*Appeals to State Board of Education*).

Section 4: Setting Up An Authorizer Office

Key Links:

- [Mission and Vision PowerPoint](#)
- [CSI Structure](#)
- [Authorizer Self-Evaluation](#)

In order to carry out high-quality authorizing, a District (or other authorizer) must dedicate capacity and intentionality to this function. This includes dedicated staff with expertise in school evaluation and a deep understanding of charter schools and the associated autonomies. It also includes clear lines of connection to subject matter experts in key areas, including special education, multilingual education, and finance. Authorizer staff are also responsible for ensuring senior leadership and board members understand the role charter schools play, including their autonomy and accountability relationship.

In order to guide their work, authorizers should consider some of the following items:

- Developing a mission and vision for their work;
- Defining clear lines of authority to protect its authorizing functions from conflicts of interest and political influence;
- Create documentation of key processes that is transparently shared;
- Self-assess processes relative to quality authorizing standards on a regular basis; and
- Partnering with experts in the field to ensure capacity.

Most of all, districts must ensure this work is adequately resourced, which includes human capital as well as financial resources. To help guide this work, authorizers can utilize the CACSA self-reflection tool to identify areas for growth and focus.¹¹

¹¹ Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers, *Authorizer Self-Evaluation Tool*, [Authorizer Self-Evaluation - Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers](#)

Section 5: New School Application Process

Key Links:

- [Application Process PowerPoint](#)
- [Review Process PowerPoint](#)
- [Decision-Making PowerPoint](#)
- [CACSA Model Application](#)
- [CACSA Model Application Rubric](#)
- [CACSA Standard Contract](#)

A critical component of an authorizer’s work starts before the charter school is opened—the new school application process. Determining if an applicant has the capacity to open a high-quality charter school allows authorizers to maintain a high-quality portfolio and prevents students from being enrolled in a low-quality school.

The new school application process is guided by the Charter Schools Act, which lays out key components of the process. This includes the timeline requirements—stating that charter applications must be reviewed in the Spring (applications due between February 1 and April 1) a full 14 months prior to school opening.¹² From a process perspective, the law outlines that:

- State Board policy requires authorizers conduct a rigorous review of each application.¹³
- The statute includes minimum requirements, but no specific application approval criteria.
- District authorizers must have their district accountability committee (DAC) review applications.
- Community meetings must be held with public notice.
- The local board must make an approval or denial decision in a public meeting.
- Once approved, all negotiations must be agreed upon no later than 90 days after the local board vote.
- The district school board must notify CDE of any denied application within 15 days of denial.

While every authorizer will have different priorities for their review process, all authorizers should publish an application and rubric (typically aligned to the CACSA model materials) that gathers information on community engagement, educational program, operations, governance,

¹² Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-107 (2024). (*Application requirements, timelines, DAC review, public meetings, notification requirements*).

¹³ Colorado State Board of Education, *Charter School Appeal and Review Procedures* (policy guidance).

and finance. They should have all applications reviewed by a team with a wide range of expertise, both district staff and external experts, and also conduct a capacity interview with the applicant prior to making a recommendation to the Superintendent and/or Board of Education, who will make the final decision.

Denied charter schools can appeal the decision to the State Board of Education:

- Applicants have 30 days from notice of denial to appeal.
- The State Board then reviews the appeal and accepts the local board decision or sends the application back to the local board to reconsider within 60 days.
- The local board then reconsiders and votes to uphold the denial, or reverse to an approval.
- If still denied, the applicant may go back to the State Board. The State Board decision to approve or deny is then the final decision.¹⁴

Contracting: If approved, the authorizer must then negotiate a contract with the charter school that lays out the clear roles and responsibilities of each party. The contract should include a wide range of topics, but most importantly:

- Clear goals for the school and processes for the authorizer to take action if goals are not met;
- Financial arrangements;
- Dispute resolution processes;
- Waivers being sought from state statute and district policy; and
- Signatures from the boards of both authorizers and schools.

Initial contract terms in Colorado are generally 4 years per state statute;¹⁵ future terms vary based on renewal process outcomes.

Year Zero: Given the new application timeline, charter schools typically have a year from approval to opening. This is an important time for the school as they prepare for opening—including facility readiness, enrollment, and hiring—and the authorizer should check in with the school at regular intervals to ensure everything is on track. Some authorizers may set milestones that the school must meet during this Year 0 in order to open, such as pre-enrollment targets or facility occupancy certificates.

¹⁴ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-108 (2024). (*Appeals to the State Board of Education*).

¹⁵ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-106 (2024). (*Initial charter contract term four years*).

Section 6: Ongoing Oversight

Key Links:

- [Annual Report PowerPoint](#)
- [CACSA Annual Report Template](#)
- [Site Visit PowerPoint](#)
- [CACSA Site Visit Rubric](#)
- [Compliance Monitoring PowerPoint](#)

Once a school is operational, it is critical that authorizers maintain regular communication with schools and oversight to ensure things are going smoothly. Authorizers that wait until renewal to assess a school's performance and organizational health may miss key issues that could have been addressed earlier, and also leave students in schools that may be struggling. In addition to general lines of communication, there are key areas for ongoing oversight that can be differentiated for schools if needed.

Financial Monitoring: Authorizers must ensure schools are financially healthy on an ongoing basis, as well as practice strong financial management. Schools must submit an annual audit, alongside an annual budget and summary financial statements. Authorizers may also choose to collect quarterly financial statements to have more frequent insight into financial health.

Organizational Health Monitoring: Authorizers should monitor governance health of their schools regularly, as well as performance on key operational metrics such as enrollment and stakeholder satisfaction. At a minimum, authorizers should collect documents (either for a school submission or by reviewing school websites) for compliance with open meeting laws and sufficient board membership. Authorizers may also choose to observe board meetings regularly.

Compliance Monitoring: It is also critical for authorizers to ensure, on an ongoing basis, that a charter school is in compliance with key requirements. This includes appropriate programming for students with disabilities, teacher certification, and non-discriminatory enrollment practices. Site visits are an effective way to monitor compliance, although they can also be time-intensive.

Annual Reporting: Authorizers are required by the Colorado Charter Schools Act to provide an annual report to every authorized charter school on academic, organizational, and financial performance. As the statute states, *“During the term of a charter, the school district shall annually review the charter school’s performance. At a minimum, the review includes the charter school’s progress in meeting the objectives identified in the plan that the charter school is required to implement pursuant to section 22-11-210 and the results of the charter school’s most recent annual financial audit. The school district shall provide to the charter school written feedback from the review and shall include the results of the charter school’s annual review in*

the body of evidence that the local board of education takes into account in deciding whether to renew or revoke the charter and that supports the renegotiation of the charter contract.”¹⁶

This is a report that should be shared with both district staff and board members, as well as the school. It allows all parties to understand how the school is performing relative to the contractual obligations and take action if they are not on track prior to the renewal process.

¹⁶ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-110 (2024). (*Annual review and reporting requirements for charter schools*).

Section 7: Renewal Process

Key Links:

- [Renewal PowerPoint](#)
- [CACSA Renewal Package \(Includes Model Application\)](#)

When a charter school's contract is coming to an end, it must apply for the renewal of that contract, and the authorizer must review their performance to determine if the contract should be renewed and, if so, for what duration and under what conditions. The Charter Schools Act gives authorizers a wide latitude around the renewal process, but does state that:

- Schools submit a renewal application no later than December 1 of the year prior to the year in which the charter expires.
- Each district must adopt procedures and timelines for the renewal process.
- Annual reports on the performance of schools must be used in renewal decisions.
- The local board must rule on renewal decisions no later than February 1 of the year the charter expires.

Additionally, the statute lays out acceptable reasons for non-renewal (or termination):

- Material violation of any condition, standard, or procedure in the contract.
- Failure to make adequate progress toward goals, objectives, content standards, or pupil performance standards.
- Failure to meet generally accepted fiscal management standards.
- Violation of any provisions of law.
- Insufficient improvement efforts if the school is in the third year of a turnaround plan.

Authorizing staff makes a recommendation to the local board, who decide to renew or revoke a charter. A charter school may appeal the decision to revoke or non-renew the charter to the State Board. Authorizers must adopt procedures for closing a charter.¹⁷

¹⁷ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-110 (2024). (*Renewal application timeline, board decision deadline, statutory grounds for non-renewal or termination*). The authorizing

Best practice process would include:

- A clear application for schools to complete, focused on progress made towards contract objectives (academic and organizational);
- Interviews with key school stakeholders;
- A thorough review of available data; and
- A site visit to assess leading indicators if a school is not meeting academic goals.

Renewal decisions should be made prior to school choice timelines (typically late fall-winter) so parents have adequate time to make alternative choices if a school is non-renewed.

Section 8: School Closure

Key Links:

- [NACSA Guide to School Closure](#)

Suppose a charter school is slated to close, either because of a non-renewal decision by the authorizer or a school governing board decision to revoke the charter. In that case, authorizers should play an active role in ensuring the process goes smoothly. State law requires the adoption of a closure protocol that should delineate key milestones as well as roles and responsibilities.¹⁸ The authorizer should provide oversight on several key components:

- **Communication:** Ensure the school is communicating about the closure with all stakeholders as soon as possible.
- **Disposition of Assets:** Monitoring disposition of assets in compliance with applicable rules. This is especially important for items purchased with state and federal grants with very specific disposition rules.
- **Staff Records:** Ensuring the school provides staff with the appropriate record of employment for future hiring needs.
- **Student Enrollment:** Providing appropriate support to students with enrollment in a new school. In districts with unified choice, this can include giving impacted students priority in a new school.
- **Student Records:** Ensuring student records are complete and transferred to the new schools. This is especially important with high school transcripts.
- **Dissolution of Organization:** The organization can be dissolved legally once a final audit has been completed.

Additionally, the most critical role an authorizer can play in some cases is providing ongoing oversight such that any closure decisions happen in a timely manner that gives staff and families sufficient time to plan. This includes avoiding midyear closures as well as closures for the upcoming year announced in late spring and summer.

¹⁸ Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-110 (2024). (*Requires adoption of closure protocols and procedures*).

Section 9: Additional Resources

This toolkit is intended to provide a very high-level overview of authorizing for those new to this work. Resources linked throughout provide more detail on key elements of processes.

Authorizers are encouraged to reach out to CACSA to fully leverage their expertise around trainings, convenings, and other one-on-one supports. Additional resources are also available in the CACSA resource library.¹⁹

¹⁹ Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers, *Resource Library*, <https://coauthorizers.org/resource-library/>

Acknowledgements

The Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA) gratefully acknowledges the partnership and support of the **Colorado League of Charter Schools** in the development of this Authorizer Welcome Kit. This resource was created as part of a grant-funded initiative designed to strengthen authorizing practices across the state.

We wish to thank:

- **Colorado League of Charter Schools (CLCS)** for providing the funding, guidance, and collaboration that made this project possible.
- **CACSA Leadership:** Dr. Mackenzie Khan for project oversight, coordination, and authorship of core materials.
- **Subcontractor:** Maya Lagana, for her work in drafting and assembling the toolkit, ensuring that the materials are both user-friendly and aligned with best practices.
- **National Resources:** The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), whose Principles and Standards provided a foundational framework.

This toolkit is dedicated to all charter school authorizers, leaders, and board members working to ensure that every student in Colorado has equitable access to a high-quality public education.

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