



Testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor
“H.R. 4330, the All Students Achieving through Reform Act of 2009”

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Good Morning Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Kline, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. I am Greg Richmond, President and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

NACSA is a membership organization, not of charter schools, but of the agencies that oversee charter schools. We work with our member agencies to grow the number of high-quality charter schools across the nation by setting professional standards for authorizing, evaluating the practices of authorizers and providing assistance directly to authorizers.

Over the past fifteen years, the federal government has allocated \$2 billion to support the creation of new charter schools. This has been a good and appropriate investment, creating better educational opportunities for hundreds of thousands of children. Yet during that same time, the federal government has invested almost nothing, less than \$2 million, or one-tenth of one percent, to ensure that those schools are held to high standards and properly monitored by a competent authorizing agency.

It is as if the federal government had spent billions for new highway construction, but nothing to put up guardrails along the sides of those highways. Yes, new highways will allow drivers to get where they are going faster, but the lack of guardrails will sometimes lead to horrible accidents.

Authorizers, if you will, are the guardrails of the charter school sector. They are the institutions that oversee *public* charter schools on behalf of the *public*.

While some think of authorizing as a one-time action to approve a new school, in reality, authorizers have three core responsibilities that continue throughout the life of the schools they oversee.

First, authorizers have a responsibility to maintain high standards and to hold schools accountable for achieving those standards. Organizations that would like to start a new charter school should be required to demonstrate a high capacity to succeed. Charter schools that are already operating should be required to demonstrate a track record of academic achievement in order to stay open.

Second, authorizers have a responsibility to protect student and public interests. This means that authorizers must ensure that all students are treated fairly. Admissions processes must be conducted fairly. Students with disabilities must receive appropriate services. Discipline and expulsion processes must be fair. To protect the public, authorizers must put in place monitoring systems, particularly to ensure public funds are used appropriately.

Third, authorizers have a responsibility to preserve the autonomy of the schools they oversee. Autonomy is critical to charter school success. Freedom from vast mandates and regulations allows charter schools to be innovative and to excel. On a day-to-day basis, authorizers must preserve that autonomy and refrain from re-regulating the schools they oversee.

High standards, student and public interests, and autonomy. How well are authorizers meeting these responsibilities on behalf of the public? The record is mixed. Some are doing a good job, but others are not doing well at all. Indeed, many charter school problems you may hear about are closely related to poor authorizing.

Weak proposals for new schools are sometimes approved because some authorizers do not have a strong application evaluation process in place. For example, our survey of authorizer practices from across the nation found that 13% of authorizers do not conduct an in-person interview with organizations applying for a new charter.

Low-performing charter schools are sometimes allowed to stay open because their authorizers don't have the data or don't have the will to close them. Our national survey found that one-quarter of authorizers do not have guidelines for making renewal decisions and one-fifth of authorizers do not apply consistent academic standards across all of the charters they oversee.

Students may not be treated fairly because basic monitoring is not occurring. Forty percent of authorizers reported that they do not have sufficient resources to perform their responsibilities.

Finally, a school may go bankrupt while its authorizer did not monitor its finances, because 15% of authorizers surveyed do not require an annual audit.

In some cities and states these problems are rare because authorizers have developed professional systems to fulfill their responsibilities. But in other places, as noted above, professional authorizing practices are seriously lacking.

It is easy to forget about highway guardrails until the moment you lose control of your car. The same is true for charter authorizing. Without strong authorizer practices in place, a school drifting off course quickly becomes a disaster for its students, parents and the public. So what can you do?

As you consider legislation like the All-STAR Act or the reauthorization of ESEA, be certain to include provisions that purposely improve authorizing. As you vote to authorize funds for more charter schools, ensure that some of those funds go directly to support improved authorizing. And as you talk with officials at the Department of Education, let them know that you believe authorizing is an important component of a quality charter school sector.

My organization and our members see the positive power of charter schools every day. From coast to coast, we work with hundreds of excellent schools that are making a real difference in children's lives. But we also know that harm can be done if charter schools are not properly monitored.

Authorizers have a responsibility to the public to maintain high standards, protect student and public interests, and preserve school autonomy. With your support, more authorizers can successfully fulfill those responsibilities. Thank you.