



Executive Summary:

Insights from Philadelphia Public Charter School Operators

Grovider Learning and Evaluation Surveyed and Conducted Focus Groups with Public Charter School Leaders and Shares Key Learnings and Recommendations

INTRODUCTION: Over the past 20 years, Philadelphia’s public charter school sector has expanded to 81 schools, serving more than 64,000 students. As an integral part of the city's education landscape, these schools require a supportive, equitable support system designed to foster a healthy, thriving community. Despite their role as vital education assets, charter schools continue to face challenges in accessing resources for growth, technical assistance, and consistent performance evaluations. Efforts to meet these needs have highlighted the complexity of creating a robust, inclusive ecosystem that respects each school’s unique requirements while also being accountable for academic performance.

This report captures the perspectives of charter school leaders on the current conditions and authorizing practices, aiming to drive improvements that strengthen support and accountability across the sector.

BACKGROUND AND GOALS: In June 2024, Elevate 215 partnered with a local research evaluation firm, Grovider Learning and Evaluation (GLE), a local independent Black-and women-led research firm, and launched an ambitious listening tour, intending to gather feedback from charter school leaders in response to growing advocacy and concerns about charter authorizing practices in Philadelphia. Elevate 215 identified the following primary goals for the initiative:

- To identify and understand pain points and areas for improvement in charter sector management, collaboration, authorization, and evaluation from the operators' perspectives.
- To develop core recommendations that focus on solutions to achieve the best outcomes for Philadelphia students and their families.
- And to promote transparent and meaningful dialogue between charter operators and the local authorizing body moving forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW: This effort aimed to build upon previous research and advocacy work already underway in Philadelphia. As such, a review of relevant literature is presented alongside survey and listening session data in the report. A few of the key research and recommendations reviewed were:

Local	National
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigative Report by Ballard Spar LLP (8.31.23) • AACSC Recommendations (10.23.23) • PA Auditor General Performance Audit (5.07.24) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NACSA Quality Practice Project (2018) • NACSA, Innovation after the pandemic (2023) • USDOE NCSRC Report (March 2021)

METHODOLOGY:

- The research team employed a mixed-methods approach that combined listening sessions with a comprehensive survey.
- This tiered engagement strategy reached 66 operators (or 83% of the public charter sector), representing a diverse range of charter schools in terms of size and type.

KEY LEARNINGS: Given that there is both a substantive presentation and full report that represent these findings, we recommend reading these in full. Below is a high-level summary of learnings by category.

Vision for the Sector - A collaborative focus on high quality schools: Operators collectively expressed a desire for a more collaborative, innovative, and transparent charter environment. As one focus group participant shared: “[The focus has to be] high quality educational opportunities for public school students.”

Summary of Experiences with Charter School Authorizer: Overall, feedback pointed to a significant need for change and improvement.

- The most frequent words associated with the current process included: inconsistent, conflict of interest, not transparent, punitive, and subjective.
- Very few respondents (4%) agree that SDP is the most appropriate charter authorizer for the City of Philadelphia.
- Respondents shared that they appreciate the CSO’s most recent focus on customer service, and agree that opportunities to submit materials for feedback more recently has been helpful. A summary of pain points and bright spots include:

Top Pain Points Identified	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Inconsistency:</u> In the survey, “inconsistent” was the most frequently selected term (58%) from a list of 14 options, indicating a prevalent sense of unpredictability and variability within the authorizing environment. • <u>Conflict of Interest:</u> The second most heavily selected term (46%) associated with the authorizing process was “conflict of interest,” which appeared 15 times in the coding of listening session transcripts. • <u>Punitive:</u> In addition to concerns about inconsistency and conflicts of interest, the charter school authorizing process was also perceived as punitive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Data-Informed and Not Transparent:</u> Respondents selected “data-informed” and “not transparent” among their top five attributes describing the process, with 40% and 38% of participants choosing these terms. • <u>Charter School Performance Framework:</u> Concerns related to the Charter School Performance Framework were explored in more detail during listening sessions, with two major concerns emerging: unexpected changes and inconsistent application, alongside an overly rigid structure. • <u>Duplication of Effort:</u> Duplication of effort and inefficiency were prominent concerns among focus group participants, illustrated by several key quotes and their contextual discussions. • <u>Differentiation:</u> Differentiation was identified as a pain point, focusing specifically on an approach that considers the unique contexts and challenges of different schools.
Positive Perceptions of the CSO	
<p>Listening sessions also indicated notable progress in the CSO’s approach to managing and supporting charter schools, reflecting a shift toward a more collaborative and thoughtful approach and methodology. Participants recognized improvements in a few key areas, including: Operations, commending its recent commitment to enhance open communication, fairness, and support systems.</p>	

Perspectives on and Vision for High Quality Authorizing: When survey respondents were asked to identify the most effective strategies for driving meaningful change in Philadelphia's charter authorizing process, as well as a proactive Schools were asked what a vision for positive change could look like for quality authorizing, a few key themes emerged:

- Respondents believe that a High-Quality authorizer should prioritize equity, fairness, and transparency.
- They believe academic progress, financial health, and compliance are the most important factors for renewal. (Operators shared that academic targets should be co-constructed in partnership with the authorizer).
- Respondents noted that a High-Quality authorizer champions innovation, provides support to increase quality in the sector, and sets and upholds standards aligned with federal and state laws.

How Can the Authorizing Process Advance Equity: Lastly, given the focus on equity issues in previous reports,

- **Focus on Equity, Fairness, and Consistency:** Across operator types, respondents noted equity concerns that included a lack of attention to systemic racism, unfair comparisons, inconsistent expectations, unfair burdens, and ambiguous decisions.
- **More Proactive Guidance and Support:** Respondents believed that authorizers should publish clear guidelines, streamline data requests, and allow operators to submit supplemental data.
- **Differentiation and Focus on Growth:** Respondents suggested that equity could be advanced through an instructive, collaborative approach that prioritizes differentiation, a focus on growth, extended renewal terms, and external audits to assess equity and the effectiveness of the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The findings from the Charter Operator Listening Tour underscore the urgent need for reform in Philadelphia's charter school authorizing process. Through comprehensive engagements with 66 charter operators, the project team was able to glean key authorizing insights and recommendations. Operator recommendations fell into two primary categories, and included:

Improvements to Charter Accountability	Improvements to Management Practices
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain a Set of Standardized Criteria While Allowing for Adjustments Based on Unique School Contexts 2. Streamline the Renewal Process 3. Address Equity Concerns in the Authorizing Process 4. Establish a Neutral Oversight Body 5. Review Processes Alongside Charter Law 6. Extend Renewal Terms 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement Regular External Audits 2. Increase Direct Engagement with Schools 3. Regularly Convene Operators 4. Prioritize Growth and Continuous Improvement 5. Adopt a Collaborative Approach to School Improvement 6. Ensure Evaluators Have Relevant School-Based Experience 7. Enhance Transparency in Decision Making

Ultimately, this effort will be successful if the information and recommendations from the report help foster renewed collaboration between the charter sector and the District's authorizing body, with a clear focus on building a system of great schools that is responsive to and improves the lives of Philadelphia children and families.