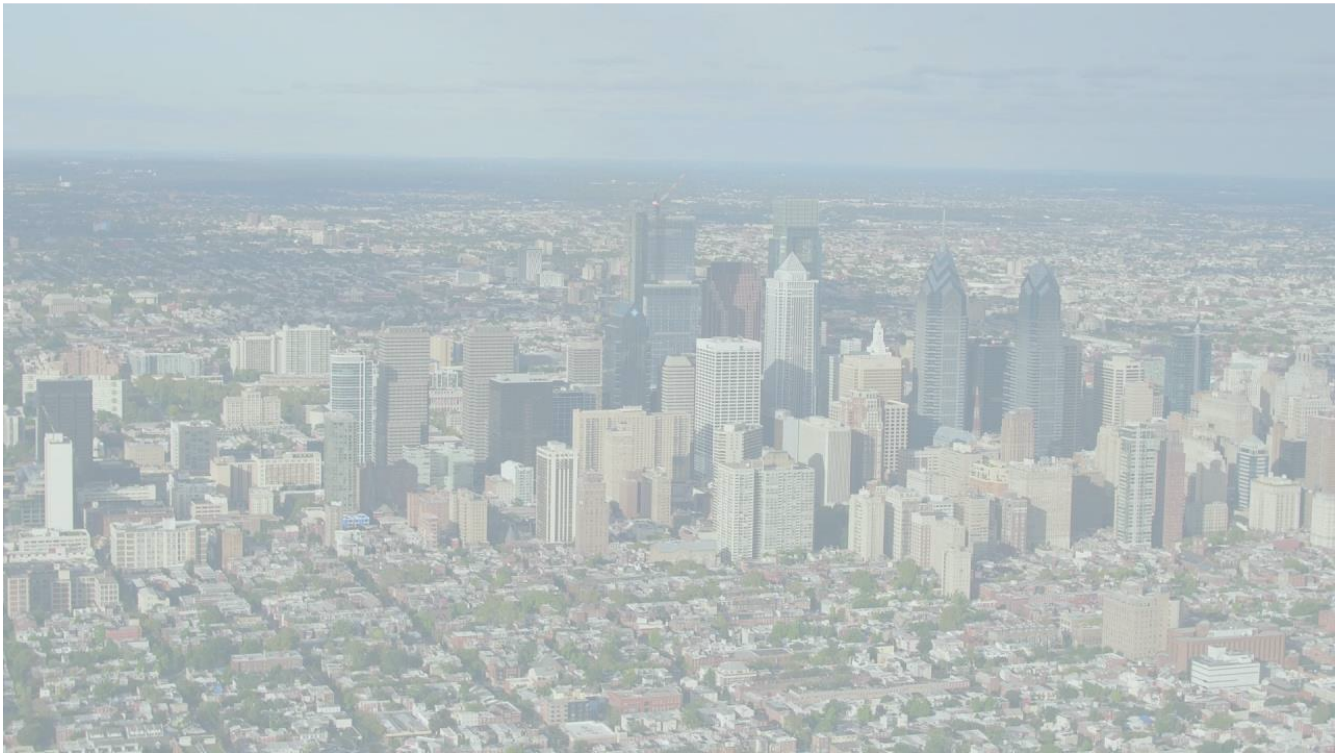# Insights from Philadelphia
Public Charter School Operators:

Uncovering Philadelphia Charter Operator Perspectives to Shape a Strong, Supportive Authorizing Future

November 4, 2024

Contents

Background and Overview

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 system 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. 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.

In June 2024, Elevate 215 launched an ambitious listening tour in response to growing advocacy concerns about charter authorizing practices in Philadelphia. This initiative aimed to engage all 81 charter operators across the city with two key objectives: to gain a nuanced understanding of their experiences within the current authorizing environment and to collaboratively explore visions for transformative change in the sector.

As a third party, Elevate 215 set out to learn from organizations engaged in existing advocacy, build on previous reports by Ballard Spahr and the State of Pennsylvania, listen to charter school leaders from a place of trust, and present solutions to the school board and public in a

collaborative and constructive manner. To ensure rigor and objectivity, Elevate 215 partnered with Grovider Learning and Evaluation (GLE), a local, independent, Black- and woman-led consulting firm. GLE was tasked with designing the initiative, engaging all 81 charter operators, providing an overview of recent reports on charter authorization, and sharing resources on national best practices for charter support and authorization.

With this context in mind, Elevate 215 identified the following primary goals for the initiative:

- To identify and understand pain points and areas of 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.

Elevate 215 would consider this effort successful if the report's information and recommendations helped 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.

Study Background

Elevate 215 recognizes that active listening is not just a strategy but a foundational tool for elevating the voices and stories of charter operators. By cultivating stronger, trust-based relationships between public schools, charter school operators, and the School District—the city's authorizing entity—Elevate 215 sought to identify the challenges that impact the charter authorizing sector. Over the course of five months, operators shared invaluable insights into their experiences, as well as constructive feedback on how the authorizing process could be refined to build a thriving charter school sector in Philadelphia.

GLE, which is known for its expertise in strategic thought partnership, applied mixed methods research, and equity-centered community engagement and storytelling, designed and led the listening tour, placing a strategic emphasis on inclusivity and methodological rigor. At the project's onset, GLE collaborated closely with Elevate 215 and a nine-member operator committee, conducting a series of research design meetings. These meetings were instrumental in:

- Establishing a clear vision for the listening process and defining participant criteria;

- Identifying targeted outreach methods to maximize recruitment and engagement;

- And developing a comprehensive listening tour plan that included core learning questions and a robust methodological approach.

Through these discussions, the team determined specific participation criteria, ensuring that the voices most relevant to the authorizing process were heard. Participants were required to have direct

experience with the Charter Schools Office (CSO) and the authorizing process, with particular attention given to individuals who:

- Had interacted with the CSO during the application or renewal process;

- Prepared renewal applications for their charter;

- Submitted data for renewal and authorization to the CSO;

- Played a role in negotiating contracts with the district;

- Or supported school leaders and teams in interpreting charter renewal recommendations and decisions.

Recognizing the diversity of experiences and operational modalities among charter operators, the team emphasized human-centered and community-driven practices throughout the recruitment and feedback solicitation phases. This approach was essential to capturing the full spectrum of perspectives within the sector.

The listening tour officially commenced in April 2024 and successfully engaged 66 operators (83% of the Philadelphia sector) throughout its duration. It featured a multifaceted approach, which included the distribution of a comprehensive survey instrument and the facilitation of focus groups, which were designed in partnership with DesignBuildDo Ventures (an Elevate 215 partner) and the nine-person operator committee. These sessions provided a platform for operators from various backgrounds and positionalities to share their diverse experiences and insights into the authorizing process.

Harnessing the insights and feedback from the listening tour has the potential to unlock new approaches for understanding and transforming Philadelphia's charter authorizing process. This bold approach could refine the charter renewal and support process, with the goal of improving the quality of education for the city's youth. The result would be a vibrant, dynamic charter sector that responds to the community's needs and strengthens the overall educational landscape in Philadelphia.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past several years, the charter authorizing process in Philadelphia has faced criticism regarding its effectiveness in promoting equity, ensuring financial stability, and maintaining transparency. The city's public charter system has a complex history, specifically regarding concerns about disparities that affect Black-led charter schools and those that operate as standalone institutions without the support of larger Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). These schools often face more significant hurdles in maintaining compliance and financial health. While the School District of Philadelphia's Charter Schools Office plays a crucial role in overseeing charter schools, there has been a perception among some operators that the CSO's focus on compliance can sometimes overshadow its potential as a supportive partner in fostering high-quality education.

There is an opportunity to better align Philadelphia's charter authorizing practices with national standards, such as those set by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). Introducing more transparent and consistent application criteria, enhancing oversight, and exploring multiple authorizing pathways could help ensure that the process supports equitable

and effective educational options for all students. This listening tour aims to address these challenges by engaging charter operators in meaningful dialogue, gathering their insights, and collaboratively exploring solutions that could improve the charter authorizing process in Philadelphia.

Related Literature

Introduction

Access to a high-quality education is a fundamental right that should be afforded to all young people. For families in Philadelphia, this right includes the opportunity to select a school in their community that can meet their children's educational needs. Philadelphia's sizeable urban landscape has faced complex challenges in providing quality education to its youth due to structural, systemic, and financial barriers. In response to the existing barriers, and to promote equitable opportunities for students and their families, Pennsylvania embraced the charter school movement—which began in 1991—and, in 1997, enacted the Pennsylvania Charter School Law (CSL) (Lubienski, 2001). Today, this law has paved the way for the establishment of over 160 charter schools across the Commonwealth, with more than half of these schools located in the City of Philadelphia.

As the charter school sector expanded, the need for robust charter authorizing practices became increasingly critical to ensure that these schools could fulfill their promise of equity and excellence. Given the significance of effective authorizing in maintaining the integrity and quality of the charter sector, this literature review aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of high-quality

charter authorizing on a national level, to examine the current state of charter authorizing practices in Philadelphia, including learnings from previous studies like the 2019 Education Law Center report (Brown Staley et al.) and to identify opportunities for improvement in Philadelphia's charter authorizing process.

Charter School History

Originating in the 1970s, the idea of charter methodology began circulating in close-knit educator groups in the northeast. Often uncredited, it is believed that the concept of charter approaches originated with Ray Budde as he pushed for educators to have the power to innovate and the freedom to create unique strategies to increase student success (History of Charter Schools, n.d.). Although educators leveraging the charter approach sought to individualize their support for students and separate themselves from the stringency of school districts, the charter approach aligned under three key principles: opportunity, choice, and responsibility.

These principles laid the foundation for the charter movement when it was brought to the national stage in the 1980s. At that time, Albert Shanker, a former president of the American Federation for Teachers, introduced the method to Philadelphia, where the city began piloting formal programs that leveraged similar strategies (National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC), n.d.). Although charter ideology saw wide success in school programs in the northeast, it wasn't until 1991 that the first laws supporting the movement were established. On May 4, 1991, Minnesota passed the Charter Schools Act, which created the first standalone (non-programmatic)

charter school in 1992 (NCSRC, n.d.). The act was a landmark in educational reform, establishing a

legal framework for creating and operating charter schools across the United States.

Despite the widespread success of charter ideology and the implementation of in-school,

charter-adjacent programs, charter schools were not formally established in Pennsylvania until 1997

(and virtually in 2002) when the state passed the Pennsylvania Charter School Law (CSL) (PA

Charter Change, 2003). The passage of the CSL marked a significant shift in the local educational

landscape. At the time, educators had been running unregulated programming that leveraged charter

ideology for nearly 20 years. The lack of regulation allowed for considerable flexibility in school

operations and enabled educators to experiment with educational models and approaches to address

the diverse needs of students in the city.

The initial wave of charter schools in Philadelphia was primarily founded by community-based

educators dedicated to creating transformative educational options. Notable examples of these

pioneering schools include Imhotep Institute Charter High School, which focused on providing a

rigorous academic curriculum with a strong emphasis on science and technology, and schools like the

Mathematics, Civics, and Science Charter School, which aimed to integrate advanced mathematical

and scientific instruction with civic engagement.

With each state's adoption of charter school laws and acts, the foundational principles of

charter schools were codified, with a focus on several key aspects. Firstly, charter schools were

designed to offer enhanced educational options. They provided parents and students with more

choices beyond the traditional public school system, allowing them to select schools that better

aligned with their educational needs and preferences. Similarly, the option of choice introduced

increased competition, which was meant to encourage improvement in traditional public schools. The

underlying belief held that competition would drive all (traditional, charter, and other) schools to

elevate their educational quality.

Secondly, charter schools became characterized by their commitment to innovation in

teaching and learning. The schools maintained the autonomy to implement novel teaching methods,

curricula, and educational programs. This freedom was intended to foster creative solutions to

educational challenges and enhance student engagement and achievement.

Accountability became another cornerstone of the charter school model. Schools were to be

held accountable to their charter agreements, and failure to meet the performance benchmarks set

forth in their charter could result in closure. This accountability mechanism was designed to ensure

that charter schools maintained high educational standards, regardless of their operating autonomy.

Since their inception, charter schools have been lauded for offering various educational

approaches, particularly in urban areas, where traditional public schools are often perceived as

underperforming. One of the key features of charter schools is their flexibility in providing diverse

curricula and teaching methodologies. For example, some charter schools focus on STEM (Science,

Technology, Engineering, and Math) education, while others emphasize the arts or experiential

learning, offering different educational experiences that cater to a range of student interests and learning styles (Fischler & Claybourn, 2023).

In addition to diverse approaches, charter schools significantly increase parent and student choice. By providing alternative educational environments, charter schools give families more options to find schools that fit their preferences and requirements. This choice can especially benefit students who may not thrive in traditional public school settings.

Another advantage of charter schools is their operational flexibility, which allows them to implement innovative programs and practices. This flexibility often enables charter schools to explore and adopt new educational strategies that might be restricted in more rigidly structured public schools.

Moreover, some charter schools have shown the potential for high performance. Evidence suggests that certain charter schools outperform traditional public schools in various metrics, such as test scores and graduation rates. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes' (CREDO) 2015 report highlights charters' success, specifically in urban areas, where students saw higher growth in reading and math. This was demonstrated once again when the Fordham Institute released its *Rising Tide* report, which found that "in urban areas, higher charter market share [was] associated with significant achievement gains for Black and Hispanic students" (Griffith, 2019, p. 8). Despite the relative age of the CREDO report, the New York City Charter School Center (2023) recently noted that its "outcomes and observations remain pertinent in 2023, offering valuable insights into

the achievements of charter schools within urban contexts" (para. 1). These reports highlight the potential for charter schools to achieve significant academic success (CREDO, 2013).

While charter schools offer alternative educational approaches and innovative learning models, they also present challenges that can impact both their effectiveness and the broader public education system. One primary concern is the variability in performance; while some charter schools achieve high outcomes, others struggle to meet educational standards, leading to inconsistent results across the sector (Betts & Tang, 2011).

Funding and resource allocation also pose significant challenges. As publicly funded institutions, charter schools can influence the financial resources available to traditional public schools. In some instances, diverting public funds to charter schools may reduce resources for established schools, creating financial strain across the public education system (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

Additionally, charter schools' regulation and oversight levels can vary by state. Inadequate oversight may result in financial mismanagement or insufficient educational practices, as charter schools are held accountable primarily to their charters rather than to a standardized set of regulations (Gleason et al., 2010).

Beyond challenges related to performance and funding, charter schools face significant equity concerns. Critics argue that these schools can contribute to increased segregation by attracting specific demographic groups, which can leave traditional public schools with a higher

concentration of high-need students. This dynamic can exacerbate existing disparities within the education system (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010).

The introduction of charter schools, both nationally and locally, was motivated by the aim to innovate and improve educational outcomes through increased autonomy, competition, and choice. In Philadelphia, early charter schools were defined by their commitment to transformative educational practices, and they benefited from significant operational flexibility. However, balancing the strengths of the charter model with its challenges—such as performance variability, funding, and equity concerns—is essential to ensuring that charter schools fulfill, or surpass, their intended vision. As these schools continue to evolve, the insights gained from early initiatives will remain critical in shaping the future development and regulatory frameworks for charter schools nationwide.

Understanding Charter Authorizing in Pennsylvania

Charter schools are unique in that they are public schools that operate independent of a school board, provided there is an approved contract or charter (Department of Education, 2024). This independence from school boards affords diverse demographics the ability to establish a charter school, including community members, teachers who intend on teaching at the newly established school, parents and/or caregivers of students who will attend the school, and any college, university, museum, or corporation with no direct religious or political ties (PA Charter School Law, 1997). Pennsylvania's Charter School Law (1997) also notes that a charter school can be established by creating a new school or converting an existing public school, or a portion of an existing public school.

Under Pennsylvania's 1997 Charter School Law, proposals to establish new charter schools in

Philadelphia must be submitted to the Charter Schools Office by November 15th of the year prior

to the intended opening. Applications must include a narrative, required attachments, and proof of

non-profit status, as for-profit entities are prohibited from operating charter schools. The narrative

outlines the school's mission, structure, and operations across six sections: Academic Program,

Organizational Capacity and Compliance, Community Engagement, Finance, Facilities, and Existing

Operator or Affiliate (Charter Schools Office, 2023). Once submitted, the School Board reviews

the application and holds a public hearing to assess its viability. A vote on the proposal must occur no

earlier than 45 days after the hearing and no later than 75 days post-hearing. For existing charter

schools, renewals are conducted every five years and managed by the Charter Schools Office.

Schools must submit a renewal application outlining their academic outcomes, financial health,

governance, and legal compliance. The CSO then conducts a comprehensive review, including site

visits and public hearings, to evaluate the school's performance and community impact. Following

this review, the CSO provides a recommendation to the School Board, which votes on the renewal. If

approved, the school is granted a new five-year charter; if denied, the school may appeal or face

closure.

The assurance of an objective and high-quality review of any charter school application, new

or existing, and supporting materials relies on a comprehensive set of standards that supports the

goal of delivering quality education to students. The National Association of Charter School

Authorizers (NACSA) is the independent entity that sets forth the standards and principles for good

charter authorizing. NACSA (2023b) has identified three principles and five standards for quality

charter authorizing, which are detailed in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below.

Figure 1.1 Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Principle	Definitions
Maintain high standards for schools	• Sets and maintains high standards for approving charter applicants • Cultivates quality charter schools via monitoring performance standards and expectations outlined in the charter contract • Closes schools that fail to meet the standards as set by law and the charter contract
Uphold school autonomy	• Hold schools accountable for their performance outcomes, rather than processes and inputs • Minimizes administrative burdens to the schools • Honors core autonomies of schools, including governing boards, personnel, vision and culture of the school, instructional programming and design, and budgeting • Only requests information from schools that cannot be obtained from other sources
Protect student and public interests	• The wellbeing and interests of the students are the foundation of the authorizer's actions and decisions • Holds schools accountable for fulfilling public education obligations • Holds schools accountable for obligations to the public, including responsible management of funds and transparent public information • Monitors its own work as it relates to ethics, focus on the mission, and compliance with laws and regulations

Figure 1.2 Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Standard for Quality Charter School Authorizing	Definition
Agency Commitment & Capacity	A quality authorizer engages in chartering as a means to foster excellent schools that meet identified community aspirations, clearly prioritizes a commitment to excellence in education and in authorizing practices, and creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary to conduct its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.
Application Process & 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 who demonstrate strong capacity to establish and operate a quality 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 and oversight, outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms. The contract is an essential document, separate from the charter application, that establishes the legally binding agreement and terms under which the school will operate and be held accountable.
Ongoing Oversight & Evaluation	A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that competently 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 & 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.

Safeguarding the validity and reliability of their own standards and principles, NACSA

(2018) conducted the Quality Practice Project, a "multi-year research initiative to identify what

high-performing authorizers do to achieve stellar student and public interest outcomes" (p. 5). The findings of the study are detailed in NACSA's (2018) publication "Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter School Authorizing", which compared high-performing authorizers with a sample of authorizers who were achieving moderate outcomes. The report includes five case studies of authorizers that met the criteria of "excellent" in their authorizing practices: (1) District of Columbia (D.C.) Public Charter School Board, (2) Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, (3) Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, (4) Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, and (5) State University of New York (SUNY) (NACSA, 2018). Based on the outcomes of studying these five authorizers, NACSA (2018) found that leadership, judgment, and commitment were the three most common characteristics of great authorizers (pp. 6-7). It is worth noting that the findings from this study focus heavily on the qualities and characteristics of high-quality authorizers and how they materialize in the charter authorizing process.

Leadership

Effective leadership is essential in successful charter school authorizing, as it shapes organizational priorities, culture, and decision-making. This section explores the key characteristics and practices that define strong leadership among top-performing charter school authorizers, drawing on findings from NACSA's 2018 report. According to the report, exemplary leadership is characterized by a clear and proactive mission, rigorous standards and accountability, strategic recruitment, transparent communication, and sound professional judgment.

High-performing authorizers are deeply committed to expanding access to quality education for more children. This commitment often manifests in their efforts to create new high-quality schools and, when necessary, close schools that fail to meet legal and contractual performance standards. The State University of New York (SUNY) Charter School Institute is highlighted by NACSA for its leadership in this area. SUNY has not only authorized and replicated successful schools but also taken decisive action to close underperforming ones. This adherence to high standards and accountability serves as a powerful signal to strong charter operators while discouraging those seeking more lenient authorizers (NACSA, 2018, p. 6).

SUNY's approach exemplifies how strong leadership in charter authorizing can directly impact the quality and success of the schools under its purview, ensuring that only those capable of delivering excellent educational outcomes are allowed to operate. This commitment to excellence and accountability underscores the importance of leadership in fostering a thriving charter school sector.

Judgment

The hallmark of high-quality judgment in charter school authorizing lies in effectively leveraging professional expertise, maintaining flexibility, conducting comprehensive data evaluations, balancing diverse perspectives, and committing to equity. These elements combine to form a robust decision-making framework that not only supports high-quality educational outcomes but also fosters trust and accountability among stakeholders (NACSA, 2018, pp. 6-7). By prioritizing these

characteristics, authorizers are equipped to make informed, fair, and impactful decisions that enhance the overall quality and success of charter schools.

Moreover, strong authorizers emphasize the importance of transparency and thorough documentation in their decision-making processes. By providing clear rationales for their actions, they ensure that decisions are not only understood but also accepted by all stakeholders involved. This commitment to openness and clarity further solidifies the trust and credibility necessary for sustaining a high-performing charter school sector.

Commitment

A clear and compelling mission and vision are fundamental to the charter authorizing process, serving as the backbone of a high-performing authorizer's commitment. This mission not only guides their work but also ensures alignment with the overarching goal of providing students with high-quality educational opportunities. High-performing authorizers consistently demonstrate their dedication to this mission by embedding it into every aspect of their operations.

One critical element of this commitment is a process of continuous improvement, where authorizers regularly engage in self-monitoring and practice refinement. They actively seek stakeholder feedback and remain informed about the latest best practices in the field. This openness to adaptation and innovation allows them to enhance their effectiveness continually, ensuring that their authorizing practices evolve with the needs of the sector.

In addition to a clear mission and vision, high-performing authorizers elevate the authorizing function as a visible and dedicated priority within their organizations. Rather than being lost within bureaucratic layers, authorizing is treated as a core mission, receiving visible support from leadership and dedicated resources to ensure its success. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation exemplifies this approach by making charter school authorizing a central organizational focus, backed by strong leadership and sufficient resources (NACSA, 2018, p. 8).

Commitment to effective authorizing is reflected in the allocation of adequate financial, human, and technical resources. Authorizers must be equipped with the necessary budget, staff, and tools to perform their duties effectively. This strategic allocation of resources underscores the importance of authorizing as a critical function that requires focused attention and support.

Charter Conditions in Philadelphia

Role of the Board of Education and the Charter Schools Office

> *"The Charter Schools Office fosters high-quality educational opportunities, fair and equitable treatment, and improved outcomes for students and families in Philadelphia through rigorous charter school evaluations, effective oversight, and meaningful support."*
> *(School District of Philadelphia, 2024).*

The Board of Education is responsible for evaluating new charter school applications and charter school renewals. To manage these responsibilities effectively, the Board established the Charter Schools Office (CSO). According to the Pew Charitable Trusts' 2015 report, the CSO is crucial in overseeing the charter authorization process, including renewals and potential revocations.

The office provides essential operational support and technical assistance, such as staff development and performance monitoring for charter schools. Additionally, the CSO supports families by offering guidance to help them make informed decisions about their children's education. However, the final authority to approve or deny renewal applications remains with the Board of Education (Brown Staley et al., 2019, p.1).

New charter school applications are filed with the CSO, which acts as a liaison to the School Board. Approval of applications is determined pursuant to the PA Charter School Law (CSL), with the Board having ultimate decision-making power. Once approved, charter schools are then subject to review of their charter contract every five years. The CSO is also responsible for conducting an annual review of each school, with a more detailed review in the renewal year. To ensure uniformity in their evaluations, the CSO follows the Charter School Performance Framework, which evaluates schools using three domains: academic success, organizational compliance and viability, and financial health and sustainability. Charter schools that meet the criteria set forth by the Charter School Performance Framework are given a five-year renewal, with or without conditions outlined by the School Board. Schools that fail to meet one or more of the domains are at risk of being given a one-year renewal or a recommendation for non-renewal. Each school is then provided with their individualized Annual Charter Evaluation (ACE), or ACE-R if it is a renewal year, which is public record and can be found on the School District's website (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of the Auditor General, 2024).

According to a two-year audit of the CSO conducted by the Commonwealth of

Pennsylvania's Department of the Auditor General, the CSO is compliant with the Charter School

Law, and its actions are aligned with its mission. The CSO has a comprehensive process for the

review of new charter schools and renewal of existing charter schools, which is clearly outlined in the

Charter School Performance Framework created by the CSO. The CSO further demonstrates its

compliance in that, in accordance with CSL, the School Board makes the final determination to

approve, renew, deny, or revoke a charter application.

Challenges in Philadelphia Authorizing

Although the CSO is in compliance with the tasks delegated by the School Board under

CSL, there has been criticism regarding the equity of the charter authorizing process in Philadelphia.

The primary criticism of the charter authorizing process is the conflict of interest that exists due to

the Board of Education being both an authorizer of charter schools and a competitor as the overseer

of Philadelphia's public schools (Brown Staley et al., 2019, p.1). Funding for both district and charter

schools is determined on a per-pupil basis, which means funding goes where the student goes. With

increasing interest in enrollment at charter schools, district schools are seeing decreases in student

enrollment and, therefore, decreases in funding. This conflict becomes especially apparent when the

SDP is engaged in litigation with a charter school, which can be costly and detrimental to an already

fragile funding structure. Furthermore, this process is out of compliance with NACSA's (2023b)

Principles and Standards for Charter School Authorizing, which states that "a quality authorizer

structures its funding in a manner that avoids conflicts of interest, inducements, incentives or

disincentives that might compromise its judgment in charter approval and accountability decision-

making" (NACSA, 2023b, p. 7).

Student enrollment in charter schools has been on the rise since the first charter school

opened in 2002. It can be argued that parents and caregivers are likely drawn to the promise of a

better education for their children, particularly if their local public school is struggling to meet

educational standards. The increased attraction to charter schools has also created a unique challenge

for the Philadelphia charter sector in that not all charter schools can meet the demands of families in

the city. Enrollment caps set by the Board of Education have led to the implementation of the

lottery system, which is meant to foster a more equitable system of enrollment through random

selection. However, there are potential exceptions to this randomization, such as sibling preference,

founder preference for children directly involved in establishing the school, and geographic

preference for those who live in a specific zip code or catchment area (School District of

Philadelphia, 2024). Research for Action (2019) in their *Equity-Focused Charter School Authorizing*

Toolkit, cites Pennsylvania's deficiency in ensuring equitable practices in charter authorizing (p. 2).

While the reasons for these deficits are not explicitly stated, it stands to reason that a randomized

selection process with exceptions is inherently inequitable as some students are more likely to be

selected than others based on circumstances outside of their control.

Opportunities and Recommendations

Philadelphia's charter authorizing practices have prompted equity concerns over the last two decades. Ballard Spahr (2023), the author of the most recent report scrutinizing the city's processes, generated controversy in its own right when the investigators found that there wasn't "any evidence of intentional, overt racially discriminatory acts by any School Reform Commission member, Board of Education member, or Charter School Office employee against a charter leader" (Philadelphia School District's Board of Education, 2023). In releasing the report, the Board of Education (2023) included that the "investigation also made no findings of racially discriminatory effects of the charter renewal process or that any charter school closure was improperly based." It should be noted that, while there were no overt findings of racial discrimination, the investigators did highlight a number of inefficiencies in Philadelphia's charter and governance structure. Namely, Ballard Spahr (2023) found a need for increased accountability and transparency, streamlined processes, and governance reforms (detailed below), which affirmed some of the grievances that charter school leaders and operators held.

In similar studies, researchers appeared to validate charter leaders' concerns. For example, in the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's 2003 report, "Charter School Authorizing—Are States Making the Grade?" Pennsylvania received a D+ for its charter policy and authorizing practices, placing a significant burden on Philadelphia, which hosts a substantial majority of the state's charter schools. As evidenced by the most recent (Ballard Spahr) investigation, many of the deficiencies it

highlighted remain prevalent. The report underscored several systemic issues, such as a lack of

transparency, weak accountability measures, and inadequate performance contracts that fail to

clearly define expectations and outcomes for charter schools. Additionally, the policy environment

for charter schools in Pennsylvania has historically been unsupportive, facing both political and

financial challenges that hinder the ability of charter schools to thrive.

To address these longstanding issues, the National Charter School Resource Center

(NCSRC, 2021) offers a Policy Framework for High-Quality Charter Authorizing Practices that

could be instrumental in reforming Philadelphia's charter authorizing process. One key

recommendation is the introduction of multiple authorizing pathways, which would provide a checks-

and-balances system to mitigate potential biases in the charter approval process. Additionally,

implementing clear and specific application criteria and timelines would enhance the fairness and

transparency of the process. Securing stable funding for authorizers and enacting stringent

accountability measures for the use of these funds are also crucial steps in equipping authorizing

bodies with the resources they need to perform their duties effectively.

Moreover, there is a need to understand the formal policies and procedures that

the Charter Schools Office (CSO) uses to monitor and evaluate the quality of its authorizing

practices. It is essential that charter authorizers are well-versed in the principles and standards of

charter authorizing and are held to the same rigorous standards they expect of the schools they

oversee. Implementing practices from the NCSRC's framework (such as a registration or

certification processes) could address systemic issues and reduce bias within Philadelphia's charter

school authorizing process, leading to a more equitable and effective system.

In addition to the recommendations from the NCSRC, NACSA's (2023a) publication,

"Innovation after the Pandemic: Opportunities to Evolve Authorizing and School System

Oversight," provides further insights for Philadelphia's charter authorizing process. The COVID-19

pandemic highlighted the need for flexibility and innovation in educational models. Philadelphia's

authorizers could benefit from encouraging charter schools to integrate innovative approaches, such

as multi-location learning and small learning communities that personalize education (NCSRC,

2021, pp. 3-4). These strategies would not only help schools adapt to future disruptions but also align

with emerging educational needs.

One of the most compelling insights from the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to expand

measures of school quality beyond standardized testing. The disruption of traditional metrics during

the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a reassessment of how school performance is measured.

Philadelphia could develop more nuanced, mission-specific measures of school quality, including

metrics like student engagement, well-being, and post-graduate success. This approach aligns with

[recommendations](#) from the African American Charter School Coalition (AACSC) for performance

objectives to be tailored to the specific needs of each school and its community (Ballard Spahr, et al.,

2023, p. 35).

The research highlights the complexities of high-quality charter school authorizing, particularly in the context of Philadelphia. National standards from organizations such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) emphasize maintaining rigorous standards, protecting school autonomy, and safeguarding student and public interests—key principles for ensuring educational excellence and accountability. Ongoing racial and financial inequities in Philadelphia's education system underscore the need for reform in charter authorizing practices. Case studies and national guidelines provide a robust framework for improving transparency, accountability, and equity, including strategies such as implementing multiple authorizing pathways, establishing clear application criteria, and enforcing rigorous monitoring practices. To support progress, the Charter Schools Office (CSO) may benefit from aligning with these standards and regularly reviewing its practices to foster continuous improvement. By adopting a more structured and transparent approach to charter authorizing, Philadelphia could address the systemic issues identified and work toward improved educational outcomes for all students.

Study Methodology

Learning Questions

This project aimed to use a listening approach to better understand the experiences of operators navigating the charter authorizing and renewal process. Activities were structured to answer the following questions:

1.   What role should the charter authorizer play in a high-quality charter sector?

2.   What pain points exist, and where are there opportunities to improve the charter authorization process in Philadelphia?

3.   What structures, systems, policies, and practices should be considered to advance equity in charter authorizing?

4.   What formal partnerships/relationships can be leveraged to strengthen authorizing within the sector?

Summary of Approach

The listening tour engaged charter operators serving students in Philadelphia with the primary goal of understanding their experiences navigating the authorizing and renewal process. Through this initiative, we sought to capture their insights and perspectives on overcoming challenges and pain points encountered in these processes. To elevate the voices of the operators, the research team employed a mixed-methods approach that combined listening sessions with a comprehensive survey. This tiered engagement strategy reached 66 operators, representing a diverse range of charter schools in terms of size and type. By adopting a human-centric approach, we aimed to gather a wide array of unique perspectives, ensuring that the operators' voices were central to the conversation on enhancing charter school authorizing practices.

Survey Overview

Purpose

The survey was meticulously designed to gather initial insights and recommendations from charter operators across the sector, particularly focusing on their experiences with the Charter Schools Office (CSO) and the authorizing process in Philadelphia. Given the diverse landscape of charter schools, it was essential to ensure that the survey captured a broad spectrum of voices. To achieve this, the survey was distributed widely through committee members and targeted email blasts, reaching a diverse audience, and enabling participation from various charter schools. This expansive approach was crucial in obtaining comprehensive input from the sector, ensuring that the data reflected a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

To maintain a balanced and representative sample, participation was limited to no more than three individuals per organization. This strategy helped avoid overrepresentation from any single entity while ensuring a variety of perspectives were included. Additionally, strict participation criteria were implemented to exclude respondents without direct experience with the CSO or the authorizing process in Philadelphia. This criterion was critical in ensuring that the data collected was both relevant and informed, as it filtered out responses from individuals who might not have the necessary background to provide meaningful insights.

The survey incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The closed-ended questions provided straightforward numerical data, facilitating the summarization and analysis of general trends. In contrast, the open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, offering deeper and more nuanced

insights. These detailed responses were instrumental in shaping the listening session protocols,

aligning the discussions with the key issues identified through the survey. The insights gained from

this mixed methods approach provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of charter

authorizing in Philadelphia, while also identifying areas for improvement and opportunities to

enhance equity within the process.

Research Instrument

The survey was developed using SurveyMonkey, a widely recognized platform for creating

and distributing online surveys. This platform was chosen for its user-friendly interface and robust

data collection capabilities, which facilitated the efficient gathering and analysis of responses. The

survey was distributed electronically between April and June 2024, allowing operators ample time to

discover and engage with it. This extended distribution period was designed to maximize participation,

ensuring that as many eligible respondents as possible had the opportunity to contribute their

insights.

The survey questions were carefully aligned with the overarching learning objectives of the

study, focusing on key areas such as operators' understanding of the charter authorizing process,

their vision for its future, and the pain points they currently experience. This alignment was essential

to ensure that the data collected would directly inform the subsequent listening sessions and the

overall research objectives. Along with insights into the authorizing process, the survey explored

operators' perspectives on the criteria for school closures, a crucial topic amid ongoing debates about accountability and performance standards in the charter sector.

To gather a comprehensive understanding of the operators' views, the survey included a variety of question types. For example, respondents were asked to select their top five words from a list of 13 that best represented their views on the current authorizing process in Philadelphia. This type of question was particularly useful in identifying common themes and perceptions among operators. The survey also featured open-ended questions, such as asking participants to define criteria for school closures, which allowed for detailed and personalized responses.

Limited demographic data were collected, including school name, respondent title, and prior relationship to the authorizing process in Philadelphia. Designed to be completed in 20 minutes, the survey balanced brevity with depth to encourage participation and gather meaningful insights.

Recruitment of Participants

The successful execution of the survey hinged not only on its design but also on a strategic and collaborative approach to recruitment. The operator committee partnered with the Elevate 215 and GLE teams to disseminate the survey using an anonymous link and targeted email blasts. These efforts were further supported by follow-up emails to operators who had not yet participated, ensuring that potential respondents were continually reminded of the opportunity to share their insights.

Moreover, the research team actively engaged with members during Philadelphia Charters for Excellence (PCE) meetings, providing updates and reinforcing the importance of survey participation. Committee members were also instrumental in sharing the survey link within their networks, complemented by targeted communication efforts that included pre-drafted language for easy dissemination.

This multi-faceted recruitment strategy was highly effective, culminating in 66 valid, completed survey responses. This robust level of participation provided a strong foundation for the subsequent listening sessions and ensured that the perspectives gathered were both diverse and representative of the charter sector in Philadelphia.

Listening Sessions Overview

Purpose

The listening sessions offered a dynamic platform for engaging charter leaders with firsthand experience in navigating the complexities of the Charter Schools Office (CSO) and the processes of renewal and authorization. These sessions offered several key advantages. Firstly, they provided a rare opportunity for participants to delve deeply into their personal experiences, allowing them to articulate nuanced responses to complex and multifaceted questions. The format of the listening sessions also fostered rich, interactive discussions, enabling participants to engage with one another's ideas, challenge assumptions, and build upon each other's insights. Additionally, by bringing together diverse perspectives and using open-ended questions, the sessions enabled participants to highlight

the most pertinent issues and enrich the conversation, providing a comprehensive view of the

charter authorizing process.

Recruitment of Participants

To identify leaders deeply connected to the authorizing and renewal processes, the operator

committee, in collaboration with the research team and Elevate 215, developed a well-defined set of

participant criteria. These criteria were disseminated through a comprehensive survey and shared

with members of Philadelphia Charters for Excellence (PCE), along with detailed information about

the listening session registration process. PCE, the operator committee, and the Elevate 215 team

worked closely to ensure that the registration links reached potential participants via email,

newsletters, and various online platforms. Additionally, personal invitations were extended to leaders

from AACSC schools and representatives from operators who had not yet engaged with the survey,

leveraging existing relationships to maximize participation.

Once participants registered for the focus group sessions, they received calendar invites and

email reminders to enhance attendance. The sessions were strategically scheduled at different times

of the day and conducted via Zoom, with each session accommodating 5 to 8 participants. This

deliberate approach, combining purposive sampling, targeted outreach, and consistent follow-up

communication, successfully resulted in the representation of 50 operators in the listening sessions

conducted throughout June 2024.

Research Instrument

Participants joined the sessions using their personal phones, computers, or other electronic devices, engaging in 90-minute virtual discussions that were thoughtfully facilitated to promote depth and focus. Each session was recorded to allow for accurate transcription of the conversations. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, their names were carefully removed from the transcripts. The sessions explored a range of critical topics, including participants' visions for the charter sector and charter authorizing process, their experiences with charter authorizing in Philadelphia, their understanding of the role of charter authorizers, and their perspectives on the strengths and challenges within the current authorizing process. Additionally, participants were invited to offer suggestions for enhancing equity and improving the authorizing process (*see Appendix I for the full protocol*).

Data Analysis

To ensure the accuracy and depth of the analysis, each listening session was meticulously transcribed, allowing for a comprehensive review of participants' remarks. Two experienced coders collaboratively examined the transcripts to develop a robust codebook, prioritizing intercoder reliability throughout the process. This collaborative approach ensured that key themes and patterns were consistently recognized and accurately analyzed across all sessions.

The coders employed Dedoose, a mixed methods data analysis software, to systematically code the five transcripts, identifying recurring themes and significant insights. For example, when a participant shared desired updates or hopes for the authorizing process, the comment was coded as

"Vision for Authorizing." Similarly, suggestions for improving equity within the charter sector were categorized under "Addressing Equity." Other commonly used codes included "Vision for the Sector," "Academic Expectations," and "Process Improvements," reflecting the recurring themes that emerged across the various discussions. After the initial coding, all transcripts were reexamined to ensure context was fully understood and codes were applied consistently.

In parallel, the survey data underwent a thorough cleaning and review process to ensure accuracy and completeness. Respondents were categorized by type of operator (national network, large network, small network, or standalone), as well as size (small, medium, large, or largest), which allowed for a detailed analysis of trends across types. Open-ended survey responses were carefully reviewed to identify common themes and compared with the closed-ended survey responses and insights from the listening sessions.

Integrating key themes from the listening sessions with survey findings provided a comprehensive and balanced understanding of charter operator experiences with the authorizing process in Philadelphia. This dual approach allowed survey data to reinforce insights from the listening sessions, while qualitative analysis provided valuable context for the quantitative survey data resulting in a nuanced understanding of charter operators' perceptions of the authorizing process's strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Data

Profile of Participants

This study benefited from broad participation, achieving an 80% or higher response rate across various operator categories. For the purposes of analysis, operators were classified by size and operational structure. Size was determined based on student population and categorized into four groups: small operators (fewer than 500 students), medium operators (500-800 students), large operators (800-1300 students), and largest operators (more than 1300 students). Operational structure was further delineated into national networks, large networks (more than three schools), small networks (fewer than three schools), and stand-alone charter schools. Although comprehensive individual demographic data was not collected, participants were required to self-report their role and their relationship to the authorizing process within their respective organizations to ensure relevant engagement in the study. Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 highlight participation profiles. Overall, participation in both the survey and listening sessions closely reflected the distribution of operator sizes and types within the sector, with respondents typically in roles closely engaged with the charter authorizing process. However, stand-alone operators were slightly underrepresented in the listening sessions, while large networks were marginally overrepresented. To address these discrepancies, variations by operator type were carefully identified and noted in the analysis, ensuring that the results were not skewed by over- or underrepresentation.

Figure 2.1: Overall Study Participation by Operator Size

Number of Survey Respondents				Number of Listening Sessions			
	Count	Percentage			Count	Percentage	Percentage of Sector
Largest	7	11%		Largest	5	10%	9%
Large	18	27%		Large	13	26%	26%
Medium	30	45%		Medium	26	52%	48%
Small	11	17%		Small	6	12%	18%
TOTAL	66	100%		TOTAL	50	100%	14

Figure 2.2: Overall Study Participation by Operator Type

Number of Survey Respondents				Number of Listening Sessions			
	Count	Percentage			Count	Percentage	Percentage of Sector
Stand Alone	22	33%		Stand Alone	8	16%	44%
Small Network	9	14%		Small Network	9	18%	11%
National Network	2	3%		National Network	1	2%	3%
Large Network	33	50%		Large Network	32	64%	43%
TOTAL	66	100%		TOTAL	50	100%	14

Figure 2.3: Overall Survey Participation by Roles

Number of Survey Respondents

	Count	Percentage
Chief Academic Officer	2	3.0%
Chief Executive Officer	22	33.3%
Compliance Leader	11	16.7%
English Language Learner (ELL) Director/Coordinator	1	1.5%
Operations Leader	9	13.6%
Other (Director of Strategic Initiatives, Finance, Director of Culture)	4	6.1%
Principal/Assistant Principal	13	19.7%
Special Education Director/Coordinator	4	6.1%

TOTAL	66	100%

Data Analysis

The survey and the listening session findings were synthesized to address the learning questions, providing a comprehensive understanding of operators' views on the current state of charter authorizing in Philadelphia. This analysis highlighted the strengths and challenges of the existing process, offering valuable insights for policymakers, charter operators, and other stakeholders. Key findings and data are detailed in the subsequent pages.

Understanding Operators' Vision for the Sector

During the listening sessions, operators collectively expressed a desire for a more collaborative, innovative, and transparent charter environment. They underscored the importance of establishing robust communication channels, ensuring equitable treatment, and sharing best practices to elevate the quality of education across all charter schools.

Participants articulated a vision where charter schools are recognized for their contributions to quality education, rather than being stigmatized or marginalized due to financial or political controversies. One participant expressed the desire for charter schools to be seen in a positive light:

> "My vision...would be that we start to be viewed for quality education in the way that we are providing it and not be vilified because of potential district money concerns."

This sentiment was echoed with a call for recognition of the innovative practices within the charter sector, emphasizing that these efforts are often overshadowed by broader systemic issues.

The discussions highlighted a significant interest in cross-sector collaboration, where charter schools and district schools learn from each other's successes and challenges. Participants suggested that such cooperation could lead to significant improvements in educational strategies and student outcomes:

> "[We have] best practices [; let's] share them. [We should be] able to experiment and find different best practices [, with a focus on] more opportunities for charter schools and districts to actually partner on things that we're both experiencing."

Finally, there was a strong emphasis on genuinely engaging with the charter sector to empower schools to drive their own improvements and innovations. This approach advocates for a partnership that goes beyond top-down directives, fostering a collaborative relationship/partnership that respects and utilizes the insights and capabilities of charter schools:

> "I'd like to see the charter sector continue growing... There hasn't been a new charter school authorized in many years... [we shouldn't just be] growing and making more charter schools but [, rather,] spreading [practices that support students]."

The vision articulated by participants in the listening sessions emphasizes the need for a more respected, integrated, and collaborative charter sector—one that thrives in an environment dedicated to promoting educational excellence and equity. This aspirational vision starkly contrasts with the operators' current experiences, particularly highlighting the impact of the existing authorizing environment on their ability to achieve these goals.

Inconsistency: Both the survey and listening sessions revealed that operators perceived the charter authorizing process in Philadelphia as highly inconsistent. 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. This concern was echoed in multiple listening sessions, where the issue of inconsistency was highlighted over 29 times across different groups. Operators identified inconsistency as a fundamental issue affecting multiple facets of the authorizing and operational framework, including the variability and unpredictability of rules governing charter schools in Philadelphia.

Participants expressed frustration over the seemingly arbitrary nature of these rules, which are often communicated unclearly and applied inconsistently:

> "I think that the business rules for that… weren't posted for quite a while, and even [then, they weren't] available. You can't predict it necessarily from each year."

This unpredictability creates a mistrust of the system, as schools find themselves unable to anticipate and adequately prepare for evaluations or changes in policy.

Another significant issue highlighted was the lack of timely and clear communication from the Charter Schools Office. Participants noted instances where major decisions or feedback were communicated too late, leaving little room for schools to respond or adapt effectively:

"My experience was a little different, given the fact that we were told by the Charter Schools Office that we were being renewed, and it wasn't until then live [at the board meeting] that we learned that the recommendation wasn't being made."

Such last-minute communications contribute to a sense of insecurity and confusion among charter operators.

The focus group discussions also touched on how different schools seem to be held to different standards, further complicating the landscape:

"During our renewal process, there were many documents [that] had identical language in regard to policies, procedures...things like that, and then one school will get charged for it, while another school had the same language verbatim, but we wouldn't get a charge for it... The inconsistencies, even amongst schools within the same network, they truly exist. They [the CSO] are able to do what they want, and it just depends."

This inconsistency is not just a logistical issue but also fosters a feeling of unfairness and partiality within the charter community.

Participants expressed a strong desire for a more predictable and equitable framework for authorizing and renewing charters. They advocated for a system where processes are aligned, rules are clearly defined, consistently applied, and communicated well in advance to allow for adequate preparation and compliance:

"It's very inconsistent. I just think that those two parts [site visits and the renewal process] are inconsistent; they should align more in the process, if anybody can understand what I'm saying. Some of the things that they throw at you in renewal come out of left field. I mean, nobody told us in 2019 to 'make sure you keep every single immunization that a family submits' at the time of renewal. Our nurses can look up any child's immunization or [see] that the immunizations are compliant. [They

ask] 'do you have the exact piece of paper that a parent submitted with their packet?'
I don't recall being told we had to keep that. Luckily, we had them, but it was a
scramble to find them all..."

Overall, the discussions underscore a need for systemic changes to address the inconsistency in the

charter school authorizing process.

Conflict of Interest: 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. Participants highlighted numerous instances where the CSO's actions and

decisions appeared to be influenced by competing interests, undermining the fair and equitable

treatment of charter schools.

Some participants voiced concerns about being seen as adversaries rather than partners in

the educational landscape. This perception stems from interactions where charter schools felt

unfairly targeted or scrutinized compared to district schools, fostering a climate of mistrust and

competition, rather than collaboration.

"We're seen as the adversary, not as a partner. The question is always about why
certain students are at our school and not about how we can collaboratively enhance
their educational journey."

Participants also expressed strong concerns regarding the financial dynamics between district

and charter schools, suggesting that these disparities contribute to conflicts of interest. Charter

schools often receive less funding per student compared to district schools despite being held to

comparable or, at times, higher standards. This discrepancy raises questions about equity and the

intentions behind funding decisions.

> "A public school official doesn't necessarily want a charter school because they are
> losing those funds for every single one of [the] students that comes here."

This concern also prompted conversations and discussions regarding the lack of checks and

balances within the Charter Schools Office, leading to decisions that appear one-sided or dictated

without adequate school input or feedback. This situation leaves charter schools feeling powerless

and subject to the whims of a singular authoritative body without a fair avenue for dispute or appeal.

> "There's not a check-and-balance in between what may be said from the Charter
> Schools Office to the board and then back. It seems like a really intense position of
> power to have one person have the majority of conversation with the School Board,
> and that we can never speak for ourselves."

These discussions underline the urgent need for reforms that address the conflicts of interest in the

charter school sector, ensuring that policies and practices are equitable, transparent, and designed in

the best interest of all students.

Punitive: In addition to concerns about inconsistency and conflicts of interest, the charter

school authorizing process was also perceived as punitive. 44% of survey respondents selected

"punitive" among their top five associated words. This sentiment was reinforced in listening sessions,

where participants detailed their frustration with the application of contract conditions and the

overall evaluation approach. Codes for "punitive" were applied 20 times to the listening session data.

Listening session conversations highlighted significant concerns regarding punitive mechanisms embedded within the charter authorizing process, emphasizing several systemic issues that appear to hamper, rather than foster, educational innovation, and progress. One participant specifically noted continuity issues, citing instances where past administrative actions negatively impacted current evaluations:

> "And there are things on there from 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 23, etc., that we were not involved in at all...we lost full credit. We couldn't earn anything at all because of things that prior administrations did."

This criticism demonstrates perceived inequities and lack of continuity in evaluation of schools, suggesting a disconnect that overlooks the broader context of the current administration's efforts.

Participants also discussed their views on how charter conditions were weaponized "as a backdoor way to control charter schools." One participant vividly described the application of these conditions, characterizing the decision-making process as arbitrary and lacking transparency:

> "I think [it's like] the wheel of charter, which is this year's new idea for conditions... Someone spins the wheel around and says we don't have anything on this charter. Let's spin the wheel and [yes], we're gonna do suspension rate this year off COVID. Boom! There it is. We're gonna do proficiency in this grade level where everyone in the Philadelphia area is struggling. Let's do that wheel of charter."

The metaphor vividly illustrates a process perceived as random, punitive, and devoid of fairness or strategic purpose, further eroding the trust between charter operators and the authorizing body.

The lack of trust is further exacerbated by the absence of a collaborative framework. Another participant expressed dismay about inadequate communication and lack of transparency surrounding unexpected changes in standards:

> "The non-collaborative piece of it is where...the standard [just] changes if you don't meet the standard. [The CSO] didn't communicate [there would be a] change in the standard."

To address these concerns, a participant proposed implementing a more structured approach to establishing conditions, which would enable schools to better prepare for and adapt to changes:

> "If we had a sense for what could comprehensively be conditions, at what thresholds, and all those things, we might be able to be better. [We could] predict out, using predictive analytics from the ACE [Annual Charter Evaluation] about what things could be done in the interim to get there."

The discussions reveal a consensus that the process should transition from punitive measures to a more supportive, transparent, and collaborative approach that genuinely fosters the advancement and stability of charter schools. Such a shift is crucial for fostering trust and enhancing the overall health of the sector.

Data-Informed and Not Transparent: Respondents were also notably inclined to select "data-informed" and "not transparent" among their top five attributes describing the process, with 40% and 38% of participants choosing these terms. While those who selected "data-informed" acknowledged the importance of using data in the evaluation process, they express concerns

regarding the methods of data collection, evaluation, and weighing. One listening session participant illustrated the perceived arbitrariness of certain data collection methods, noting:

> "Some parts feel really random—i.e., the selection of students for health files across nine grades doesn't really set you up for success."

Survey respondents also shared a strong desire to ensure that all collected data has a clear purpose. This concern aligns with focus group discussions on academic expectations within the existing authorizing framework, particularly regarding the processes of setting, assessing, and applying these expectations to schools. Participants' perspectives underscore a call for a more contextual approach to collecting and evaluating school performance data. One participant articulated a fundamental issue with current use of academic data:

> "I also think there should not be academic data that closes schools that does not consider value-addedness (sic) [to] the students. Looking at [growth] data can show a lot more than what is shown in the proficiency targets."

This sentiment highlights limitations of conventional metrics, which fail to accurately reflect the educational progress of students, especially those who begin significantly behind their peers. The concern is that the existing systems inadequately acknowledge the effort and resources required to advance students from lower performance levels to basic standards.

Further emphasizing the need for a reassessment of academic progress metrics, another participant notes:

"I think it shouldn't take so long for them to get [an] external analysis of their processes. That's not completely done from within... [they need to see if] everything [they're] evaluating right now [is] appropriate."

This points to a desire to ensure that metrics support broad success, particularly in the context of a post-pandemic learning environment. The recurring concern was that existing criteria might be outdated or disproportionately punitive towards schools serving more challenging demographics.

In discussing the variability in starting points and available resources among schools, participants observed that:

"[Some of the schools that are], heralded as top performing...have [smaller numbers of] Special Education students, and some charters have [way more] with specific needs...it has to be very much about [the] starting place for kids. What is [student] growth over time?" And:

"It might have taken so much more support to uplift students [who start farther behind], versus students already...proficient or close to proficiency. So, I think it disincentivizes schools from servicing the neediest [students], and it incentivizes people who don't want to use the processes fairly [and] exclude those kids."

The criticism here targets evaluation systems that inadequately account for the varying challenges faced by schools, suggesting that success metrics should be adapted to recognize student growth and improvement relative to their starting points.

The limitations of standardized testing as the primary measure of school success were also critically examined:

"They are limiting it to the PSSA [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment] and the Keystone... and underweighting [other] things. So, whether it's charter or whether its...conventional schools... that are poor performing, have low attendance,

have unstable financial situations... [the district is] not closing those schools, right? So why is it even an option if we're not doing it across the board?" And:

"Our school [is] a college preparatory school...the exact demonstration of our [student] success...would be college matriculation, persistence, and then graduation...that is the direct measurement of achievement [aligned to] our mission...there's not even a single State school in Pennsylvania that requires or ask for Keystone exam scores."

Participants advocated for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to assessing school performance, extending beyond high stakes testing to include a wider array of indicators such as graduation rates, college matriculation, and student persistence.

Participants in the listening sessions corroborated the survey data concerning the lack of transparency in the process. Many expressed frustrations over unclear communication, opaque decision-making, and a perceived disconnect between charter schools and the oversight entities. One participant specifically highlighted the exclusion of charter schools from important discussions and opportunities that could enhance student outcomes:

"[The CSO] sort of deleted us from that conversation... even with a lot of the new initiatives for businesses to step up and partner with schools, a lot of it is still very district-based, and not even sent as an opportunity to organizations like ours to push out to our charter partners."

This quote reflects the broader issue of exclusion, where critical information and opportunities seem to be selectively shared, placing charter schools at a disadvantage. The lack of transparency in resource allocation not only results in missed opportunities but also reflects a broader failure to recognize charter schools as equal stakeholders within the educational ecosystem.

Another participant highlighted the consequences of this lack of transparency, particularly

the decision-making processes that impact schools:

> "Potentially closing a child's school for things that are outside of the family or the
> child's control, and somewhat outside of the school's control, needs to be looked at
> and brought to light more transparently."

This statement underscores the frustration with decisions that appear to neglect or inadequately

communicate the factors that influence these decisions. The lack of clarity around the criteria for

such critical decisions can create a sense of helplessness and mistrust among those affected.

Another participant highlighted the theme of insufficient communication, noting that

decisions frequently appear to be made behind closed doors, without adequate input or awareness

from those directly affected:

> "I feel like decisions are made in back rooms [where] you're not part of the
>
> conversation."

This statement encapsulates the pervasive feeling that charter schools are often excluded from

critical decision-making processes that directly impact them, reinforcing a sense of marginalization

and disempowerment. Moreover, participants highlighted the absence of transparent guidelines and

defined thresholds fosters uncertainty, leaving schools to operate without clear expectations.

> "Evaluating us in comparison to districts and similar schools is problematic...
> especially when the formula for creating similar schools is very specific and also not
> transparent."

The opaqueness of the evaluation criteria undermines the fairness of the process and impedes

schools' ability to improve or meet expectations, as they remain uncertain about what is being

measured and the rationale behind it.

Additional qualitative responses reveal profound dissatisfaction and frustration with the

current charter authorizing process. Participants frequently described the process using negative

terms such as "inconsistent," "combative," "confusing," and "unhealthy," underscoring the convoluted

nature of evaluation procedures. Frequent changes and perceived conflicts of interest were seen as

exacerbating feelings of unpredictability and unfairness. One participant poignantly stated that the

process is "unfair and inequitable," further emphasizing that it is "not healthy," given its significant

impact on students, families, and school staff.

Consistent with earlier findings, survey participants identified the most pressing challenges

within the current charter school authorizing process, as shown in Figure 3.1, which provides a visual

representation of the most commonly cited concerns.

Figure 3.1 Top Pain Points in the Current Process

Pain Point	Percentage within Top Five
Inconsistent Practices	53%
Charter School Performance Framework	49%
Shifting Expectations	47%
Duplication of Effort	41%
Lack of Differentiation	39%

Survey respondents were asked to select 5 pain points from a list of 15.

These findings not only echo the concerns captured through one-word descriptors, but also amplify specific areas of dissatisfaction. Notably, the "Charter School Performance Framework" emerges as a significant area of discontent, with nearly half of the respondents identifying it as a top concern. Additionally, the challenges of "Duplication of Effort" and "Lack of Differentiation" are highlighted, signaling widespread frustration with redundancy and the lack of tailored approaches to the unique needs of different schools. The prominence of these concerns suggests that stakeholders are deeply troubled by inefficiencies and inconsistencies that may compromise the effectiveness of charter school authorizing process.

Charter School Performance Framework: 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. Participants believed that the current structure may perpetuate inequities, rather than resolve them. A critical concern was the framework's disproportionate impact on schools facing specific challenges, particularly in terms of attendance and overall student achievement. As one participant noted:

> "The logic behind how it gets implemented. If you are weighing more heavily, schools' attendance data and overall achievement over their growth data... that is going to put you in a position. If you have more real barriers for your kids getting to school than everybody, you could have the best program to try to engage students, you could be engaging with families, but you just may have more barriers in that area... and they're weighting it differently."

This statement underscores a critical issue: the current framework may fail to adequately account for the unique challenges faced by schools serving high-need populations. Despite implementing effective programs, these schools may be unfairly disadvantaged due to the framework's emphasis on metrics like attendance and overall achievement.

Another participant stressed the need for a systematic reevaluation of the framework, prioritizing consistency, and stability in any revisions. They emphasized:

> "Whenever they do come up with an idea that everyone feels is good, I hope they stick with it... [and apply] mandatory advanced notice for changes to the framework as a bare minimum."

This highlights a broader concern with the frequent changes and lack of stability within the framework, which generate uncertainty and difficulty for schools attempting to adapt to evolving expectations. Consistency, along with advance notice of changes, is seen as crucial to effectively plan and implement strategies.

Additionally, participants found that the framework contributes to a rigid and punitive authorizing process. One participant succinctly articulated the overarching sentiment regarding the framework's lack of clear direction:

> "I feel like it lacks a vision, right? So, we use tools to drive towards ultimate goals, right? And I am not clear on what the ultimate goal is, especially as a sector and as a city... everyone's experience [with the framework] has been punitive and not transparent. That's kind of how it's played out."

This statement reflects the frustration with the framework's inability to present a coherent and unified vision for charter schools, particularly in relation to performance comparisons with district schools. The perceived lack of transparency, coupled with its punitive nature, further hinders charter schools in their efforts to meet authorizer expectations.

Another participant highlighted the rigidity of the framework, which often fails to account for the unique challenges faced by individual schools:

> "There's no understanding [that], as a school, I am required to produce those dental records... even if I've communicated with that family, there's no alternative. I can't say I've reached out to this family 15 times... it's very black and white."

This insight elucidates on the bureaucratic nature of the framework, which lacks flexibility or contextual understanding. Schools are held to rigid standards without accounting for the real-world complexities, such as supporting high-need families who may face barriers to compliance.

Participants also noted that the increasing demands of the framework has undermined their ability to focus on their core educational mission:

> "If you collectively put how much everyone has had to put into hours as the framework has gotten more rigorous... it has taken away from our ability to do what we do best as operators."

This quote emphasizes the unintended consequences of an overly stringent framework—where compliance requirements consume time and resources that should be dedicated to essential educational work. The increased demands of the framework are seen/viewed as counterproductive, diverting attention from the primary goal of student education.

Moreover, the discussion touched on the perceived disconnect between the framework's design and the input of the community:

"They say... the parents, they're your partners, and we wanna [sic] hear what they want. But they have no say, [no one] really hears them... So why aren't they being heard [as a part of the process]? There should be some type of solution... and just not a one-sided solution."

This participant articulated a key concern: the framework does not adequately reflect the input or needs of the community, particularly parents who are directly impacted by school policies. The lack of meaningful engagement with these stakeholders suggests that the framework should be more inclusive and responsive.

Duplication of Effort: The themes of duplication of effort and inefficiency were a prominent concern among focus group participants, as illustrated by several key quotes and their contextual discussions. Participants expressed frustration with repeated tasks and redundant processes that drain/deplete resources and impede progress. One participant elaborated on this issue by stating:

"Many of the documents they [require], they either have from prior years, or they're able to get from the State through the PIMS [Pennsylvania Information Management System], or we've uploaded it other times through Epi [sic]. So, it's just doing the same work multiple times."

This sentiment reflects a broader issue where charter schools are compelled to repeatedly submit the same documentation, despite having already provided it through various channels. This not only wastes time but also undermines the efficiency of the schools' operations.

Another participant reiterated this concern by highlighting that external audits, which have already been reviewed and approved by other entities, are redundantly reevaluated:

> "They have a lot of things on their report that are items that are reviewed by other entities. So, you know, I have my food service audit that's reviewed. We have our special education audit. You have your health inspections, and with those entities you are compliant... Why are you putting on my report that red arrow? You know it should be blue. I've fulfilled all the requirements with the State."

This quote underscores the unnecessary duplication of review processes, questioning the rationale behind reevaluating areas that have already been certified as compliant by separate authoritative bodies. The inefficiency created by such practices diverts focus from the schools' primary mission, which is to educate students.

Additionally, another participant points out the disconnect between the Charter Schools Office's conceptual understanding of the data requirements and the actual burden imposed on school staff:

> "I don't think, in having conversations with the Charter Schools Office, [that] they have a full appreciation for the data that the State and the Feds collect, or even the Bureau of Special Education. And so, there's [a] massive duplication of requests without an appreciation for the burden that that places on school-based staff."

This quote highlights a critical issue: the lack of alignment between the demands of the Charter Schools Office and the existing data collection and reporting processes already imposed by state and federal authorities. This misalignment leads to unnecessary duplication, increasing the workload of already stretched school staff and detracting from their ability to focus on student learning.

Differentiation: Listening group participants discussed differentiation as a pain point,

focusing specifically on an approach that considers the unique contexts and challenges of different

schools. The conversations revealed a strong consensus on the importance of allowing for

adjustments based on size, demographics, and community context. Participants argued that a one-

size-fits-all approach does not accurately reflect or support the diverse realities of charter schools.

One participant stressed concerns about how a lack of differentiation affects school comparisons:

> "Although [we might be compared to] a similar school, it's definitely not even when
> you think about the family structure, home ownership, [and] so many other things
> that impact education that just are not being taken into consideration."

Participants voiced concerns about the inequitable comparisons made between schools that serve

markedly different populations or operating in varied contexts. This absence of appropriate

differentiation in evaluations leads to unfair assessments and potentially harmful outcomes.

> "The first year I participated in renewal, [I didn't have] much experience with it, but I
> never really thought about [differentiation at the time]. But that is a really good
> point, because what you look for, for example, at [another] school and my school are
> completely different...they're totally different grade levels, totally different amounts
> of students. So, the fact that there is no differentiation is very weird."

The lack of differentiation was noted as particularly punitive for smaller operators who often

lack the resources to meet standardized expectations that are better suited to larger institutions. This

issue led to calls for the establishment of clear, adaptable standards that align with the mission and

unique circumstances of each school:

"[Some] operators don't have the resources to make sure that everything is perfect all the time...so clear standards, but a differentiated approach based on [the school's] mission and [other] pieces that would make sense. Allowing context, I think, is really important."

The discussions also addressed the need for differentiation in conditions based on the history and mission of the schools. Participants asserted that a school with a history of successful operations should receive more tailored conditions during renewals, acknowledging and supporting their proven capabilities:

"I would say, like a track record, right? So, if you have operators who have a long track record of success, then there could be some differentiation around that."

Finally, there was a strong call for operational flexibility to better meet the specific needs of the students served by each charter school. This was seen as essential to fulfilling the original spirit of the charter school law, which is supposed to foster innovation and adaptability.

"The whole point, the spirit of it, was the innovation... We're supposed to take the needs of our children and be able to meet [them]."

The feedback from the focus group clearly underscores a widespread desire among charter school operators for a more differentiated and context-sensitive approach in the authorizing process. Such an approach would not only recognize the unique challenges and strengths of each school but also promote more equitable and effective educational outcomes.

Additional Pain Points: Participants in the listening sessions shared several additional pain points, including the challenges of school comparisons, lack of clarity in decision-making processes, and the overall politicization of the authorizing process.

Discussions among focus group participants concerning school comparisons revealed a broad consensus on the complexities and perceived shortcomings of existing methodologies used to evaluate charter schools relative to district schools. Participants contended that the metrics and criteria employed often overlooked the nuanced and contextual factors that influence educational outcomes. As one participant pointed out, comparing charter schools to district schools is problematic due to the opaque and overly simplistic criteria utilized in these evaluations.

> "The formula for creating similar schools is very specific and also not transparent, especially when the poverty data is not publicly available... maybe the concept of comparison at all is flawed."

Participants perceived a disregard for key social and structural differences that impact educational dynamics. They suggested that charter school operators should work in partnership with the authorizer to create a list of comparable schools based on local neighborhood data of the students, as opposed to relying on the official lists deemed unrepresentative and inadequate.

These concerns aligned with questions regarding decision-making within the process in general, as it was often viewed as inconsistent, unclear, and overly political. Many operators expressed frustrations regarding the need for more clarity in the evaluation and renewal processes,

citing the ambiguity and perceived inconsistencies in their interactions with the Charter Schools

Office.

One participant articulated a prevailing sentiment regarding the opaque criteria used in

school evaluations:

> "It feels very punitive when you're publishing reports without any context, without a
> school having an opportunity to respond to it... You know, it's like you miss one ELL,
> [English Language Learner] file, and you're not in compliance. But then, all of a [sic]
> sudden, you know you cannot have all your staff clearances and that's okay... I'm not
> really clear on how that works."

Another participant echoed this by pointing out the inconsistencies in how evaluators interpret and

apply the decision-making framework:

> "Where they did state that although they have this framework of how they look at
> the different categories and ratings, it's up to the individual who's looking at it to
> make the determination of whether or not the standard was met."

Participants also shared their perspectives on the intricate, and often contentious role of the

School Board in decision-making processes concerning charter authorization and renewal. Concerns

were raised about potential biases, political influence, and the transparency of these processes. One

participant articulated what they believed to be the fundamental issues stemming from the School

Board's oversight of diverse educational models:

> "The conflict of interest is too great, and I think we need to look at various
> independent authorizing structures [like] a university [or] something else. But I think
> we have a long track record where charters and district schools are pitted against
> each other because we're under one school board."

The sentiment highlights the perceived need for restructuring to mitigate conflicts of interest and ensure that educational policies are appropriately tailored for diverse school models. Further illuminating the issue, another participant suggested:

> "I think it might be helpful... [to understand] what the Board actually knows about charter schools and how they're structured. I would love to see the School Board being transparent about how they're being trained on how charter schools work in the context of the city...so we're all starting from the same place of knowledge."

This statement underscores a desire for greater transparency and education within the Board to support more informed, impartial decision-making. The political nature of Board's decisions was frequently raised, with one participant noting:

> "It's political...it ends up being much more political than it ends up being about [the] kids. There's certainly a level of bias that exists."

This reflects a pervasive concern that decisions are often influenced by political agendas rather than being based on the best interest of the students or schools.

Additionally, participants critiqued the decision-making process for its complexity, lack of transparency, and insufficient communication.

> "... conversations before Board meetings occur in a back room, and sometimes they don't even listen [during Board meetings]. It's not clear when the Board makes a decision different from the recommendation of the Charter Schools Office...what drives it."

Participants expressed frustration with the opacity of the processes and the perceived "rubberstamping" or rejection of recommendations without adequate scrutiny or meaningful

dialogue. The Board was identified as the ultimate decision-maker, yet participants noted its

detachment from direct engagement with stakeholders.

> "They [the CSO] make some set of recommendations to the Board, and
> theoretically, the Board is the decision maker. We [the operator] don't get to speak
> to the ultimate decision maker, and so the Board only gets to hear from the CSO,
> and they'll agree with it.... Occasionally they strike out on their own, and it's almost
> impossible to understand what's motivating that."

This statement encapsulates the challenges faced by stakeholders in navigating decision-making

processes, underscoring the urgent need for reforms that prioritize transparency, accountability, and

a focus/commitment to educational outcomes over political considerations.

During listening session discussions regarding challenges within the authorizing process,

participants outlined significant hurdles associated with charter agreements. The reservations largely

stemmed from the perception that the terms of these agreements are often unfavorable or

impractical. Several operators voiced concerns that the conditions stipulated within these contracts

often appear arbitrary or lack clear justification, potentially not aligning with the operational realities

of school management. As one operator aptly noted:

> "Some of the goals that they're putting in, or conditions, are somewhat arbitrarily
> looked at at times."

Moreover, participants expressed a fear that certain clauses within the current charter

agreements could be leveraged in ways that disadvantage the schools. These provisions could

potentially result in severe actions, such as charter revocation, if schools do not meet compliance requirements. One participant illustrated this concern by referring to a specific stipulation:

"The only reason you would include that condition is so that, if we, in any one year during the Charter term, have a special education teacher who's not appropriately certified, you can now pull our charter."

Concerns were also raised about the possibility of unilateral changes to the agreements by the Charter Schools Office (CSO), a practice that erodes trust and detracts from the perceived legitimacy and mutual respect of the agreements. Reflecting on this, one participant remarked:

"... they can change everything whenever they want, which is the bottom line. No one signs a contract like that in the real world."

Another added to the critique of the negotiation dynamics:

"It's very one-sided. It's not like a contract negotiation. I don't know why I would sign something that..."

These factors collectively foster a significant reluctance among charter school operators to sign their charters, driven by concerns regarding the fairness, practicality, and integrity of the agreement terms. This hesitance is further compounded by past negative experiences and various challenges noted throughout the contracting process.

Further corroborating the qualitative insights, the survey incorporated Likert-scale items that elucidated key concerns and pinpointed critical pain points. As depicted in Figure 4.1, the survey solicited responses from participants who rated various statements on a five-point scale ranging from

'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. This quantitative data enriches our understanding of the issues

at hand by quantifying the levels of consensus or dissent among the respondents.

Figure 4.1 Likert-Like Items Related to Pain Points

	Percent Affirmative (Strongly Agree or Agree)
SDP is the most appropriate charter authorizer for the City of Philadelphia.	4%
The charter authorizing process in equitable.	8%
The charter authorizing process is fair.	10%
The charter authorizing process in Philadelphia is easy to understand.	10%
The charter authorizing process is transparent.	12%
I trust the charter authorization process and the recommendations that result.	14%

Small, National, and Large Networks agreed that:
- *Comparison data used to evaluate charter schools are **not** fair and reasonable. (52%)*
- *The charter authorization process is **not** based on the use of valid and reliable tools. (60%)*

Positive Perceptions of the CSO: While listening sessions highlighted several concerns, they

also indicated notable progress in the CSO's approach to managing and supporting charter schools,

reflecting a shift towards a more collaborative and thoughtful approach/methodology. Participants

recognized improvements in the CSO's operations, commending its recent commitment to enhance

open communication, fairness, and support systems.

Participants appreciated the CSO's strategy of employing staff with firsthand experience in

charter schools. This staffing approach has fostered a deeper understanding charter-specific issues

and contributed to more effective management and support:

"I would agree that they [are working to] put personnel in there that have worked in charter schools and that are willing to have conversations. I think it makes sense."

This sentiment underscores the effort by the CSO to enhance its operational effectiveness by employing staff with relevant operational experience, which, according to participants, significantly enriches the dialogue and decision-making processes.

The CSO was lauded for its proactive outreach efforts, ensuring that schools felt supported during critical moments in the authorizing process:

"They're reaching out like 'we wanna [sic] make sure you're as successful...during the [site] visit'."

These efforts illustrate the CSO's dedication to not merely assess, but actively contribute to, the success of schools.

Participants particularly valued the CSO's incorporation of school missions into the evaluation process, which demonstrated a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the unique environments of each school:

"They seem to care about our mission, and how our mission shows up... I was able to take the whole [site visit] team to observe and visit with our students in a [nontraditional learning environment]."

This adaptability in the evaluation process is indicative of a commitment to appreciating the unique contexts and educational philosophies of each charter school.

The CSO's approach to feedback and correction was lauded for its constructive nature,

helping schools improve without feeling penalized:

> "I appreciate the advanced...or priority deadlines, I forget what they call it. But the
> chance to get their feedback and fix it doesn't feel like as much of a gotcha [sic]."

This method of interaction has been pivotal in allowing schools to adjust and refine their practices

based on constructive feedback, further emphasizing the importance of the CSO operating as a

supportive partner rather than merely a regulatory body.

> Lastly, the CSO's open communication channels have been particularly beneficial:

> "[Lately, I have found them to be] very open to communication...if you submit
> information early, they're happy to review it and get back to you with feedback to
> change it before the final submission."

This readiness to communicate openly and respond to feedback promptly can foster a more

collaborative relationship between the CSO and charter schools. Overall, these discussions paint a

picture of a Charter Schools Office actively working to support and enhance the operations of

charter schools through a partnership approach, marked by empathy, responsiveness, and a genuine

commitment to educational outcomes.

Perspectives on High-Quality Authorizing

Operators were invited to articulate their perspectives on high-quality authorizing through

both listening sessions and a series of survey questions. When asked to identify the top three roles of

a high-quality charter authorizer, survey respondents agreed on the top two roles but differed on the

third. Figure 5.1 highlights these findings and illustrates key differences in the third most selected

role across different operator types. Additionally, the table provides an alignment analysis, indicating

which of the most frequently selected roles correspond with established standards for high quality

authorizing.

Figure 5.1 Top 3 Roles of a High-Quality Authorizer (Operator Perspective)

Rank*	Role	Percentage	Alignment with NACSA guidance
1st	Committing to equity, fairness, and transparency in the implementation/execution of charter authorizing	85.2%	X
2nd	Ensuring operators have flexibility to innovate and meet student needs	51.9%	X
3rd	Facilitating the success of charters within the sector through ongoing & dedicated support	35.2%	
Variations in 3rd most selected included:			
3rd	Building accountability measures to ensure the effectiveness of the sector (selected as 3rd national network operators)	26%	X
3rd	Addressing student and public interests (selected as 3rd by small networks and stand-alone operators)	25%	X

*Participants were asked to select their top three out of 10.

Additionally, survey respondents provided insights on the most critical compliance and

functional roles that an operator should fulfill. Findings along with their alignment with national

guidelines, are captured in Figure 5.2. Consensus was observed across all operator types on the

following key points:

Figure 5.2 Top 5 Compliance and Functional Roles of a High-Quality Authorizer (Operator Perspective)

Top Five Compliance Roles	Percentage Rating in Top 5*	Alignment with NACSA guidance
Holds schools accountable for fulfilling fundamental public education obligations to all students	75.93%	X
Holds schools accountable for fulfilling fundamental obligations to the public, including governance, stewardship of public funds, and operational transparency	72.22%	X
Ensuring compliance decisions and guidance account for the context in which schools operate	72.23%	
Partners with the sector to co-create performance targets	61.12%	
Maintains high standards for the schools it authorizes	50.00%	X
Top Five Functional Roles	Percentage Rating in Top 5*	Alignment with NACSA guidance
Ensures clarity, consistency, equity, and transparency in authorizing policies, practices, and decisions	81.48%	X
Makes the well-being and interests of students the fundamental value informing all the authorizer's actions and decisions	72.22%	X
Assumes responsibility for facilitating a thriving charter sector	55.56%	
Effectively cultivates charter schools that meet identified educational and community aspirations	48.15%	X
Prioritizes ethical conduct, efficient public stewardship, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations	51.85%	X

Participants were asked rank 10 options from greatest to least important.

The majority of desired roles selected by survey respondents were consistent with NACSA guidance. However, roles not aligned with the NACSA guidelines predominantly reflected a preference for authorizers who emphasize supportive relationships and consider the diverse contexts of different schools. The selected criteria also aligned with survey respondent feedback on Likert-like items, where 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "authorizers should support

charters to reach standards that improve opportunities for all students" and where 72% selected

affirmative responses to the statement "authorizers should set the standard for charters to ensure

academic opportunities for all students."

Survey respondents provided valuable insights into the role of a high-quality authorizer,

particularly in relation to three key stakeholders: students and families, the school district, and the

individual schools. Among these, the most diverse range of opinions was expressed regarding the

authorizer's role in relation to students and families.

Some participants advocated for minimal interference from the authorizer, emphasizing the

importance of respecting family autonomy in the school selection process. One respondent stated

that the authorizer should "stay out of it entirely," while another highlighted the need to "respect the

judgment of families and their reasons for choosing a school." This perspective underscores the

importance of centering family input in the decision-making process, ensuring that family choices

are honored and integral to the authorizer's evaluation. One participant emphasized this by stating:

> "The charter authorizer should actually value family/student input rather than
> focusing solely on quantitative data."

On the other hand, some respondents focused on the authorizer's role in ensuring quality and

accountability within the charter school sector. They argued that the authorizer's primary function

should be to safeguard students and families by maintaining high standards and intervening when

necessary. As one participant noted:

"The authorizer should protect families and the children by not allowing low-performing schools to continue to operate."

This commentary highlights the belief that the authorizer must ensure that parents and families have access to high-quality educational options.

While performance and accountability were key concerns, several respondents also emphasized the importance of transparency. One respondent remarked,

"The authorizer should promote transparency in school performance, operations, and financial management so families can make informed choices."

Although most respondents suggested that the authorizer should support families in a more indirect manner, a few advocated for a more active, hands-on role. They suggested that the authorizer should "serve as a resource to help families understand their rights, as well as the process of applying to charters."

Overall, the survey data illustrates that the role of a charter school authorizer should be that of an engaged, supportive, and transparent partner. The authorizer should ensure that family voices are heard, their choices respected, and their needs met through access to high-quality educational options, backed by transparent and accountable processes.

When considering the role an authorizer should play in interacting with the school district, respondents highlighted the importance of both collaboration and independence. Many emphasized the need for cooperation between charter schools and the district, suggesting that the authorizer should encourage a partnership that benefits all students. One respondent noted:

"The authorizer can encourage collaboration between charter schools and traditional public schools within the district, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship."

Accountability and fiscal responsibility were also key themes. Respondents expressed that the authorizer should manage the fiscal impact of charter schools on the district and ensure that charter schools adhere to academic and operational standards. One respondent highlighted this need, stating the authorizer should:

"...manage the financial implications of charter schools on the district. This involves ensuring that charter schools are funded adequately without [disproportionately effecting] traditional public schools."

While some respondents viewed the authorizer as a facilitator of communication and coordination between charter schools and the district, advocating for the role of charters within the educational sector, others insisted on maintaining a clear separation to avoid conflicts. This concern was most prominent when considering contexts such as Philadelphia, where the school district itself acts as the authorizer. Several respondents argued that an independent authorizer is essential for ensuring impartial and objective decision-making. One participant highlighted this point:

"The charter authorizing process should not be tied into the school district as it can [promote] conflicting interests."

In summary, respondents envisioned an authorizer that balances collaboration with the district while maintaining the independence necessary to ensure fairness, accountability, and transparency in the charter school sector.

Consistent with expectations, the survey data offers a clear perspective on the role of a charter school authorizer in relation to schools, highlighting the need for a balanced approach between support and accountability. Respondents emphasized that the authorizer should allow charter schools the freedom to innovate while holding them accountable for their performance. As one respondent expressed,

> "The authorizer should grant charter schools the autonomy they need to implement their educational models while providing oversight to ensure accountability and compliance."

Aligned to other survey findings, "support" emerged as a significant theme. Participants highlighted the importance of the authorizer providing resources, such as professional development and assistance in sharing best practices. One comment noted that the authorizer should "share resources and PD [professional development] with charters... serve as a thought partner on hardest issues."

In terms of evaluation, respondents advocated for a process that is both equitable and transparent, considering a range factors like academic performance and organizational effectiveness. One participant underscored this need, noting that the authorizer should:

> "Provide clear and equitable processes for charter schools, accompanied by the support and resources necessary for success."

Finally, the authorizer was seen as crucial in maintaining high standards and ensuring compliance with regulations. As one respondent stated, a high-quality authorizer is, first and foremost,

> "Equitable, transparent, and non-biased—advocating for charters to have adequate tools and opportunity for success, [while holding] them accountable if they do not meet success [as defined by] the law."

In summary, the data suggests that the charter authorizer should serve as both a supporter and a regulator, enabling schools to innovate while ensuring they meet high standards of accountability and transparency.

Participants of the listening tour rigorously explored the dynamic interplay between experience, transparency, and accountability while discussing the roles and responsibilities ideal for a high-quality charter school authorizer. Central to these discussions was a palpable desire for authorizers who act not merely as enforcers, but as facilitators of quality education.

A key focus of the discourse on high-quality authorizing was the emphasis on ensuring authorizers have practical experience. Participants highlighted a critical gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the current CSO staff:

> "A lot of the decisions that they're making are driven by best practices in whatever ed-policy [Education Policy] class it is that they took, but they haven't actually had the experience of applying best practices in the real world."

This sentiment underscores a recurrent theme: the need for an authorizing body comprised of individuals who possess not only academic credentials, but also substantial, hands-on experience in

managing charter schools. The credibility and effectiveness of their oversight depend greatly on this

experiential knowledge, bridging the gap between policy and practice in educational settings.

As discussions progressed, participants emphasized the need for equity in the authorizing

process, advocating for practices that support educational excellence and innovation rather than

solely enforcing compliance. Several participants articulated this perspective noting:

> "Regulations should not only focus on compliance but also foster innovation and
> learning, which are core to the charter school philosophy" and:

> "They are supposed to make sure that we're executing the primary functions of a
> charter school [as identified in charter law] ..."

These comments articulated a desire for a supportive authorizer, emphasizing the need to create

environments where charter schools can not only comply with standards but also push the

boundaries of educational innovation. It's about transitioning to a developmental approach, where the

goal of authorizing includes fostering educational environments conducive to growth and

improvement.

Listening session participants also expressed a strong desire for authorizing bodies to be

adaptable to changes in the educational landscape, particularly in the wake of global crises, such as

the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "To support high-quality learning environments, there should have been a complete
> pause... [we should] ensure that everything we're evaluating right now is still
> appropriate."

This call for adaptability underscores the need for authorizers to possess the capacity to swiftly adapt to emerging educational trends and systemic changes. Participants emphasized that authorizers must be proactive and responsive, continually evolving their practices to maintain relevance and effectiveness amid changing educational demands.

Finally, the discussion highlighted the essential role of high-quality authorizing in both defining and advancing a cohesive vision for the sector. Participants emphasized the need for strategic framework that aligns with this vision as illustrated by the following remarks:

> "I think you first start with a clear understanding of mission and vision, so everyone's aligned in this sector, just as a school would" and:

> "Understanding the city's educational needs and having a strategic framework that aligns with these needs is essential for the authorizer to effectively support and expand high-quality educational opportunities."

These insights emphasize the strategic role that operators envision for authorizers, advocating for them to serve not merely as regulators but as visionaries who align their regulatory frameworks with the broader educational goals of their community. Achieving this necessitates a profound understanding of educational operations, a steadfast commitment to equity, support for innovation, and transparency in practices.

Vision for High-Quality Authorizing in Philadelphia

When survey respondents were asked to identify the most effective strategies for driving meaningful change in Philadelphia's charter authorizing process, four key strategies emerged as top

priorities. These strategies reflect a consensus among operators on the necessary reforms, with slight variations in emphasis, depending on the type of charter network. Figure 6.1 illustrates these operator preferences, revealing nuanced differences in strategy selection across stand-alone schools and national networks.

Figure 6.1 Strategies to Affect Change in Philadelphia's Charter Authorizing Process

Overall Percentage	Consideration*	Small Network	Stand Alone	National Network	Large Network
60%	Allowing schools to submit supplemental data in order to provide a more well-rounded picture of performance	2nd	1st		1st
48%	Streamlining data collection to reduce redundancies	1st	3rd	2nd	2nd
38%	Clear and transparent published guidelines	1st	2nd		3rd
30%	Ensuring authorizers have a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of operating a charter school			1st	3rd
28%	Establishing renewal criteria at the beginning of a cohort			1st	
26%	Appropriate resources and guidance aligned to established criteria		3rd		

Operators were asked to select three options from a list of 10

Insights from the listening sessions revealed several key themes regarding participants' vision for charter authorizing in Philadelphia, with a focus on the need for supportive relationships anchored in trust. Participants stressed the importance of holding schools accountable to their original missions and quality standards. However, they emphasized that such accountability should support, rather than obstruct, the school's ability to meet these standards. As one participant aptly put it:

"Hold schools accountable to quality and their original intentions, and what they set out to do, but do it in a way that doesn't interfere and potentially detract from a

school's ability to achieve those very outcomes that they're being held accountable to."

Building trust between schools and authorizers was highlighted as a critical element in ensuring successful outcomes. Participants emphasized that authorizers should actively support the success of schools and collaborate more effectively with them. One participant noted the importance of fostering trust, stating:

"Just build a ton of trust. I think that they [should] really [be] rooting for us all to succeed."

Another participant echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that the authorizing process in Philadelphia should prioritize collaboration with schools. As noted, "at the end of the day, we want schools to be successful."

Moreover, participants stressed the importance of making decisions that account for the needs of all stakeholders, particularly in terms of timing. They advocated that:

"Decisions [should be] made on a timeline that is best for kids and the school staff, and everyone involved."

This highlights the necessity for authorizers to be mindful of the impact their decisions have on the entire school community, ensuring that the timing of these decisions aligns with the needs of both students and staff.

A recurring theme in the sessions was the call for an independent or multi-authorizer system to foster a more robust authorizing environment. Participants pointed out that Philadelphia is unique among major cities in its absence of such a system, with one participant expressly noting the deficiencies in Philadelphia's current authorizing framework;

> "An independent or multi-authorizer environment. We're like one of the few major
> cities that doesn't have that."

This suggestion indicates a desire for a neutral and objective approach to charter authorizing, one that could potentially offer more balanced oversight and support.

Additionally, there was a strong advocacy for a differentiated approach to authorizing, which would account for the unique circumstances of each school. One participant suggested that an authorizer employing such a differentiated approach could be more effective in:

> "Providing more high-quality options for kids."

This underscores the need for flexibility in authorizing practices, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach may not serve the diverse needs of all schools.

Participants also expressed a desire for authorizers to function as a resource hub, offering professional development opportunities, facilitating hiring pipelines, and fostering connections among schools. One participant conceptualized authorizers as:

> "A resource for professional development or hiring pipelines or ways that we could
> group together to get [the] benefits we've talked about for years..."

Another expanded on this idea, questioning:

"What would happen if they also saw themselves as a conduit for making [and] building connections and sharing strengths?"

These insights suggest that authorizers should expand their role beyond mere oversight to actively contribute to the growth and success of schools.

Clear and consistent communication from authorizers was another critical factor that participants believed was essential to transforming authorizing in Philadelphia and ensuring that schools could meet expectations. One participant emphasized:

"I think it's important for them to decide exactly what they need from us and make that very clear in advance and be consistent."

This points to the need for transparency and reliability in the relationship between schools and authorizers, ensuring that schools have a clear understanding of expectations and can plan accordingly.

Finally, participants advocated for the importance of providing schools with performance improvement plans (P.I.P.s) and opportunities to correct issues before considering termination. One participant highlighted this approach questioning:

"Why are we not allowed to submit our policies and documentation and have clear feedback given? And if we correct it with a board meeting, and... whatever clerical change [is needed] in some of these cases, resubmit it and put it out there, why would that not be sufficient to meet the standard? And so, I think, doing something like that, where we are able to submit everything ahead of time, they find issues, we have a collaborative meeting, we address them... that would [be] much better. We're happy to fix the issues that they bring up. That's not the concern."

This emphasized the importance of granting schools a fair chance to address concerns before considering termination. Another participant stressed this viewpoint by stating, "don't terminate without there being a performance improvement plan," highlighting the need for a process focused on continuous improvement rather than punitive measures.

In summary, the listening sessions brought to light the participants' concerns and suggestions, underscoring the need for a more collaborative, supportive, and flexible authorizing environment in Philadelphia. By fostering trust, embracing a differentiated approach, and acting as a resource, authorizers can help create the conditions necessary for schools to thrive, ultimately benefiting the students and communities they serve.

To understand operators' perceptions of high-quality authorizing in Philadelphia, survey respondents were asked to identify the key considerations that should guide charter renewal decisions. The consensus across all operator types highlighted "compliance with state and federal regulations," "financial health," and "academic data" as the most critical considerations. Notably, national networks prioritized "family feedback" over "compliance with state and federal regulations." Figure 7.1. provides a detailed breakdown of overall percentages and rankings by operator type.

Figure 7.1 Considerations that Authorizers Should Use for Renewal Decisions

Overall Percentage	Consideration	Small Network Ranking	Stand Alone Ranking	National Network Ranking	Large Network Ranking
66%	Compliance with state and federal regulations	2nd	1st		1st

Overall Percentage	Consideration	Small Network Ranking	Stand Alone Ranking	National Network Ranking	Large Network Ranking
55.6%	Financial health	1st	3rd	1st	2nd
51.9%	Academic data	3rd	2nd	3rd	3rd
25.93%	Family feedback			2nd	

Participants were also asked to define their selected considerations. Figure 7.2 provides an overview of operator definitions for the most highly selected considerations.

Figure 7.2 Definitions of Most Selected Considerations

Consideration	Definition
Compliance with state and federal regulations	Authorizers should engage in regular monitoring, providing the necessary oversight using universal standards and engaging in clear, transparent, and timely communication. Operators should operate in alignment with charter school law, as well as upholding safety standards, engaging in fiscal transparency, and ensuring schools provide safe, equitable environments.
Financial health	Operators should meet state and federal financial requirements, with a focus on operational integrity and sustainability. Financial review must also account for physical plant spending, along with sustainability and adequate compensation for staff.
Academic data	Academic expectations should prioritize growth and consider a range of data sources. Additionally, the authorizer and operator should partner to co-construct target goals and appropriate comparisons schools.

Given Philadelphia's complex history with charter school authorizing, where equity has been a central but often contentious issue, the importance of equitable practices cannot be overstated. Equity emerged as a predominant theme in discussions about authorizing, prompting charter operators to articulate their visions for enhancing fairness and inclusivity in the authorizing process. The listening sessions uncovered significant concerns, critically examining how the current authorizing framework may perpetuate inequities. Key issues highlighted included systemic racism, ambiguous decision-making, unfair comparisons between charter and district schools, inconsistent expectations, and the challenges inherent in having the district serve as both operator and authorizer. Collectively, these issues underscore the urgent need for reform to establish a more just and transparent authorizing process in Philadelphia.

Participants expressed significant concerns about systemic racism within the charter school authorizing process, noting that racial bias may disproportionately affect African American students and schools serving predominantly Black communities.

> "Racial demographics is never factored into the similar schools list...and yet we know that African American students suffer because of bias and trauma and discrimination at much higher rates..."

This quote underscores the belief that the authorizing process does not adequately address, or even acknowledge, the systemic racism that disproportionately affects Black students. The participants

argue that this oversight contributes to inequitable outcomes, reinforcing existing disparities rather than alleviating them.

Participants expressed frustrations regarding the ambiguity in the authorizing body's decision-making process, noting that unclear evaluation and renewal criteria hinder schools' ability to understand and meet expectations.

> "It's kind of different every single year, and even in the year, with every single charter school."

Inconsistency in decision-making creates a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability for charter schools, as the absence of clear guidelines and a consistent framework exacerbates challenges in their ability to plan and sustain long-term strategies effectively.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the perceived inequity in evaluating charter schools compared to district schools. Participants noted that charter schools are often judged more harshly than their district counterparts, despite facing similar challenges.

> "... we're not looking at conventional schools that are poor performing... We're not closing those schools, right?"

This quote highlights the double standard perceived by charter leaders, where charter schools face closures or penalties for issues that district schools with similar performance issues do not. Such unequal treatment is viewed as a fundamental flaw in the authorizing process, leading to unfair outcomes.

Participants also expressed significant concern regarding the inconsistency in expectations set by the authorizer. They perceived these expectations as frequently misaligned with the actual challenges faced by charter schools, resulting in an often unreasonable burden on these institutions.

> "I think it's hard sometimes for there to be equity when... you kind of have to explain your job to the person who's supposed to be overseeing you."

This comment reflects the frustration of dealing with evaluators who may not fully understand the complexities of running a charter school, especially those serving high-need populations. The expectation that these schools meet the same standards as more privileged schools, without consideration of their unique challenges, was seen as inherently inequitable.

Participants also discussed concerns regarding the disproportionate compliance requirements imposed on charter schools. These requirements can be overwhelming, particularly for schools with limited resources, leading to punitive measures that exacerbate disparities.

> "Also, I think a lot of schools don't have the capacity to fulfill all the requests of the Charter Schools Office... it's really hard to have equity when you don't [have the capacity]."

The emphasis here is on the disparity in resources between schools and the unrealistic demands placed on them by the authorizer. The inability to meet these demands, due to factors beyond the schools' control, often leads to conditions that compound the challenges faced by these schools.

The dual role of the District as both a school operator and charter school authorizer present a significant conflict of interest. Participants argued that this arrangement introduces inherent biases where charter schools are perceived as adversaries, rather than partners.

> "We're seen as the adversary... The question is always well, why do you have this kid attending your school, and they're not in your catchment area" and:

> "[the authorizing process] feels like it's [primarily] focused on how to close [charter] schools."

This perspective illustrates the adversarial relationship that has developed between charter schools and the District. Rather than being evaluated as partners in the broader educational ecosystem, charter schools are often viewed with suspicion, leading to decisions that may not be in the best interests of the students they serve.

The focus group discussion revealed deep-seated concerns about the equity and fairness of the charter school authorizing process in Philadelphia. Participants highlighted systemic racism, ambiguous decision-making, unfair comparisons with district schools, inconsistent expectations, disproportionate burdens, and the inherent conflict of interest in the district serving as both operator and authorizer. These issues collectively point to a fundamentally flawed process that requires substantial reform to effectively advance equity in education.

Recommendations and Implications

Summary

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. These recommendations, grounded in the voices of those directly involved in the charter sector, provide a roadmap for fostering a more equitable, transparent, and supportive authorizing environment. By focusing on collaboration, differentiation, and a more nuanced understanding of individual school contexts, these reforms aim to create an authorizing process that not only holds schools accountable but empowers them to thrive.

Implications & Recommendations

Across a comprehensive analysis of both survey and listening session data, a consensus emerged among charter school operators in Philadelphia, resulting in 13 robust recommendations for reforming the current charter school authorizing process. These recommendations prioritize collaboration, equity, transparency, and differentiation, aiming to create an environment where operators can focus on achieving operational excellence and serving the diverse needs of their students. The proposed reforms reflect a collective aspiration to build a more supportive and effective partnership between charter schools and the authorizing body, fostering a system that is both accountable and adaptable to the unique contexts of each school. For implementation considerations, operator recommendations can be effectively separated into two themes:

management practices between schools and the CSO and improvements to authorizing practices, each addressing distinct areas for potential enhancement.

Management Practices

Refreshing management practices between schools and the Charter School Office (CSO) is crucial in a region where charter school operators express concerns about a lack of trust, support, communication, collaboration, and transparency. Effective management practices can bridge gaps and foster a more constructive relationship by establishing clear, open channels of communication and collaboration. This revitalization ensures that both parties are aligned in their goals and expectations, which is essential for building trust and providing the support needed for charters to thrive. By implementing transparent processes and regular, meaningful interactions, the CSO can better understand and address the unique challenges faced by charter schools, ultimately leading to more effective oversight and a more positive, supportive environment for school improvement and student success. Figure 8.1 outlines the 7 key operator recommendations for management practices that arose in listening sessions and were detailed in survey data.

Figure 8.1 Management Practice-Aligned Operator Recommendations

Recommendation	Rationale
Increase Direct Engagement with Schools	Operators felt that decisions were made without consideration of the unique challenges faced by their schools. Increasing evaluators' direct engagement would allow authorizers to gain a more nuanced understanding of each schools' environment, such as community challenges or resource limitations, which are difficult to express in traditional data captures.

Recommendation	Rationale
Adopt a Collaborative Approach to School Improvement	The current authorizing approach feels punitive, with a focus on closures rather than support. Operators prefer evaluations centered on helping schools meet standards and improve. Shifting to a collaborative, partnership model would transform the CSO from a watchdog into a supportive ally, offering guidance and resources to help schools enhance performance. This approach, based on operator feedback, would lead to better outcomes for students and a stronger educational system.
Regularly Convene Operators	Frequent changes and unclear guidelines have caused confusion and frustration among operators. Regular convenings would create a collaborative space for operators to give input and understand authorizing expectations.
Prioritize Growth and Continuous Improvement	Shifting from focusing on proficiency targets to emphasizing growth over time would better reflect schools' improvement efforts, especially in challenging environments. Feedback from operators highlights the need for an authorizing process that supports, rather than penalizes, schools for not meeting arbitrary benchmarks. This recommendation advocates for a supportive approach, where the authorizing body acknowledges the complexities of school improvement and provides the resources and guidance needed for success.
Ensure Evaluators Have Relevant, School-Based Experience	Operators noted that evaluators without classroom or administrative backgrounds often overlook important aspects of school operations, resulting in incomplete or unfair assessments. Involving experienced educators in the evaluation process would improve fairness and accuracy, making assessments more reflective of actual school performance and management.
Implement Regular External Audits	Regular external audits by independent third parties would ensure objective assessments of compliance with regulatory standards, offering a transparent and unbiased mechanism for accountability. This approach would enhance trust in the system by ensuring consistent standards for all schools.
Enhance Transparency in Decision Making	Lack of clear communication about decision-making has led to frustration and distrust among charter operators. Transparency is crucial for building trust, as operators often feel unclear about the reasons behind decisions. Clearly communicating the rationale and ensuring transparent processes will help rebuild trust and create a fairer, more effective authorizing environment.

During the listening tour, operators expressed a lack of consideration for their schools' and students' unique needs, leading to perceived inequities. Operators identified 6 key areas of improvement (Figure 8.2) for charter school authorizing practices to increase equity and fairness in the authorizing process. Addressing issues such as cumbersome renewal processes, short renewal terms, and unclear procedures can significantly impact the effectiveness of charter school oversight. By streamlining and clarifying these processes, authorizers can create a more equitable environment that better supports the diverse needs of schools and their students. Ensuring that renewal terms are sufficiently long and that evaluation criteria are adaptable to individual school contexts will help operators focus on delivering high-quality education rather than navigating bureaucratic hurdles. This approach fosters fairness and provides the necessary support, enabling charter schools to thrive and better serve their communities.

Figure 8.2 Authorizing Practice-Aligned Operator Recommendations

Recommendation	Rationale
Establish a Neutral Oversight Body	The close relationship between the authorizing body and the school board has led to perceptions of bias. Establishing a neutral oversight body would eliminate direct influence from the school board, ensuring the authorizing process is based on objective metrics and fair treatment. This change is crucial for restoring trust, as current practices are seen as being influenced by political or personal biases, which undermines the integrity of the process.
Review Processes Alongside Charter Law	Establishing a structured forum for discussion would help address ambiguities and streamline processes, leading to a more transparent and effective authorizing environment.

Recommendation	Rationale
Address Equity Concerns in the Charter Authorizing Process	Addressing equity in the authorizing process is essential to providing all students with high-quality education. Operators from schools serving marginalized communities highlighted the need for a process that acknowledges and adapts to the extra challenges these schools face. The recommendation advocates for a nuanced approach that considers diverse needs and offers tailored support to ensure all schools have the opportunity to succeed.
Differentiation (Maintain Some Standardized Criteria While Allowing for Adjustments Based on Unique School Contexts)	Standardized evaluation criteria are important for maintaining quality and accountability, but they should not be applied uniformly. The authorizing body should create a flexible framework that upholds key performance indicators (KPIs) while allowing for adjustments based on each school's unique context. This involves collaborating with schools to set appropriate benchmarks tailored to their mission, demographics, size, and education model. Guidelines for such adjustments should balance accountability with innovation and responsiveness to student needs. Operators have expressed concerns that rigid frameworks do not account for their schools' specific circumstances, such as those serving low-income or English Language Learner (ELL) populations, or small or non-traditional schools, which may need different metrics or support systems.
Streamline the Renewal Process	The current renewal process is viewed as overly complex and bureaucratic, diverting resources from instructional priorities. Simplifying this process would enable schools to dedicate more resources to education rather than administrative tasks. Operators have indicated that the time-consuming process hampers their focus on student education. Streamlining the renewal process would help schools operate more efficiently and concentrate on enhancing student outcomes.
Extend Renewal Terms	Operators feel that the current five-year renewal cycle creates instability, and shifts focus away from long-term planning. Frequent renewals force schools into a reactive mode, hindering strategic growth. Extending the renewal term to 10 years would reduce the pressure to constantly prepare for renewals, allowing schools to concentrate on sustainable growth and comprehensive planning in areas such as curriculum development and infrastructure improvements. This change

	would help schools prioritize educational outcomes over the administrative burden of frequent renewal processes.

Impact and Considerations

The learnings from this engagement carry significant weight for the future of charter school authorizing in Philadelphia, highlighting systemic issues of equity, transparency, and collaboration. One major outcome is the pressing need for reforms that emphasize consistency and fairness in the charter school evaluation process. The current inconsistencies, as highlighted by operators, create an environment where schools struggle to effectively plan for long-term success. The arbitrary application of rules and shifting expectations not only hampers school operations, but also fosters a climate of mistrust between charter operators and the authorizing body.

A critical takeaway is the necessity of addressing the perceived and actual conflicts of interest within the current authorizing structure. The dual role of the Board of Education as both an authorizer and a competitor introduces biases that undermine the credibility, and compromise the integrity, of the authorizing process. This issue is not unique to Philadelphia, but it is reflective of a broader challenge in educational governance where the roles of oversight and competition intersect. There is an urgent need to rethink the structure of charter school governance to ensure impartiality. Establishing a neutral oversight body or exploring alternative authorizing pathways, such as involving universities or independent entities, could mitigate these conflicts and ensure a more objective and equitable approach to charter authorization.

The results also underscore the need for a more differentiated and context-sensitive approach to evaluating charter schools. A standardized model does not sufficiently account for the unique challenges faced by different schools, particularly those serving high-need populations or employing innovative educational models. This threat to equity is profound; without adjustments that account for these challenges, the system risks perpetuating inequality and hindering the success of schools that serve the most vulnerable students. Adopting a more differentiated approach to authorizing, one based on specific school contexts, will result in a level playing field and ensure that all schools, regardless of their student demographics or educational model, have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Furthermore, insights gained from this engagement also stress the importance of greater transparency in decision-making processes. Operators raised significant issues in how decisions are communicated and how evaluation criteria are applied, leading to a lack of trust, and hindering their ability to effectively address feedback and make necessary improvements. When communication is unclear and decision-making criteria are opaque, it not only undermines the confidence of school operators but also limits their capacity to respond constructively to evaluations. This situation creates an unpredictable environment that can stifle the growth and development of charter schools. To address these challenges, it is crucial to establish a more transparent decision-making process that includes clear and consistent communication of the rationale behind each decision. This approach would not only help rebuild trust between charter operators and the authorizing body but also ensure

that all parties, including parents and community members, are better informed and more engaged in the process.

Additionally, implementing strong accountability measures is necessary to guarantee that these processes are applied fairly and consistently across all schools. By doing so, the authorizing body can create a more supportive and predictable environment that empowers schools to focus on their primary mission—delivering high-quality education to students—while ensuring that all stakeholders are working together towards the common goal of improving educational outcomes.

The influence of the current authorizing process on student outcomes cannot be overstated. A key concern is that the existing focus on compliance and proficiency metrics often neglects the considerable progress and growth schools achieve, especially in challenging environments. This approach has led to a system that is more punitive than supportive. To truly enhance student outcomes, there must be a fundamental shift in the authorizing process from one that penalizes schools to one that fosters continuous improvement. By recognizing and rewarding growth over time, the authorizing process can better support schools in their mission to elevate student achievement. This shift would not only benefit individual schools but also strengthen the overall impact of the charter sector within Philadelphia's educational landscape.

The lessons drawn from Philadelphia's experience extend beyond the city, offering valuable insights into charter school policy at both state and national levels. Issues of governance, equity, and transparency are challenges that resonate throughout the charter school movement across the

United States. The recommendations highlighted in this exploration provide a blueprint for reform

that other cities and states can adopt, promoting a more equitable and effective charter school

environment nationwide. Additionally, these insights underscore broader systemic concerns in

educational governance, emphasizing the need to strike a balance between accountability and

autonomy. By doing so, we can encourage innovation in education while maintaining the high

standards necessary to ensure that all students receive a quality education. The lessons learned here

are not just about improving the charter sector in Philadelphia, but also about informing policy

decisions across the country and contributing to the ongoing dialogue on how to best support charter

schools in fulfilling their promise to students.

Conclusion

The Philadelphia charter authorizing process stands at a pivotal crossroads, informed by the

collective insights gathered through the Charter Operator Listening Tour. This initiative, which

engaged charter school operators across the city, has shed light on the challenges and opportunities

inherent in the current system. The dialogue between charter operators and the School District of

Philadelphia has surfaced critical issues, particularly concerning inconsistency, lack of transparency,

and perceived conflicts of interest. These challenges not only hinder the operational efficiency of

individual schools, but also affect the broader educational landscape in Philadelphia.

At the heart of these discussions is a clear call for a more equitable, transparent, and supportive authorizing process—one that acknowledges the unique contexts and challenges faced by different schools while maintaining rigorous standards for quality and accountability. Charter operators have expressed a strong desire for an authorizing body that functions as a partner, rather than an adversary. This partnership would work collaboratively to ensure that all students, regardless of their background or the specific charter school they attend, have access to high-quality education. The insights gathered from this tour indicate the need for a fundamental shift in how authorizing practices are conceived and implemented. The focus should move from merely enforcing compliance to fostering long-term growth and continuous improvement. This shift requires changes in policy and practice, but more importantly, it necessitates a reimagining of the relationship between charter schools and their authorizers—one rooted in trust, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to student success.

The implications of these conversations extend far beyond the immediate concerns of charter school operators in Philadelphia. They underscore broader systemic issues in educational governance, including the balance between accountability and autonomy, which must be carefully managed to foster innovation while maintaining high standards. The experiences and recommendations from Philadelphia's charter operators offer valuable lessons for other cities and states facing similar challenges. These recommendations provide a blueprint for reform that can be

adapted and applied in different contexts, helping to create a more equitable and effective charter school sector nationwide.

As the Philadelphia charter sector moves forward, it is imperative that the insights and recommendations gathered through this process are not only acknowledged but acted upon. The path to reform may be challenging, but it is essential to create an educational environment where every charter school is empowered to thrive and where every student is given the opportunity to succeed. The lessons learned from this initiative serve as a powerful reminder that meaningful change is possible when stakeholders come together in a spirit of collaboration, transparency, and a shared commitment to the greater good.

In conclusion, the Charter Operator Listening Tour has provided a crucial platform for charter school operators to voice their concerns, share their experiences, and collaboratively explore solutions to the challenges they face. The recommendations that have emerged from these conversations offer a pathway toward a more just, transparent, and supportive authorizing process—one that recognizes the unique contexts of different schools and prioritizes the long-term success of all students. By embracing these recommendations, Philadelphia has the opportunity to lead the way in creating a charter school sector that is not only accountable, but also innovative, inclusive, and truly dedicated to the educational success of every child.

The success of this initiative depends on the collective efforts of all stakeholders, including the School District of Philadelphia, the Board of Education, charter operators, and the broader

community. Implementing the recommended changes will require a commitment to a more nuanced and flexible approach to authorizing—one that aligns with the diverse needs of Philadelphia's charter schools. By doing so, the city can create an environment where all charter schools can thrive, ultimately contributing to a stronger and more equitable educational landscape in Philadelphia.

Reflecting on the insights gained through the Charter Operator Listening Tour, it is clear that the challenges faced by Philadelphia's charter sector are not insurmountable. With a collective commitment to reform and a willingness to embrace new approaches, there is a significant opportunity to create a charter authorizing process that not only meets the needs of schools and students, but also serves as a model for other cities and states. The path forward requires bold action, collaborative problem-solving, and a steadfast focus on equity and excellence in education. By following this path, Philadelphia can ensure that its charter school sector remains a vibrant and integral part of the city's educational fabric.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Focus Group Protocol

PART I. INTRODUCTION

Say: Good morning/afternoon. My name is _____, and I am a <u>*<insert your title>*</u> with Elevate 215/ Grovider Learning & Evaluation. *Elevate 215*, *GLE*, *and an advisory council of Philadelphia charter sector leaders have partnered to develop a listening approach so that we can gather the honest insights, feedback, reflections, and experiences of charter leaders who have participated in the authorization and renewal process. We hope to understand the sector's vision for authorizing and areas for improvement.*

Last month, we released a survey to the sector and are following up with this focus group to clarify what we've learned from it so far. The conversation will help inform recommendations that we hope will facilitate change in the sector. *We deeply look forward to your input and believe this conversation will be a valuable resource in elevating the voice of the sector.*

Over the next ninety minutes, I will ask you a few questions about your experiences going through the renewal or authorizing process. I will also gather your opinions on the opportunities and barriers within the current approach. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. Participation in this focus group is strictly voluntary, and your identity will remain confidential.

Do you have any questions?

PART II. AUDIO RECORDING

Say: If it is okay with you, I will audio record our discussion. That way, I can capture the details while having an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that your identity will remain confidential. Recordings from this conversation will be transcribed and analyzed only by the GLE research team. Names are not being captured, and any insights shared from this conversation will be anonymized. Can I record our conversation?

 If they approve, then say: I will begin the recording now.

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Say: Before we start, we'll go around with quick introductions (name/org/role)

Thank you - we have a great group here today.

Before we start with the questions, I'd like to share an update on the survey—this is important because there might be times when I reference survey data. I want you to know how much data was captured to draw the survey conclusions that are shared as part of this conversation. Please note that a response in the context of this survey is defined as having one but no more than three submissions by the operator, either at the network or school level.

Overall, 81% of the sector responded to the survey. This means that approximately 14 operators have not weighed in.

We have disaggregated responses by school size and type categories. In terms of size here are the response rates:
- 80% of small operators (Less than 500 students)
- 79% of medium operators (500-800 students)
- 86% of large operators (More than 800 students)
- 100% of Largest operators (More than 1300 students)
- 70% to 72% of culturally based operators

While this doesn't represent 100% of the sector, we can safely assume that our sampling is fairly representative of the range of experiences with authorizing in the city. That said, the survey has remained open, and we will continue to pursue 100% participation even as we run focus groups.

PART III: QUESTIONS

Say: Now, let's move on to our discussion. Remember, not every participant needs to respond to every question. We will start with questions that focus on uncovering your definition of a high-quality authorizer.

Understanding Your Current Experience with Authorizing

Say: These next few questions focus on your experience working with the CSO.
1. Using one word or phrase, describe the current charter authorizing process.
    a. *[Optional]* What is your perspective on how authorizing decisions are made?

b. *[Optional]* The survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents used these words to describe the process: Inconsistent, Conflict of Interest, Punitive, Not Transparent, and Subjective. To what degree would you agree with this assessment?

c. *[Optional]* Would you add any additional insights?

2. Based on those insights, would you agree with the survey findings that the major pain points associated with the current process include Inconsistent Practices, Shifting Expectations, The Charter School Performance Framework, Duplication of Effort, and Lack of Differentiation?

d. *[Optional]* When thinking of "major pain points" Would you add anything to this list? What other barriers are there?

e. [Optional] What do you believe are the root causes of these pain points?

f. *[Optional]* What specific changes would you like to see in these areas? Provide explicit examples/changes.

5. What is currently working in the process/What, if anything, should be continued?

a. *[Optional]* Is there anything that you've found valuable or useful in the authorizing process?

b. *[Optional]* Are there strengths that can be leveraged to reimagine the current processes?

6. Some operators have chosen not to sign their charter agreements for several years. From your perspective, what drives these decisions?

Defining a High-Quality Authorizing Environment

1. Tell me a little bit about your understanding of the role of a charter authorizer.

a. *[Optional]* What informs that understanding?

2. Given what you understand, what might make an authorizer high-quality?

a. *[Optional]* Are there any ideal/necessary characteristics that would qualify an authorizer as high quality?

b. *[Optional]* How can authorizers be held accountable for maintaining their own quality?

3. When is it appropriate for an authorizer to move to close a charter?

a. *[Optional]* Should academic data and school comparisons factor into closure/non-renewal decisions, and if so, how?

b. *[Optional]* How is the responsibility to close charters connected to high-quality authorizing from your perspective?

4. What specific authorizing and renewal practices would exist in a high-quality authorizer?

a. *[Optional]* Are there any practices relating to setting and communicating expectations?

  b. *[Optional]* Are there any practices relating to supports provided to established vs. aspiring charters?

5. What mindsets would it require for authorizing to operate in this way?
  a. *[Optional]* Within the sector?
  b. *[Optional]* For the authorizing body?

Envisioning Change

Say: These next few questions focus on your vision for changes, adjustments, or innovations to the current process.

7. In a few words, can you share your vision for the charter sector in Philadelphia?
8. Describe how you believe the authorizing process can be more deeply connected with your vision for the charter sector.
  a. *[Optional] When asked a word association about the nature of authorizing in the city, 45% of respondents described it as punitive.* What changes can be made to move the process from punitive to instructive?
  b. *[Optional] 75% of survey respondents believed that 5 years was not an appropriate timeline for authorizations.* Do you agree? Why or Why not?
    i. How frequently should schools be evaluated?
  c. *[Optional] 40% of respondents to the survey felt that more differentiation was needed in the process.* What operator-specific factors should be considered in the process?
  d. *[Optional] 62% of respondents either disagreed or were neutral regarding the importance of a standardized renewal process.* In your opinion, what should be standardized/not standardized?
  e. *[Optional]* How should data be presented to ensure a fair renewal and authorizing process?
    i. To the CSO
    ii. To the board

9. What processes, policies, and approaches can be implemented to advance equity in charter authorizing?
  a. *[Optional]* How is equity defined in the charter authorizing context?
  b. *[Optional]* What capacity must be built to increase equity in the process?
  c. *[Optional]* How can the process for determining criteria be implemented in a fair and equitable manner?
  d. *[Optional] Only 2% of survey respondents agreed that SDP is the most appropriate authorizer. 28% remained neutral on the topic.* Is equity possible in the current structure where SDP serves as the charter authorizer?

      i. What are the major barriers to equity?

      ii. From your perspective, who is the most appropriate authorizer?

  10. What processes, policies, and approaches can be implemented to increase transparency in charter authorizing as it relates to the following areas:

    a. *[Optional]* Communication

    b. *[Optional]* Charter Agreements & Conditions

    c. *[Optional]* Denials and Rationale for Denials/Closures

Say: That concludes our questions. We'd like to invite you to share any additional insights that we haven't covered.

Additional Thoughts on Current Process or Opportunities to Innovate

  11. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you wished we would have?

    a. *[Optional]* What additional information would you like to share either about your experiences or your vision?

    b. *[Optional]* Do you have additional information that will inform our research?

PART IV. CLOSING

Say: Thank you so much for your insightful feedback and sincerity and for trusting us with your thoughts and suggestions. This recording will be transcribed so that the GLE team can consolidate and analyze everyone's feedback. GLE will aggregate and summarize findings and use the insights to support the development of a set of recommendations. Again, rest assured that your individual responses will remain confidential. If you have any questions or additional thoughts, please feel free to reach out to Candace Kenyatta (candace@groviderle.com)

Appendix II – Summary of Cleaned Group Quotes by Code

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
Academic Expectations	"I also think there should not be academic data that closes a school that does not consider value added into the students. And looking at more than, you know, the data can show a lot more than what is shown in the proficiency targets. For example, after Covid, a lot of schools were able to move students from below basic, who had really fallen down, up to basic. So that'll show in your growth category. It's not gonna show anything in your proficiency category. But it might have taken so much more support to uplift students in that way than it is, you know, to support and uplift

students already coming to you proficient or close to proficient. So, I think it disincentivizes schools from servicing the most needy areas of our school, and it incentivizes people who don't want to use the processes fairly to exclude those kids."

"What does a high-performance seat mean when we know that we're still struggling? We're below other cities academically; what does a high-performance seat actually mean?"

"I think it has to be based on Peer Group. I mean, nothing drives me crazy, like when a Mast or [Central] is heralded as top performing. Yet they have 2 Special Ed [sic] and I have 33. In terms of specific needs that we're satisfying, like it has to be very much about starting place for kids."

"There's not even a single State school in Pennsylvania that requires or asks for the Keystone exam. And so, until that day comes, like, we're always going to be more focused on preparing our students for success on the SAT and college, and beyond that. The academic measure that they're selecting seems odd."

"[The problem with] evaluating success in Philly is [that] a lot of people are comfortable with relative success, and I think we should all be like shooting for more absolute success at the State aggregate."

"I was just going to say, you know, growth shows the trajectory. So, you are moving forward. You're not stagnant. You're not going below, you are moving. You are making progress."

"For our school as a college preparatory school, the exact demonstration of our success, would be our students' graduation? Well, matriculation, persistence, and then graduation, and that is undervalued. In an ACE that is like the direct measurement of the achievement of our mission."

"Moving to a progress standard as opposed to a proficient [standard]. And I don't mean that with just respect to academics. I absolutely mean that in terms of academics, in terms of being able to accept and take more data

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	than just state standardized tests. Like, for example, we use a nationally normal set. We use MBA MAP. We use that assessment. And we've tried to say, like, 'Listen, we have benchmark scores throughout the year for this, being able to take in additional data that shows specific growth and does that without just the one-time PSSA does."
Board Role in Decisions	"At the very least, there should be discussion and directive from the School Board when they take up issues related to charter schools and not just say, "Yeah, we addressed this. We send it back to the Charter office to deal with," or you know, something big like that." "I think it's not clear when the Board makes a decision different from the recommendation of the Charter School Office. What drives it? And then I would also just add that my perspective is just like kind of big picture. I've had experience with a lot of different authorizers in other cities, and a lot of the practices that Philadelphia uses seem ineffective in comparison." "We don't get to speak to the ultimate decision maker, and so they only get to hear, or at least my perspective is, they just hear from the CSO, and then usually they'll agree with it. And then occasionally they strike out on their own, and it's almost impossible to understand like what's motivating that." "I think it might be helpful-- and this will kind of get at everyone-- understanding what the Board actually knows about Charter schools and how they're structured. The same way, if you're on a charter board, you have to prove that you've gone through a standard training. I would love to see the School Board being transparent about how they're being trained on how Charter schools work in the context in the city. And just so we're all starting from the same place of knowledge. There's a lot of varying knowledge about charter schools on the current board." "My experience was a little different. Given the fact that we were told by the Charter Schools Office that we were being renewed, and we expected a recommendation at the board meeting, and it wasn't until then, live, that

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	we learned that the recommendation wasn't being made. So, you know my experience is somewhat different than many others." "Being given a mixture of messages. The Charter School Office said, 'yes, 5 years renewal.' When it went up to the Board, the Board reviewed the materials, had some very deep questions about it...and ultimately gave them only a one-year renewal."
Closure	"[The CSO] Recommending to close some schools when you're well aware of violations in other schools, and they get chances to make corrections? And so, I think that there can be no chance to have support for closing a school when it's still being applied inconsistently." "I'm gonna definitely answer the question by saying it's not appropriate to move to close schools or threaten stability in school communities." "I think that people should be given a chance to correct and address [problems]. If that's, you know, replacement of the board, replacement of policy procedure-- whatever that looks like." "I would say, not to shut down a charter school. If the community in which it serves is happy with the school, they are rallying for the school. Then, it should be tiers before you get to closing a school. You can even say, 'Hey, we're going to swap out leadership.' If they're serving a need that the school district can't or wasn't able to fill, then no, it shouldn't close down. The school district wasn't able to serve that community and do those things." "[Closure should happen when] ...Laws and regulations, clear ones, that have been flagged and not addressed appropriately. I think there are times when, you know if the school's financially unsound and unable to pay their staff and provide basic services. I think there are extreme circumstances where they do have a role to play."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"Truly taking into consideration what our families need and the needs of those in the city [by] utilizing their school district survey that they make us do anyway. You know because we tend to get, you know, positive results from that. I know we see it, but are they really using it to make, you know, decisions as to whether or not we stay open?" "...It's about potentially closing a child's school for things that are outside of the family or the child's control and somewhat outside of the school's control. So [the factors that affect closures], I just think, need to be looked at and brought to light more transparently, what those numbers actually mean especially since it is causing some schools to experience a lot of financial hardship..."
Communication	"Getting pressured to sign [agreements] without having full documentation from the District definitely has got gotten to points where they have stopped talking to us. Even when we've been having a lot of conversations and just refuse to answer back after a while. And I'm speaking from a perspective of different schools and school leader experiences. This isn't just like me, personally. This is in our network." "How they decide which should be conditions, and which shouldn't you know. There's no rhyme or reason to that one for me. So, just really any kind of communication about how that's decided would be great." "We're not getting good communication, and the Charter School Office comes back with a lot of communication about little stuff. And yet, the big issues that we ask about there are no good answers." "...In regard to communication, I would expect honest communication to come from the Charter School office. Like I said, in my experience, I literally was told things to my face, I was asked to submit information from our waitlist in hopes of opening more seats for [another school] versus the surrender clause that was invoked that night. So again, in regard to communication, I just need straight-up honesty."

Conflict of Interest	"A public school official doesn't necessarily-- doesn't really want a charter school. They are losing those funds for every single one of our students that comes here. I also find it crazy that we, you know, we don't get the full amount that we pay because they are authorizing. We pay like we give them something. But what do we get from them?" "I think there's been a number of best practices, studies that have been out there, and recommendations that have been made in this particular situation regarding the inherent conflict of interest." "It's almost like gatekeeping. Like the district is like creating another barrier to go through, just as like a formality. So, either they're here for us or they're not. I mean, it's kind of awkward, I guess, to have to go through their approval." "He [a colleague] compares it to like Wawa approving Royal Farms. Obviously, Wawa doesn't want Royal Farms to build a Royal Farms because they're gonna lose money because they are the same type of business." "One of the things that I was adamant about sharing is that you know, the students who entered my school at 10 years old-- 5th grade-- where 70% of them were significantly reading 3 to 5 grade levels below reading. However, they all were educated in Philadelphia public schools. Then we might get them, and we make significant growth. Significant gains pretty much change the trajectory of their lives. However, because we didn't meet one proficiency goal in mathematics, although we're close…Finances were met. Organizational structure was met-- not approaching—met, in both…Then the surrender clause was then invoked upon us…The district needs to take some accountability, especially in those middle school models. When we don't-- we're not educating kids from age 5." "[The School District] shouldn't be able to close the school at all to be perfectly honest, because if you look at their own schools, they are failing

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	their kids time and again. I think that part of the problem is the fact that it's all linked to the same school district. And it's people that don't necessarily want charter schools making these decisions."
Differentiation	"There could be a benefit to differentiating the process for a single operator versus a large organization like a [another school] or a [another school], but I'm not exactly sure what that looks like and if it's necessary. I think it would probably benefit all charter schools if there were just proficiencies created across the board, and I would certainly be supportive of that." "The Charter School law, the whole point, the spirit of it, was the innovation. Yet at the convening meeting last week they literally gave us a packet that said that every one of our policies...has to be written exactly this way. My secretary took the time to take that packet. It's literally the school district's policies, so what they want is us to just take all of their policies and put our names on." "I think a lack of differentiation is not only based on what charter schools experience, but also based on, like, changing people. And if we're relying on a person to be an evaluator, and they leave and it's [the evaluation] based on their opinion, we got a problem." "If charter schools are supposed to be unique why is every condition there compared to the school district?" "So, if you have operators who have a long track record of success, then there could be some differentiation around that. Candidly, the mission and vision component of charter renewal, I just thought, was like joke and it was just a dog and pony show that they set up for you." "...The site visit, and the whole process this time was kind of centered around our vision and mission. And are we doing the things that we set out to do? I think standardizing that is important. And then, like we discussed, I mean, you should be looking at student data. I don't think you should not be looking at student data, but in a, you know, in a realistic lens."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"I think the process should probably be standardized in the sense that we all need it to be predictable and somewhat fair. Whereas the targets, certainly the academic targets, should not necessarily be standardized." "I feel like what I would add would then cover the whole framework. But I think that there are certain compliance and financial areas that are fairly straightforward and standardizing, as long as they were further refined to not be so punitive, but look at, kind of, the trajectory."
Duplication	"But you know you have to write this like multi-page [Charter] application, where you talk about every single element of your results. And the thing is, like, does the School Board see it? I mean, let's be honest: how would they have time to read that for all the cohorts, right? So, I just don't know what the point of it is, frankly." "You know, Charter schools are unique. So, to compare Charter School A to Charter School B, it's not, you know, it's not really valid, and it's a duplication of effort. Many of the documents they have they either have from prior years, or they're able to get from the State...so it's just doing the same work, multiple times." "They ask for all these documents every freaking year, right? Like every year. It's the same documents every year. You know that we're in compliance with these documents. I just feel like the renewal process at the end of 5 years should just be seamless because you've already had all of the conversations and all of the accountability for the previous 4 years. And so, it just shouldn't be a thing that after 5 years you have to...take a look at all of this stuff." "Similarly, as we've been talking about with compliance, why are in the they in the business of evaluating the evaluations? Compliance is important for health and safety and legal reasons. And so, if someone's in violation, sure they can surface that and express a concern. But for regular operational stuff, why double review everything that someone else has already checked on?"

"I do think there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of where we could, you know, introduce efficiencies, because there's a lot of duplication of effort, and I'm not even sure people are reading all these things, you know? But it's just process."

"I don't think, in having conversations with the Charter School Office, they have a full appreciation for the data that the State and the Feds collect, or even the Bureau of Special Education. And so, there's massive duplication of requests without an appreciation for the burden that, that places on school-based staff."

"Something that I've never understood with their reports is they have a lot of things on their report that are items that are reviewed by other entities. So, you know, I have my food service audit that's reviewed by PD. We have our, you know, our special education audit. You have your health inspections, and with those entities you are compliant, even though, say you maybe had some kind of corrective action or, you know, you had some kind of finding, but you went through the corrective action process and the technical assistance process. You know, just because I had a finding on my food service audit doesn't mean I'm not compliant with my food service program. I'm still operating a food service program. Why are you putting on my report that red arrow? You know it should be blue. I've fulfilled all the requirements with the State."

Equity

"If you are weighing more heavily a school's attendance data and overall achievement over their growth data that is going to put you in a position. If you have more real barriers for your kids getting to school than everybody-- you could have the best program to try to engage students, you could be engaging with families-- but you just may have more barriers in that area and they're weighting it differently. You know the kids who maybe have less barriers and may be able to get to school more regularly and perform higher achievement."

"I think there can't ever be equity, in a place where they continuously change and do things at such a rate that people who have higher needs

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	schools cannot keep up, with the burden of the unique circumstances of educating in Philadelphia... But Philadelphia has a very unique set of circumstances, and the District in Philadelphia has a lot of unique sets of circumstances, and I think if they really want to really understand equity, I agree, it has to be from people who are a little bit more sophisticated..."

"I think a very first step that our authorizer can do is, is own what they're doing currently and take action to stop the racist and biased and other flawed practices of their office, and the board, and everything related to it."

"It's an incredibly expensive proposition to open a new school in Philadelphia because of the barriers to entry that they've created. And so, unless you're backed with some real financial heavyweights and grant funding, like Elevate215, which we got, it's impossible. So, I think you see some really awesome, talented, educational leaders who are shut out of the process. And then, you see inequitable launching of schools in that way. So, I think we need to look at what new schools' applications look like, and how can that be more equitable around community organizing and accessing, launching a school, understanding that you still need real resources to launch a school."

"...Expanding the definition of equity to get away from following a single set of rules and applying them in the same way to everybody versus looking at the actual impact and outcome on the ground is essential." |
| *Evaluator Knowledge* | "One of the things that is difficult, you know, that was touched on previously is that it does feel a lot of times that we're being reviewed by people who do not have a background in what they are reviewing, you know. And so, I think it's definitely going to be more equitable if you have people who have operations experience, or, you know, compliance experience-- people who have actually run schools before. Instead of, you know, just being in the ED space as a teacher or something like that. It's a very different role. And so, I think it's hard sometimes for there to be equity when you're not really clear, and you kind of have to explain your job to the person who's supposed to be overseeing you. Also, I think a lot of schools don't have the capacity to fulfill all the requests of the Charter |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	Schools Office and so, it's really hard to have equity when you don't have the people who can keep up with it, you know, if there's ever-expanding compliance required requirements from the [CSO]." "I would say the quality of people that make up the authorizer, I think they should know schools. They should be familiar with how schools operate." "Charter leaders being able to understand how they're being trained-- what their knowledge base is-- I think would be helpful in the authorizing process." "They don't have the knowledge or experience to be able to say; they've never worked in a charter school, some of them, or even been a part of the sector, so they don't understand the difference of like being your own district, and what that encompasses."
Expectations for the CSO	"If we're going to be bound to a bunch of timelines, then it goes both ways. And if they-- if the CSO-- were forced to live within a shorter timeframe, it would both help us from like the effort but also for some decision-making on their end about what's really important and what is just like compliance for the sake of compliance, you know. But they have like endless time." "They should set up all the convening meetings a year in advance and give them to us, so we can calendar them. That would be transparent. Then we could plan around them. I, personally feel like any email that goes out at 5:30 on a Friday is meant to not be seen." "They are creating their own arbitrary standards and so, just overall, they should be out. [There's something about] creating [your] own standards and [your] own methodology for evaluating them." "They should be responsible for somewhat, like, helping the schools achieve quality." "The system of mistrust has been created. I don't think that that is for us necessarily to figure out. I think that at certain points, when things aren't

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	going well, reflection has to happen on both sides; and that clearly is not happening on their side, despite several people raising concerns to them through the years."
	"I would say we're not seen as a partner; we're seen as the adversary. The question is always "well, why do you have this kid attending your school and they're not in your catchment area?" No, the question should be, why is the kid traveling [outside of their catchment area]?"
	"And I'm going to say it's biased and it has been. They're trying to move away from it because we called the mountain on it, and we put it in a newspaper that you're biased. This is where the [expectation of] transparency is coming from."
Fairness_Consistency of Use	"I feel as though the district is like going beyond. In fact, what like the State law says, or in putting their own interpretation on it, and then holding us accountable to that."
	"I mean, my perspective is that it's kind of different every single year, and even in the year, with every single charter school. So, like, if you look at the ACE reports for the schools that were up for renewal this year versus the schools that were up for renewal last year, there's discrepancies between what, you know, what was written as being, in our case an egregious incident. That seems to be new this year."
	"So, whether it's charter or whether it's just, you know, the conventional schools right. Because we're not looking at conventional schools that are poor performing, have low attendance, [and] have unstable financial situations. No, they're not. We're not closing those schools, right? So, why is it even an option if we're not doing it across the board?"
Fear (Lack of Trust)	"I can do everything right, and still possibly get a non-renewal."

"I feel like sometimes if we drop our guard, then that's when you get burned." |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"I don't trust, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. I don't trust them."

"You are constantly operating from a place of fear, or your backs against the wall." |
| *Focus on Closing/Denying Charters* | "The way it is structured just feels like it's just an opportunity to find somebody who's below the line. And not about all of us getting better."

"I think it's like understanding what is the goal of authorization, because to me it seems like they think the goal is to shut schools down....Like a lot of the charters are here because we have a community need that's being met in a specific community, or a specific area, or parent choice or whatever it is. And so, if their goal is to shut us down, and our goal is to like, do whatever we have to do to service students and families in our community, like those are two different goals."

"It really didn't seem like there was any type of additional concerns or supports. It seemed like communities that we know statistically were hit heavier by the Covid pandemic were then targeted for closure of schools without any kind of idea of like, what does it take to do what that school is doing? Like, it's really great to judge people in a tough time. It's another thing if you had spent more time reaching your hand out and bringing supports together, 'what could we have done for the community of Philadelphia?'

Essentially, the objective has just been deny them to the extent that it is at all possible to do so."

"It's being approached from the authorizer side, as like, 'how can I find schools to close?'."

"I had never understood the point of the Charter School Office to be like authorizers to shut down schools. I thought it was supposed to be to help charter schools make sure that we're as compliant as possible, and give |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	some transparency and give some, you know, public assurances to accountability being met."
Framework Changes	"What policies, processes, and approaches can be implemented to advance equity in that process. I think there needs to be a real workshopping around the framework. So, looking at the framework, and where it is having disproportionate impact on certain types of schools and then those impacts on students, right? So, how are we overhauling the framework in service of the outcomes we're driving for towards overall?" "I believe that this whole idea, coming out through several reports of like, where are there areas of biases and how we're evaluating things? And the issue of, like, is there intentional bias? Or is it just happening? Or what's happening? I think that there is enough data to show that some structural things in the framework do create inequities in some areas. And so, without commenting on all of those, the English language learner is one example where schools that have students, they're identifying they're servicing. We're not getting any more money for EL students. We may have to have several more staff members for that, and that could be something that gets us in trouble as opposed to being like 'Great! You're servicing a really high area of need in the city.'" "I think whenever they do come up with an idea that everyone feels is good-- I hope they stick with [it]. It is all I'm hoping for." "Mandatory advance notice for changes to the framework is like a bare minimum." "Take your best players, public and charter, put them in a room and say, you know, 'How do we come up with a framework that benefits the Philadelphia area, the families in Philadelphia. And what are the real, you know, what are the real pain points across these two platforms?'"
High Quality Authorizer	"I think, based on the, you know, visions that were shared, and then some of the pain points, something that could make charter authorizing more deeply connected just to, you know, schooling as a whole, is if the school district was to do similar evaluations on their own schools, or to have some

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	kind of process for how they make their own determination about, you know, their schools. I think if we had an individual Charter school have some of the facility issues that we know that district schools have you know, it would absolutely come up in our evaluations." "A high-quality authorizer goes beyond compliance and actually betters the entire system because they are, you know, finding and supporting and expanding, you know, things that work to make the entire system better." "I think that they're supposed to make sure that we're responsible stewards of taxpayer money, like that's the job. They're supposed to make sure that we're executing the primary functions of what a charter is." "They would have to know how schools work, I mean, you know, and all of the levels and dimensions, I think. Yes,...there's some good people doing this work, and that come from a good place, but I don't get the sense that people have run schools necessarily, and to be realistic and relevant, and understanding like, all of the moving pieces and all that it takes to run a school. I think they really have to be able to prove that they're coming from an exemplar-- or they've at least participated in--you know, an environment that was successful." "I don't know the best way to describe it, but I think the authorizer has their pulse on the city-- the needs of the city. And has some analysis framework additionally to what our performance framework would be to be able to select the proper planning for the future in the city to be able to make those decisions around authorizing, or the number of charters, or the increase of seats, etc."
Inconsistency	"...And a lot of times the Charter schools are being somewhat labeled as being difficult or non-cooperative. Which yes, shifting expectations, that's definitely it. But it's also about, like, shifting expectations like, not just that the framework itself changes, but like how we're using that framework is changing, which is then implementing, inconsistent practices. But it's just, I feel like somewhat. This is a very neutral way of stating some things that the reason sometimes people feel suspicious, or defensive is because it's not

always feeling like it's being implemented neutrally. And there is [sic] a lot of different outcomes for different schools based on those differences of opinions. And that's where I think this inherent conflict of interest that's coming in is."

"You're asking people to do triage instead of actually, really go deep. And so, I'm just not really clear on what the purpose of some of these actions are, which, to me, makes it feel inconsistent because I don't know what the end goal is."

"I think it's important for them to decide exactly what they need from us and make that very clear in advance and be consistent."

"I've been through 4 renewals, and it's a whole different group of people every time. So, I know that's something like from a staffing perspective. But you kind of never know what you're gonna get."

"Some of the things that they throw at you in renewal come out of left field. I mean, nobody told us in 2019 'Make sure you keep every single immunization that a family submits' at the time of renewal. Doesn't matter, that Philadax exists, and you can print out any one, you know you can. Our nurses can look up any child's immunization, or that the immunizations are compliant. It's, 'Do you have the exact piece of paper that a parent submitted in 2019?'. Like with their packet? I don't recall being told we had to keep that now. Luckily, we had them, but it was a scramble to find them all, you know."

| *Inefficiency* | "...I do take issue with the process, in that it completely undermines the intent of the Pennsylvania Charter School law, and it really prohibits the innovation that charter schools can really bring to education because so much of our time and our resources now go to constantly expanding compliance processes." |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"It's just really inefficient to have to triple check our work before submitting, and then their work as they go through the various drafts throughout the year."
Innovation/Expansion	"The Pennsylvania Charter School Law was designed with a very specific intent to drive innovation and education... I, too, want all schools to be held to really high expectations, and I am not against the expectations that are set and having to demonstrate." "It's not put together in a way to really let charter schools grow or be innovative. There's the whole process." "It's [the renewal process] aimed to standardize literally all the charter schools to what the School District's doing. That's what they want. That's the goal."
Lack of Clarity on How Decisions are Made	"In terms of what you present to them as the narrative, all the subsequent documentation, everything that you're talking about in terms of governance-- all these things. What they actually talk to you about ends up not being based on the evidence that's provided. It ends up being some other set of talking points that they had focused on. And they did a series of focus groups with us on the renewal process for the last cohort. And I said the clarity around what you're asking for, and then what is discussed in terms of artifact submission, all of those pieces is [sic] not aligned, and you're not being clear about what's going to be measured and how it's going to be measured." "It feels very punitive when you're publishing reports without any context, without a school having an opportunity to respond to it. You know, there are different standards for different things...You know, it's like you miss one EL file and you're not in compliance. But then, all of a sudden, you know, you can have not all your staff clearances. And that's okay. You know, I'm not really clear on how that works."

"…They did state that although they have this framework of how they look at the different categories and ratings, it's up to the individual who's looking at it to make the determination of whether or not the standard was met…and they didn't explicitly say that if someone else looked at this, perhaps they would have had a different take on whether or not the standard was met, but that was sort of the implication. It was like, 'Well, I need to go back to them and ask why?' Because they basically make those decisions in a silo."

"I think what was particularly challenging about the fact that it is so subjective is that they think it's objective. And it's not. They just gave us a 53-page guide to the Organizational Compliance domain. So, they think they're doing a good job. They are not."

"[The CSO] has attempted to set up a bureaucratic process that, in their minds, treats everybody the same and makes data-based decisions. And yet, they deny the subjectivity and lack of transparency that their own system actually has."

"We've had similar things with the L&I, where L&I will think it's fine; and here's the department that are experts at that. But then the CSO is saying, like, it's not fine. And you're like, how do these two things live in tension? Like, how are my tax-paying dollars going to this one department-- as a Philadelphian as a taxpayer-- that is saying it's okay. And we've hired them and trust them as an expert. And then the CSO is saying, 'it's not okay' and 'that's not their area of expertise.' And my tax-paying dollars are going to that, too."

"…There are things that-- especially with my school-- we are a fully new administration as of March of last school year. And there are things on there from 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, that we were not involved in at all on the ACE report, the ACE-R report, and that we lost full credit. We couldn't earn anything at all because of things that prior administrations disvalued basically."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"When you actually get to renewal, they have all of these separate standards, which count for so much more than your annual standards, so much more. You miss one, all of a sudden, [sic] your entire rating is like 50. It almost doesn't matter what you did year after year. All the things that you submitted to them, because the weight of those renewal standards is so high."
Longer Renewal	"I think that...if you are working with, say, you know, the state on some kind of improvement plan, that's not something that necessarily can take place in 5 years. So, I think to show actual growth takes time. I don't think that's an adequate amount." "I think 10 years gives you more of an on ramp to gather that data for a new school. I also understand if you have a new school, you wanna be monitoring them actively. So, I could imagine, you know, an annual evaluation with, like, a review. That's not a full-scale charter reauthorizing. But then you look at other operators that have been doing an excellent job. The fact that they have to go through this incredibly cumbersome process for a full year every 5 years, you know. Give those extraordinary operators a 10-year charter so they can really innovate and grow and then revisit every decade." "Yeah, five years is just goofy. And by the time you get any momentum going and trainings based on needs and looking at their effectiveness, that's at least gonna take three years." "If you're gonna take all the time to give someone a charter your goal shouldn't be to attack them for three years, to hit all the compliance stuff. It should be like an intentional runway to build a successful operation, if you will." "Also, I think if we look back at these last five years it's a perfect example of how you often don't have enough data within five years, because five years isn't five years of data even; it's four years. And then you could have a wacky year or two, and all of a sudden, everybody gets one-year renewals because there isn't enough data."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"Also, I think if you're starting a new school, while there's some value, perhaps, in check-ins along the way to make sure you know what you're doing, five years is nowhere near enough time to start new school and show results." "I think five years is not enough time, even based on the CSOs own self-proclaimed difficulty keeping up with those deadlines."
Not Instructive	"We want [our] schools to [be recognized for the work we do]. Not one note on this from the School Board or anyone else that says, 'Great job. Let's try to grow these schools.' Because isn't that the intention of it? Right? Like, charter schools are created to provide a different service to kids. Now, if we don't do something well, tell us what we don't do well and tell us how to improve it." "It feels deliberate. It feels like it's meant to be secluded and off to the side, so that no one asks too many questions about what's actually happening. And I think that that's huge because I agree there is so much that is shared with like 1,800 links to a Google Doc that has 400 lines in it, making a whole bureaucracy out of looking at little things."
Partnership	"Any of the public awards...even with a lot of the new initiatives for businesses to step up and, like, partner with schools-- a lot of it is still very district-based and not even sent as an opportunity to some, like an organization like PCE, to say, 'Hey, can you push this out to your charter partners? So, they know it exists?' Or, 'Can you let that company know that there's also charter schools that could partner with them in these?,' whether it's the internships or other types of resources that come into schools." "I need [us] to work together if the mission is to service and to educate all Philadelphians-- all Philadelphia school kids."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"So, I think the non-collaborative piece of it, where it's just the standard changes if you don't meet the standard. 'We didn't communicate the change in the standard, number one, and number two, if you haven't instituted this and changed your policy, then you're non-compliant. So, it's not supportive. And it's not collaborative."

"It seems like there's a divide and conquer approach which is limiting communication as opposed to trying to bring us together for productive dialogue." |
| *Politics* | "So, what is the point of a condition? And so, really explaining it, it feels like there is a little bit of, like, public posturing and politicking around the conditions. So, what is the rationale behind all the conditions? And what are they trying to achieve with them when they're already actually components of all the frameworks."

"I don't think you're gonna change the fact that there's politics behind the people that are there. But just to make them have a responsibility to understand that charters are part of that community would probably go a long way."

"The School Board is, I guess, a group of political appointees essentially, right? Do they have responsibility to us beyond politics?" |
| *Positive Attributes_CSO* | "They're reaching out like, 'we wanna make sure you're as successful as you are during this visit'."

"I am actually more aware of both the legal and even ethical kind of standards that we should be adhering to for schools. So, I think the quality of education and supports that we provide is probably higher than if they [the CSO] weren't in that business at all."

"I also, like, I usually call them with my dirty as laundry, so when I have something that feels very hard or I'm worried, they're gonna get a call; or |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	I'm concerned about our process, like, I call my contact person there. And I say, 'I'm feeling really stuck.' and I do that because she's always kind of presented herself to me as like an ally and an advocate..."
	"I appreciate...the chance to, like, get their feedback, fix it, and, you know, like, so it doesn't feel as much of a 'gotcha'."
	"I can see places where we have improved what we do because [of] the renewal process. Like, I'm glad for the renewal process. It's been helpful in some ways."
	"I think they do really want to build trusting relationships with us."
	"I will say that everyone at the CSO last year was very helpful...I've felt more comfortable reaching out in the last two years to help navigate the system with them than I have in the past, so I do think the CSO has paid attention to, like, better customer service."
	"They [The CSO] is [sic] very open to communication. You know, if you submit information early, they're happy to review it and get back to you with feedback to change it before the final submission."
	"For example, the office hours. They have the office hours they were doing, like, different cohorts.... They are putting forth effort to help make the process transparent."
	"One thing I will say that has happened in our building this Spring is...so we use EL as our literacy curriculum. We're pretty new to it. We adopted it last year in lower school, this year for middle school. So now all K-8 uses it. And with the district going there, they did seek us out and have brought several big groups of educators from lots of buildings out to see the program in action."
Rigidity of Process/Framework	"There's so much put on schools to be the center hub for making sure that the city's children are taken care of. To make sure that their medical records are taken care of, that they're seeing the dentist that they're being

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	pre-screened...all the ways the city wants to take care of children is being taken care of through the schools and that's understandable, but that's a big responsibility...you don't get extra money for doing those things like, there's not an extra bonus of like, 'Hey, good job, guys. You made sure everyone got to see the dentist this year. Here's an extra blah blah.'" "But if you collectively put how much everyone has had to put into hours, as the framework has gotten more rigorous, it has taken away from our ability to do what we do best as operators." "You, in fact, sometimes have to choose between, like, what's gonna get me the points and not what's gonna actually be better. And so that's the problem, I feel." "It really shouldn't be an all-or-nothing. There should be a way to have some gray area in there." "...So, like when they came to our school, when we were evaluated, they all left, and so there was no way to ask more questions of, 'Hey? You wrote this but we didn't agree with it', but then there's no one to, like, refine it." "Why is there not a submission and correction window like we would do for anything? Why are we not allowed to submit our policies and documentation and have clear feedback given? And if we correct it with a board meeting, and like whatever clerical change in some of these cases, legitimately, and resubmit it and put it out there, why would that not be sufficient to meet the standard? And so, I think, doing something like that, where we are able to submit everything ahead of time, they find issues, we have a collaborative meeting we address them. That would be much better. We're happy to fix the issues that they bring up. That's not the concern. It's how that process is engaged."
Role of Authorizer	"I think the charter authorizer's vision is typically to follow the leadership in the city from the mayor to the Education Office to selectively build a

system of models that helps to support underprivileged cities-- underprivileged kids in cities-- typically urban cities."

"Charter leaders being able to understand how they're being trained, what their knowledge base is, I think would be helpful in the authorizing process."

"One thing I think a true charter authorizer should be...is truly independent."

"[In reference to the role of an authorizer] An independent entity that does not have, you know, the interests of, say, the School Board of Philadelphia, in mind over the interests of the schools that they are meant to represent."

"To give opportunities to families that wanna have a better life, or specifically want a high-quality option, that maybe doesn't exist in their neighborhood, or provide something unique, like a charter school to that environment and give another option. Not necessarily to put the school district down, because I think there's some good school district schools, but to provide another option to a family potentially, who wants to remain in the city or can't afford to move out of the city like to try to make our cities obviously stronger. The authorizer is supposed to evaluate all that, to see what really fits, where it fits, you know, what areas are underserved, what areas are flawed?"

"Obviously, there's the accountability piece. But more importantly to me, I think there is usually someone who has a unified vision."

"I guess their role should be as partners to expand and maintain choice for families and high-quality education for students, regardless of the type of school."

"I feel like their job should be to try to elevate the charter schools and make them successful."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"To hold schools accountable to quality and their original intentions, and what they set out to do, but do it in a way that doesn't interfere and potentially detract from a school's ability to achieve those very outcomes that they're being held accountable to."
School Comparisons	"Evaluating us in comparison to districts and similar schools is problematic. I don't necessarily have a better solution in mind at the moment, but especially when the formula for creating similar schools is very specific and also not transparent because the poverty data is not publicly available. But even if it were, I would say that basing these comparisons on just those three points just isn't working, or maybe the concept of comparison at all is flawed." "Although they're considered in a similar school, it definitely is not, even when you think about just the family structure, home ownership, so many other things that impact education, that just are not being taken into consideration." "I would say that, in agreement, we should all have targets. But there [school comparisons], I don't. I don't think anyone in the Charter sector-- I have not met one person who felt like their similar schools' group like really accurately reflected similar schools, or there wasn't some question of 'where did it come from?'" "You gotta get rid of the similar schools' group that was not developed by a statistician. The groupings are often the number and is way too small, and so then they throw in the closest peer. But then they're outside of the range and then it just creates huge inequities and a lack of vision there." "I actually don't even know currently how our similar schools are selected. And that continues to be really lacking like transparency or consistency." "I don't have anything on the comparison. I don't even understand how they do it, and they outperform us every year. So, I just-- I just feel like it's a fight I'm never gonna win."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"I don't think school comparisons should factor in at all. I think schools should have individualized growth and proficiency targets in the same way that we have them."
Signing Charter	"…What I will say is, these negotiations went back and forth, so when we received our charter there were conversations that went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and they understood where we were. We were expecting to receive something else in writing, however, we did not, so it's not signed. So that was a waste of time, too…then you go back and forth, and you negotiate with their lawyers and our lawyers to make sure we narrow down on the language that we all agree upon. Then you receive a document that doesn't have the language that we all agreed upon." "There are phrases in there that allow them to withhold money from us without prior notification. We have problems with the similar school's groups, and oh, yeah…the not allowing us to take kids from out of catchment is a big issue." "I would say that there are some cases where our experience has been that we have tried to get questions answered about the contract, or things such as 'Oh, there's an exhibit for our catchment that's supposed to be included in here. Oh, there's a licensing agreement that's supposed to be included.'" "Being asked to make changes that you legally do not have to make in order to appease the school district and their level of comfort." "I think often there are clauses in contracts that set a school up for failure and may be contrary to Charter School Law. And so, many schools feel like their only option is to operate with an unsigned charter." "I think, when a lot of people were holding out on signing because they didn't want to agree to the performance framework." "It's very one sided. It's not like a contract negotiation. So, I mean why? I don't know why I would sign something that I can't, like, [argue] like an

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	actual negotiation. It's like this it, this is the thing, take it, or leave it, or, like, fight to the death to change one little thing about it." "Some of what I've seen with some of the charters: they're never going to be able to meet the conditions that are given to them. So, they're ultimately shutting themselves down. Like, if you watch the last couple of years where they've given conditions to schools. There's just not enough time to possibly get that growth, or whatever it is."
Site Visits	"I think that it's very interesting that in five years we only had anyone from the Charter Schools Office come to our school one day, in five years for a couple of hours. And you know I do think that-- not that I'm like hoping that people come a lot. But at the same time, I do think that it's really impossible to get a sense of a school, just from what we submit through epicenter. You know, you're never going to know what goes on here. Well, you know what our building is like. Our children look safe and happy, you know. It's like what, kind of, what's going on in the classrooms?" "That's the only visit we get all year, unless I specifically request someone to go there. I don't know how you describe that, in a word, but problematic would be a good one. Because if you don't see my school, you don't see what I'm doing. How in the world are you going out there and talking about all this stuff?"
Taking Feedback	"Like in the current system, where they will claim that they've solicited feedback from schools. It's really not true. They will have, like, a stakeholder meeting-- like they had this morning. It's a Zoom Webinar, and then they will send out a survey that they will then ignore. And then it's like, 'Oh, well, you know, [someone] gets up and says this was done with input from charter schools.'"
Timelines	"Even though I think that this year's authorizing has been better than last year, they released the agreements without a whole lot of time to review them, right? And so, then it needs board approval. I don't have another board meeting until after I actually have to submit to the district today, so

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	there's no chance I can get it done. So even stuff like that like, how are they considering timeline when publishing it?" "The timelines, I don't think, are fair to schools in terms of producing a quality app application." "We got our draft renewal agreement, and we had about a week turnaround time to review this legally binding document." "I built in a year until, because, like, I know that we need that year, because I knew the district wouldn't come in with a decision until late June. And so, we find ourselves, you know, navigating these interesting paths in order to circumvent what we know will be just a wildly drawn-out process on the SDPs end."
Transparency	"If we had a sense for what could comprehensively be conditions, and at what thresholds and all those things, like, we might be able to better-- you know, predict out, using predictive analytics from the ACE about what things could be done in the interim, you know, to get there." "Including the charter schools' responses to questions in the ACE report-- I feel like that would increase transparency to the ultimate decision maker, because they don't hear our side of the communication." "At the very least, there should be clear discussion and directive from the School Board when they take up issues related to charter schools and not just say, 'Yeah, we addressed this. We sent it back to the Charter office to deal with,' or you know, or something big like that." "I think also just an explanation around conditions like every single school, I think, has conditions. Oftentimes the conditions are just reiterating the framework." "I feel like decisions are made in back rooms that you're not part of the conversation."

	"I think it's difficult, since everything seems to change within the five years of renewal, or whatever, anyway. But I think communication throughout the year. Why does it seem like everything matters only the year that you're up for renewal and not everything in the past? Yes, it was on ACE reports and everything, but there wasn't like, I feel like no one has ever come back to us and been like: 'Here's what's good. What's wrong, like, here's where we need some fixes.' They just, like, say that we didn't get full points on something."

"If you're gonna interview families and staff, and you know, students, share it back with us, in terms of what you heard. But we never saw any of that feedback, whereas in the past it was so nice to kind of, like, get that validation or feedback from families."

"So, one thing I try to do as a leader, that I definitely do imperfectly, is [to] try to be very clear around, like, this is a decision I'm gonna make. This is a decision we're gonna make. This is the decision. I'm really gonna turn over to you all. And so, I wonder if, like, if just some clarity around that like if we saw them sometimes saying like, 'no, we really know what it's gonna be and this is the place where we're saying you have to adopt our decision and here's why' versus 'here's a space where we really want to open up conversation, to kind of grow and take in ideas' and all that kind of stuff, because what everybody hates is a process that feels like you've been invited into a transparent, inclusive, collaborative process. And then actually, it's like, no, that was a waste of my time, because you all came back and just said you did what you wanted to do." |
| *Trust in Charters* | "More flexibility in being able to prove that what you're doing is actually better than what is written in the framework, if that makes sense."

"So, it's like the ability to talk to the office and say, yes, in your framework it doesn't fit that exact formula. But if you look logically at this, it absolutely makes sense in terms of why we made a smart business decision, even though it doesn't fit perfectly into what you're doing." |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
Vision for Authorizing	"What would happen if they also saw themselves as a conduit for making for building connections and sharing strengths?" "The expansion of more high-quality charter schools and the closure of more low-quality [charter schools]." "I also think, you know, there just needs to be a real conversation around the environment. Like, if the entire city is failing [in] middle school and the PSSA tests are being modified, then I think there needs to be some subjectiveness to whether a school is able to go to the table and really talk about academic achievement. There needs to be some question, 'what is your academic plan? What is your curriculum? What do your pacing guides look like?'-- those types of things." "I'd love to see what this you know how this school would rate, or, you know, we don't know how the district is doing on their food service audits...I don't have that information, but they have it for all of us. And so, it's kind of hard to even show that you're doing such a great job because there's no data on the others, on any of the other schools, that's being shared. Even as a parent, like, that information is so much more valuable. I think sometimes charter schools can get slapped with like a 'We're whiny. It's not fair. It's not fair.' But like when I have friends who are like, 'I don't understand the landscape for education in Philadelphia' and I'm like, 'Okay, let's pull the ACE report to this charter school, and there's nothing to pull up for the other schools, like, there's nothing. And so, if we're saying that the ACE report is the best practice so that we can figure out if schools are high-quality, that it should also exist for the neighborhood schools so that parents have tools to make decisions."
Vision for Sector	"My vision, my vision would be that we start to be viewed for quality education in the way that we are providing it and not be vilified because of potential district money concerns. You know, I think, that there is a lot of value added in the charter sector."

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	"Being recognized for that innovation. And, you know, like we do some great stuff."

"Bring things into alignment where we can be satisfied with how we're being evaluated, what the expectations are so that we can live in harmony, and we can serve our communities right. Not asking for anything perfect. But you have to be open, open to listening."

"I would say that we have a dynamic sector that can really innovate, learn from each other, and learn from district schools and then have feedback loops, right? So that we're there's a continuous process of improvement both among charters and district schools, so that, you know, my schools' trying out a language model. It's not something that you would go full-scale in the district quite yet. What can we learn from my school?"

"Hit the ground running with us. Get into the trenches like they say, you know, with us leaders, with us charter school operators, and actually show up at our buildings. And you know, see and feel the impact that we make."

"I'd like to see the charter sector continue growing...A new Charter school hasn't been authorized in many years. But not just growing like making more charter schools-- spreading, you know. One of the things I think charters are more successful at is that as the population shifts, they can shift quickly to meet the needs of the students."

"I'd like to see the charter sector be valued as increasing choice for families, improving the quality of education for the students in the city, and as partners in best practices that we can share and work together with." |
| *Weaponized Conditions* | "Some of the conditions in the one year [renewals], like, research shows that you actually can't make meaningful progress on some of those things. Like it doesn't make any sense. What would make more sense is 'Hey, we identified these really big areas that need improvement. This one-year renewal is for you to come back with basically a strategic plan of how you're going to address that, how you're going to resource it, etc.' Because if |

Theme	Quotes for FT Transcripts
	you're not really clear on attendance, for example why you've had such a dip, you're not given the time that you need to root cause that to develop new strategies."
	"I don't know what one has to do to get no conditions. That's not clear to me. You know, there were some schools who had, they met all three domains, but still had conditions. I'm not clear."
	"They're using conditions as like a backdoor way to control charter schools and have this like double jeopardy, where, like first, you lose points on the framework. And now they're going to build that in and say, not only is it going to take away from your, like, domain score, but also we're going to make it like a do or die metric as part of your charter, or a do or die condition of your charter?"
	"The way that they've started using conditions is alarming. Some of them are just not reasonable at all. And so, it feels like where we had maybe as a sector made some progress towards, like, agreeing to the concept of the framework, and these charter agreements could have become less controversial, now we are weaponizing conditions."
Words to Describe Process	"Different" "Overwhelming" "Redundant" "Intimidating" "I would say unpredictable." "Combative" "Conflict of interest" "Confusing and frustrating"

"Deceptive"

"Convoluted"

"Time-consuming"

"Grueling"

"It's just unhealthy, for lack of a better word."

Appendix III – Topline Survey Data

Q2. Please select your role within the organization.	
Answer Choices	Responses
Chief Executive Officer	33.85%
Principal/Assistant Principal	18.46%
Role not listed	18.46%
Compliance Leader	13.85%
Operations Leader	7.69%
Chief Academic Officer	3.08%
Special Education Director/Coordinator	3.08%
ELLs Director/Coordinator	1.54%

Q3. Please select the role you have played in the charter application or renewal process. Select all that apply.	
Answer Choices	Responses
I have interacted with the CSO as a part of the application or renewal process.	89.23%
I submit or prepare data for renewal and authorizing to the CSO.	75.38%
I have prepared renewal applications for my charter.	72.31%
I help school leaders and teams make sense of charter renewal recommendations and decisions.	67.69%
I have a role in negotiating the contract with the district.	38.46%
I have not participated in the charter application or renewal process.	1.54%

Q4. Of the options listed, which do you believe represent the top three responsibilities that should guide a high-quality charter authorizer?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Committing to equity, fairness, and transparency in the implementation/execution of charter authorizing	85.19%
Ensuring operators have flexibility to innovate and meet student needs	51.85%
Facilitating the success of charters within the sector through ongoing & dedicated support	35.19%
Building accountability measures to ensure the effectiveness of the sector	31.48%
Addressing student and public interests	29.63%
Ensuring autonomy for charter operators	18.52%
Setting high standards for schools	16.67%
Providing partnership support for the district and operators	11.11%
Providing resources that support operators in meeting requirements	9.26%
Providing professional learning that supports operators in meeting requirements	7.41%
Other (please specify)	3.70%

Q5. The following represent potential compliance specific roles that one could expect a charter authorizer to play. Using the rank function, organize these roles based on which you think are most important (1) to least important (10).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Score
Holds schools accountable for fulfilling fundamental public education obligations to all students	29.63%	18.52%	7.41%	9.26%	11.11%	11.11%	5.56%	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	7.54
Holds schools accountable for fulfilling fundamental obligations to the public, including governance, stewardship of public funds, and operational transparency	18.52%	22.22%	12.96%	7.41%	11.11%	5.56%	12.96%	1.85%	5.56%	1.85%	7.06
Ensuring compliance decisions and guidance account for the context in which schools operate	18.52%	5.56%	11.11%	18.52%	18.52%	9.26%	11.11%	1.85%	5.56%	0.00%	6.72
Partners with the sector to co-create performance targets	7.41%	16.67%	16.67%	7.41%	12.96%	5.56%	3.70%	9.26%	12.96%	7.41%	5.91
Maintains high standards for the schools it authorizes	5.56%	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%	16.67%	12.96%	14.81%	3.70%	1.85%	5.78
Focuses on holding schools accountable for performance rather than processes and inputs	3.70%	7.41%	9.26%	7.41%	14.81%	9.26%	11.11%	16.67%	14.81%	5.56%	4.94
Monitors charter schools that, over time, meet the performance standards and targets on a range of measures and metrics set forth in their charter contracts	5.56%	3.70%	9.26%	9.26%	5.56%	12.96%	24.07%	14.81%	7.41%	7.41%	4.89
Partners with the sector to co-create modeling used for comparison schools	3.70%	1.85%	7.41%	14.81%	7.41%	9.26%	12.96%	16.67%	16.67%	9.26%	4.52
Sets high standards for approving charter applicants	7.41%	7.41%	3.70%	11.11%	5.56%	9.26%	5.56%	7.41%	24.07%	18.52%	4.39
Closes schools that fail to meet standards and targets set forth in law and by contract	0.00%	5.56%	11.11%	3.70%	1.85%	11.11%	0.00%	9.26%	9.26%	48.15%	3.26

Q6. The following represent potential functional roles that one could expect a charter authorizer to play. Using the rank function, organize these roles based on which you think are most important (1) to least important (10).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Score
Ensures clarity, consistency, equity, and transparency in authorizing policies, practices, and decisions	18.52%	24.07%	16.67%	12.96%	9.26%	5.56%	3.70%	9.26%	0.00%	0.00%	7.52
Makes the well-being and interests of students the fundamental value informing all the authorizer's actions and decisions	27.78%	14.81%	14.81%	9.26%	5.56%	12.96%	7.41%	3.70%	3.70%	0.00%	7.41
Assumes responsibility for facilitating a thriving charter sector	11.11%	18.52%	9.26%	7.41%	9.26%	7.41%	9.26%	5.56%	9.26%	12.96%	5.81
Effectively cultivates charter schools that meet identified educational and community aspirations	7.41%	11.11%	14.81%	9.26%	5.56%	9.26%	12.96%	16.67%	7.41%	5.56%	5.59
Prioritizes ethical conduct, efficient public stewardship, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations	9.26%	9.26%	9.26%	11.11%	12.96%	7.41%	12.96%	7.41%	11.11%	9.26%	5.48
Honors, preserves, and, where appropriate, promotes creative use of core autonomies crucial to school success	1.85%	9.26%	9.26%	14.81%	14.81%	16.67%	7.41%	11.11%	9.26%	5.56%	5.39
Assumes responsibility not for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding schools accountable for their performance	9.26%	5.56%	5.56%	12.96%	14.81%	12.96%	14.81%	7.41%	7.41%	9.26%	5.37
Minimizes administrative and compliance burdens on LEAs	11.11%	1.85%	3.70%	14.81%	12.96%	3.70%	14.81%	18.52%	14.81%	3.70%	5.06
Only collects from schools the information they are not able to reliably get from other sources	3.70%	1.85%	12.96%	7.41%	3.70%	9.26%	7.41%	11.11%	20.37%	22.22%	4.04
Supports parents and students in being well-informed about the quality of education provided by charter schools	0.00%	3.70%	3.70%	0.00%	11.11%	14.81%	9.26%	9.26%	16.67%	31.48%	3.33

Q7. Given your understanding of the charter authorizing process, in what ways should the charter authorizer serve the interests of the entities listed below. Please write in your thoughts.	
Answer Choices	Responses
Families/Students	100.00%
The School District	100.00%
Schools	100.00%

Q8. Select the top three considerations that you believe are critical to renewal/non-renewal decisions. Please note, the provided answer options can mean different things to different people. Please interpret the answer choices in the way that makes most sense to you. You will be provided an opportunity to expand on your choices.	
Answer Choices	Responses
Compliance with state and federal requirements	64.81%
Financial health	55.56%
Academic data	51.85%
Comparison data with similar schools	33.33%
Family feedback	25.93%
Family demand	24.07%
Instructional practice	18.52%
School culture data	16.67%
Teacher quality	5.56%
Length of time operating	1.85%
Leadership consistency/tenure	0.00%

Q9. Please provide clarification for your selected answers. You can use the space to more clearly define the concepts, share exactly how the selected items should be used in the authorizing and renewal process, or provide any additional insights.	
Answer Choices	Responses
Compliance with state and federal requirements	66.00%
Financial health	54.00%
Academic data	50.00%
Comparison data with similar schools	30.00%
Family feedback	28.00%
Family demand	24.00%
Instructional practice	18.00%
School culture data	16.00%
Teacher quality	6.00%
Length of time operating	2.00%
Leadership consistency/tenure	0.00%

Q10. Based on your experience with the charter authorization process, which of the following words do you associate with the current process in Philadelphia? Please select no more than five total.

Answer Choices	Responses
Inconsistent	58.00%
Conflict of interest	46.00%
Punitive	44.00%
Data-informed	40.00%
Not transparent	38.00%
Subjective	38.00%
Evaluative	32.00%
Disorganized	24.00%
Improvement-driven	18.00%
Supportive	14.00%
Well-structured	12.00%
Appropriate	6.00%
Reliable	4.00%
Instructive	4.00%

Q11. Of the strategies listed below, select the top three that you believe can be implemented to streamline the current charter authorizing process in Philadelphia.

Answer Choices	Responses
Allowing schools to submit supplemental data in order to provide a more well-rounded picture of performance	60.00%
Streamlining data collection to reduce redundancies	48.00%
Clear and transparent published guidelines	38.00%
Ensuring authorizers have a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of operating a charter school	30.00%
Establishing renewal criteria at the beginning of a cohort	28.00%
Appropriate resources and guidance aligned to established criteria	26.00%
Consistent messaging and guidance throughout the process	20.00%
School site visits (outside of renewal periods)	20.00%
Other (please specify)	12.00%
More realistic timelines	6.00%
Troubleshooting support	6.00%

Q12. What are the top five pain points that exist in Philadelphia's charter authorizing process?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Inconsistent practices	53.06%
Charter school performance framework	48.98%
Shifting expectations	46.94%
Duplication of effort	40.82%
Lack of differentiation of process based on charter context (model, size, age)	38.78%
Approval of new charters and expansion	34.69%
Additional or more relevant educational, financial, operational, and legal expertise needed at the authorizer level	30.61%
Time-intensive processes	26.53%
Focus on family engagement is reactive or only occurs when there is an issue	26.53%
Lack of relationship between CSO and charters	24.49%
Lack of consistent engagement with parents prior to renewal	20.41%
Creation and use of data	16.33%
Timelines	12.24%
Inequitable time requirements based on size	10.20%
Reporting	10.20%

Q13. I currently partner with SDP or the CSO in the following areas:	
Answer Choices	Responses
Other (please specify)*	64.00%
Student services and supports (including special education)	28.00%
Enrollment and attendance	24.00%
Community and parent engagement	12.00%
Curriculum	6.00%
College and career supports	6.00%
Talent management	4.00%
Assessments	4.00%

Other
*Some respondents express that they do not partner with the CSO on any specific issues. Several indicate they "never hear from either" the CSO or the school district.
*Some schools note that they operate independently of the district, only interacting with the CSO for compliance, reporting, or renewal processes, rather than for active partnership or collaboration.
*A few responses highlighted a lack of support, especially in areas like special education. Comparisons were made with support received by charter schools in other counties, expressing frustration that charter schools in Philadelphia receive significantly less assistance.
*Topics mentioned for partnership or resource support include "anti-bullying practices," "transportation," and "professional learning communities." However, these were generally noted as gaps where more support or resources could be beneficial.
* Some respondents question the very notion of partnership, expressing doubts that the CSO actively supports or partners with charter schools in a meaningful way.

Q14. In which areas do you believe SDP/the CSO and charters could work more closely together?

Answer Choices	Responses
School safety	64.00%
Addressing teacher pipeline issues	52.00%
Enrollment and attendance	46.00%
Increasing student supports	44.00%
Family and community engagement	40.00%
Graduating college and career ready students	34.00%
Increasing literacy rates	28.00%
Student retention	18.00%

Q15. Rate the statements using the scale below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree no Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Weighted Average
Philadelphia would benefit from a neutral/ independent authorizer not affiliated with a local school district.	0.00%	8.00%	14.00%	20.00%	58.00%	4.28
Authorizers should support charters to reach standards that improve opportunities for all students.	2.00%	2.00%	10.00%	42.00%	44.00%	4.24
Priority deadlines for compliance submissions are helpful.	0.00%	2.00%	16.00%	48.00%	34.00%	4.14
Charters should be given an appropriate learning curve from startup to fully operating.	2.00%	4.00%	12.00%	56.00%	26.00%	4
Recommendations shared for renewal with conditions should align with school/sector vision.	2.00%	4.00%	16.00%	64.00%	14.00%	3.84
Authorizers should set the standard for charters to ensure academic opportunities for all students.	6.00%	12.00%	10.00%	52.00%	20.00%	3.68
SDP should compare charters and neighborhood schools with similar missions, size, and student populations.	10.00%	8.00%	14.00%	50.00%	18.00%	3.58
Charter authorizers should focus on how charters do their work.	6.00%	18.00%	20.00%	42.00%	14.00%	3.4
Standardized processes create more burden than equality.	0.00%	26.00%	38.00%	28.00%	8.00%	3.18
Standalone and network charters should have the same expectations for authorization.	8.00%	28.00%	20.00%	36.00%	8.00%	3.08
Five years is an appropriate timeline for authorizations.	22.00%	28.00%	12.00%	30.00%	8.00%	2.74
State-wide measures are appropriate to capture student achievement.	10.00%	38.00%	26.00%	22.00%	4.00%	2.72
Expectations and rules for the authorizing process are clearly articulated in a timely manner.	16.00%	34.00%	16.00%	32.00%	2.00%	2.7
Comparison data used to evaluate charter schools is fair and reasonable.	20.00%	32.00%	28.00%	18.00%	2.00%	2.5
I trust the charter authorization process and the recommendations that result.	34.00%	16.00%	36.00%	12.00%	2.00%	2.32
The charter authorization process is based on the use of valid and reliable tools.	26.00%	34.00%	24.00%	16.00%	0.00%	2.3
The charter authorizing process is transparent.	28.00%	34.00%	26.00%	12.00%	0.00%	2.22
The charter authorizing process is fair.	30.00%	32.00%	28.00%	10.00%	0.00%	2.18
The charter authorizing process is equitable.	36.00%	30.00%	26.00%	8.00%	0.00%	2.06
The charter authorization process in Philadelphia is easy to understand.	32.00%	40.00%	18.00%	10.00%	0.00%	2.06
SDP is the most appropriate charter authorizer for the City of Philadelphia	46.00%	20.00%	30.00%	4.00%	0.00%	1.92