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NACSA Authorizer Needs Assessment

Authorizer

Miami-Dade County Public Schools

Board Chair

Perla Tabares Hantman

Superintendent

Alberto M. Carvalho

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Scope

This needs assessment is designed to provide authorizers with a reflective, formative look at its current authorizing policies and practices in relation to NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* and the Florida *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. The review process and this report serve as an opportunity for an authorizer to reflect upon the strengths of its authorizing program and determine how best to focus time and energy on areas where the program could be improved.

Consistent with NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* and the Florida *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, this analysis focuses on and is organized according to the following five guiding questions:

1. Does the authorizer approve applications based on applicants' demonstrated preparation and capacity to open and operate a quality charter school?
2. Does the authorizer have effective systems for establishing and monitoring school performance expectations and holding schools accountable as necessary to protect student and public interests?
3. Does the authorizer have rigorous, appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results? Are decisions made with the intent to maintain high standards and protect the students' and the public's interests?
4. Do schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled?
5. To what extent do the organizational structure and systems support quality authorizing practices and forward the authorizer's mission?

The contents of this report are a culmination of a process involving analysis of authorizer policy and practice. NACSA gathers evidence that informs our assessment through an extensive document review, surveys, interviews, and a site visit. We explore each guiding question in detail and present the authorizer with analysis of the applicable standards and recommended actions for strengthening the future work of the authorizing office.

Rating Categories

Authorization quality is rated in two categories:

Established

Refers to the authorizer's practices as set out "on paper" whether by policy, protocol, or other means. It also addresses the way that the authorizer communicates information about its practices to relevant stakeholders within the authorizing agency and to schools. This category rates the authorizer based on what it plans to do.

Applied

Refers to the authorizer's practices as applied. This category rates the authorizer based on what it actually does, in practice.

Within each part of the assessment, the rating categories are defined more specifically with respect to the authorizer's responsibilities in that area.

Rating System

For each category (established or applied), the authorizer receives a rating as follows:

Well-Developed

Commendable in that it meets or exceeds NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

Approaching Well-Developed

Fundamentally sound in that it contains most aspects of a well-developed practice but requires one or more material modifications to meet NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

Partially Developed

Incomplete in that it contains some aspects of a well-developed practice but is missing key components, is limited in its execution, or otherwise falls short of satisfying NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

Minimally Developed

Inadequate in that the authorizer has minimally undertaken the practice or is carrying it out in a way that falls far short of satisfying NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

Undeveloped

Wholly inadequate in that the authorizer has not undertaken the practice at all or is carrying it out in a way that is not recognizably connected to NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

About the Authorizer

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) is one of 67 Florida local school systems. Florida's charter school law was enacted in 1996 and a year later MDCPS became a charter school authorizer. Its portfolio includes 125 charter schools or (roughly 20 percent of all Florida charter schools) serving 16 percent (55,629) of MDCPS students. While MDCPS' district-wide mission is to "provide the highest-quality education so that all of our students are empowered to lead productive and fulfilling lives as lifelong learners and responsible citizens," MDCPS's office of Charter School Support (CSS) has its own authorizing-specific mission: "To provide quality services and tools to charter schools in an environment of collaboration and professionalism conducive to the achievement of global educational standards and compliance with legislation and policies."

The MDCPS board (the "board") is composed of nine members. Members serve four-year terms and are elected from individual single member districts on a staggered basis. Members elect their chair and vice-chair annually. Of the board's four committees, the Personnel Services and Student and School Support Committee oversees most charter school matters, while the Fiscal Accountability Committee oversees charter matters as they relate to financial oversight. The full board reviews and considers high-stakes decisions (e.g., application approvals, renewals, and amendments).

The board sets district policy and has a comprehensive set of district charter school policies. Board bylaws govern the board's operations, including a conflict of interest policy that applies to the board's charter school decision-making. In addition, the board appoints the superintendent who in turn selects administrators to head the district's administrative divisions and carry out the board's policies. The CSS office is in the Operations Division, led by Assistant Superintendent Tiffanie Pauline. The CSS office has a \$1.7 million budget and 10 full-time-equivalent staff.

Authorizing Environment. State law requires that the Florida Department of Education ("FDOE" or "the Department") establish a model charter school application and a model charter school contract that all district authorizers are required to follow. The model application includes both the application requirements and a corresponding evaluation rubric, while the model contract dictates terms for individual charter contracts. If an authorizer denies an application, the applicant can appeal to the Florida State Board of Education. Florida law allows districts to supplement the application with additional requirements; however, some districts have been hesitant to do so for fear that supplemental information might not be considered on appeal. MDCPS policy states that the district may request supplemental information from charter school applicants. While some applicants have appealed MDCPS' denials of their charter applications, none of these appeals have been successful to date.

Ambiguity around the scope of authorizer discretion under state law generates concern from authorizers that implementing certain practices not expressly permitted by law will result in issues on appeal. Similarly, if a district develops a new system or practice, the state could subsequently require the district to replace its system or practice with a state-approved version. This concern is evident in MDCPS' plans for developing an academic performance framework and a differentiated oversight process.

School Performance. The state of Florida issues letter grades for all public schools, including charter schools. Based on the state's grading system, charter schools outperformed the district. In 2014, 70 percent of MDCPS-authorized charter schools earned a B or above, while 54 percent of MDCPS schools earned a B or above, districtwide. MDCPS-authorized charter schools performed slightly better than charter schools statewide—62 percent of which earned a B or above.¹

Based on MDCPS Office of Program Evaluation analysis, however, the district's charter schools have mixed results. For the 2013-14 school year a higher percentage of charter schools had results below the district average than performed above the district average:

- "In reading, 62.6% of the charter schools had results that were not significantly different from the traditional school comparison group, while 25.2% had results that were significantly lower, and 12.2% had results that were significantly higher.
- In mathematics, 55.9% of the charter schools had results that were not significantly different than the traditional school comparison group, while 23.4% had results that were significantly lower, and 20.7% had results that were significantly higher."²

NACSA Assessment Context. In January 2015, MDCPS received a District-Charter Compact Collaborative (DCCC) grant from the Department. NACSA conducted this needs assessment as a condition of the grant. The purpose is to evaluate the district's current authorizing practices and make recommendations that will help MDCPS implement its compact collaborative plan most effectively. Additionally, in fall 2014, the FDOE in partnership with authorizers, charter operators, and NACSA developed a publication of the Florida *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. This document is the first of its kind for the state and will be used to guide the development and proliferation of quality authorizing standards statewide. MDCPS was an active participant in the development of these standards, providing leadership and guidance for the authorizing sector in the state and has been active in promoting its use. This assessment aligns with Florida's authorizing standards and provides MDCPS with a diagnostic for how implement those standards more fully.

¹ Florida Department of Education School Grades: <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/>. Accessed 3/3/2015.

² Miami-Dade County Public Schools: Review of Charter Schools (2013-14). November 2014. Comparison groups of students not attending charter schools were identified for each charter school in reading and mathematics by matching each charter school student to all non-charter school students in the district based academic achievement, demographic variables, and geographic location.

Executive Summary

Ratings Summary	Established	Applied
1 Application Decision-Making	Approaching Well-Developed	Approaching Well-Developed
2 Performance Management Systems	Approaching Well-Developed	Approaching Well-Developed
3 Performance-Based Accountability	Approaching Well-Developed	Approaching Well-Developed
4 Autonomy	Approaching Well-Developed	Partially Developed
5 Organizational Capacity	Approaching Well-Developed	Approaching Well-Developed

Key Competencies

- ✓ Leadership envisions the use of charter schools as a key lever for improving performance in some of the district’s most-challenged communities.
- ✓ The Office of Charter School Support (CSS) established its own mission and operational goals that demonstrate an awareness of its role as an authorizer to ensure that the schools it authorizes are of high quality.
- ✓ Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) has a strong foundation for meeting Florida’s *Principles & Standards for Quality Authorizing* with a thorough set of policies that dictate how it vets charter school proposals, monitors performance, and makes high-stakes decisions.
- ✓ In some important ways MDCPS provides appropriate levels of autonomy to schools (e.g., providing access to district services and streamlining some processes for high-performing charter schools).

Focus Areas	Recommendations
Outcome-Based Strategy	Refocus the CSS team on charter school outcomes, rather than inputs, as aligned with established strategic goals; adjust plan as necessary to ensure successful implementation of DCCC grant goals.
Application Evaluation	Establish supplemental criteria to evaluate replicating or expanding operators’ past performance.
Performance Framework	Develop a dynamic academic performance framework that encourages charter schools to continually improve performance over time, taking into account baseline student performance, but not accepting sustained mediocrity.
Performance-Based Accountability and Transparency	Create and implement a performance management system that aligns with an established performance framework and allows for comprehensive analysis and decision-making related to renewal, termination, and, intervention. Publicly report data against the framework annually.

Application Decision-Making

Does the authorizer approve applications based on applicants' demonstrated preparation and capacity to open and operate a quality charter school?

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Summary Assessment

MDCPS's application policies, process, and materials are sound and comprehensive. MDCPS uses the Florida model application and supplements it appropriately with additional requirements to ensure it approves proposals with a high likelihood of success. However, while district policy stipulates that MDCPS will consider past performance of operators, it has not developed additional application criteria for existing operators. This process change will be particularly useful as the district implements its DCCC grant strategies to attract high-performing operators to the district.

Despite the high volume of applications received (approximately 50 annually) and the statutorily-required timeline for review, MDCPS' runs a thorough and comprehensive application review process. However, this process is could be strengthened by ensuring that at least one or two members of each application review team are required to review the application in its entirety. The superintendent provides written recommendations to the board, but these recommendations do not include application strengths, only deficiencies. As a result, the board is making application decisions with minimal information about the proposed plan.

Recommendations

- ✓ Establish supplemental criteria to evaluate replicating or expanding operators' past performance.
- ✓ Ensure a full and comprehensive reading of applications by structuring application review teams in a way that at least one or two members of each team are required to review the application in its entirety.
- ✓ When reviewing applications, provide leadership and the board with comprehensive written recommendations that include analysis of both the application's strengths and weaknesses.

1.1 Application Materials and Process

The authorizer provides clear guidance and requirements regarding application materials and submission requirements, and runs a clear and well-structured application process with realistic timelines.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

⊕ Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS effectively communicates the requirements to open a charter school in the district. Application requirements are easily found on the CSS district website. The CSS office publishes instructions for completing the application annually and provides a checklist to ensure applications include all the necessary documents. State law and FDOE requirements dictate most of the application content and process, including the due date, timeline, and application evaluation rubric. While MDCPS uses the Florida model application, it supplements this application with additional requirements. For instance, MDCPS requires a letter of intent, due one month prior to the final application deadline. MDCPS policy also permits additional information requests about the school's governing body and the performance of any proposed service providers.

APPLIED

MDCPS's ARC members are well-trained and committed to reviewing applications comprehensively; however, the process could be more efficient and improved by having reviewers evaluate fewer applications more comprehensively and by utilizing external reviewers. Most ARC reviewers evaluate only the portions of the application that align with their areas of expertise, with very few reviewers evaluating the application as a whole. As a result, there is a lack of reviewers who understand the entire application for the applicant interview since the ARC does not deliberate on the application prior to the interview.

Instead of the current practice, reviewers could evaluate fewer applications more comprehensively or one or two members from each evaluation team could be responsible for reviewing the application in its entirety in addition to their given area of expertise. Teams could be structured to align with needed expertise (e.g., team members with high school expertise review the full applications for schools proposing grades 9-12). Finally, CSS could utilize Charter Tools' functionality to bring the application fully online, providing a structure for analyses.

MDCPS does not currently use external reviewers in its application reviews. However, the Florida *Principles & Standards for Quality Authorizing* recommends that authorizers use external reviewers to support rigorous decision-making.

The application review process is well-structured and transparent for the applicants. In May of each year MDCPS holds an informational meeting for charter school applicants, the content of which is rich and comprehensive. The CSS office communicates expectations and provides time for applicants to ask questions about the process. Survey responses of school leaders indicate that applicants have a clear understanding of the requirements for approval and that the process is coherent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Structure application review teams in a way that at least one or two members of each team are required to review the application in its entirety.

Include external reviewers in the review process.

1.2 Educational Program

The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed educational program including the vision and mission statements; educational philosophy; curriculum and instruction; teaching skills and experience; , calendar and daily schedule; target population, enrollment; and plans for educating students with special needs.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

⊕ Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Authorizers in the state must use the Florida model application and evaluation criteria, and generally, this model application provides clear expectations for applicants to describe their educational program in sufficient detail.

Within the application, the FDOE outlines the evaluation criteria and also provides a reviewer evaluation rubric. However, the criteria set forth in the application differ at times from the criteria outlined in the reviewer rubric. For example, the Curriculum Plan criteria in the reviewer rubric states that, “the Curriculum Plan section should explain not only what the school will teach but also *how* and *why*.” However, this same language is not included in the “evaluation criteria” outlined in the model application. MDCPS has no control over the content of these documents; however, the district could bring awareness to these differences.

APPLIED

From the initial application review to board recommendation, MDCPS application reviews only include application deficiencies and do not include any analysis of an application's strengths. If an application “meets standard” in any category, the reviewers include no comments with the rating, making it very difficult to assess the quality of the review. When asked, MDCPS did not provide a clear reason as to why it does not provide strengths of applications. Without this analysis, it is difficult to ascertain *why* the application “meets standard” in any particular category. More importantly, decision-makers are not provided comprehensive analysis of the strengths of the educational program when making a decision to approve or deny an application.

RECOMMENDATION

Include an analysis of the educational program's strengths as well as weaknesses in all phases of review, including recommendations to the board.

1.3 Organizational Plan

The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed organizational plan including the effective governance and management structures and systems (including staffing); founding team members demonstrating diverse and necessary capabilities; and understanding of legal requirements related to opening and operating a charter school.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

⊕ Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

The Florida model application requires a thorough organizational plan with sections devoted to school governance, management, education service providers (ESPs), human resources and employment, and student recruitment and enrollment. MDCPS policy stipulates that it collects additional information to “evaluate the applicant’s ability to operate a charter school,” including information about the history and background of applicants, description of delineated responsibilities, whether the applicant currently operates charter schools in Florida, and whether the application is a replication of an existing school. Governing board members must also complete a disclosure form. Additionally, MDCPS states that “an applicant’s history of establishing and operating charter schools shall be considered when recommending approval or denial of an application”—clearly stating in policy the intent to consider due diligence of past performance.

While MDCPS cannot dictate the content of the model application, it could require additional information that might help the authorizer evaluate the organizational plan’s alignment with the educational program and business plan such as a professional development plan that is aligned with the particular skills and competencies required by the school model.

APPLIED

While district policy permits MDCPS to request and evaluate an applicant’s background, history, and track record, evaluation criteria do not include supplemental standards for this information, and written analysis and recommendations do not reference it. However, an applicant’s historical performance is often discussed in the applicant interview. For example, in summary documentation provided to the board of a recently denied proposal, staff stated, “The historical performance of the two existing schools does not outweigh the significant deficiencies in this application.” Yet, the written denial includes no reference to the applicant’s historical performance or how this performance provided additional evidence to support the ultimate decision. The review and analysis provided by the ARC included no due diligence of the applicant’s historical performance.

As noted in Section 1.2, application reviews do not directly reference an applicant’s strengths, including those of an applicant’s organizational plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop evaluation criteria for any supplemental standards MDCPS establishes, including replicating or existing operators’ past performance.

Include an analysis of the organizational plan’s strengths as well as weaknesses in all phases of review, including recommendations to the board.

1.4 Business/Financial Plan

The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed business plan including financial viability of the plan demonstrated through budget projections that are aligned with the proposed educational program.

Established:

 Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

The Florida model application requires a thorough business plan with sections devoted to facilities, transportation, food service, yearly budgets, financial management and oversight, and start-up plans. The state provides a charter school estimated revenue Excel worksheet that helps applicants prepare start-up and operating budgets. The Florida model application further requires the applicant to describe its spending priorities and reviewers are directed to ensure budgetary projections are consistent with all parts of the model application.

MDCPS requires that, in addition to the state-required budgets, applicants provide a five-year budget assuming 50 percent enrollment. MDCPS requires that the applicant use the district's budget template and provides very detailed instructions at the applicant orientation.

APPLIED

CSS staff and the district's audit division review charter school applications and provide thorough feedback on the budget. Comments from multiple applications illustrate that financial reviewers ensure that the business plan is aligned with the educational plan. Deficiencies noted in denied application reviews demonstrate in-depth analysis across reviews.

As noted in Section 1.2, application reviews do not include strengths, including strengths of an applicant's business and financial plan.

RECOMMENDATION

Include an analysis of the business and financial plan's strengths as well as weaknesses in all phases of review, including recommendations to the board.

1.5 Capacity

The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous criteria for evaluating the applicant's capacity to implement the school plan effectively, including but not limited to a substantive in-person capacity interview with all qualified applicants.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

While the Florida model application establishes some requirements for applicants to demonstrate capacity to open and operate a charter school, MDCPS appropriately supplements the model application with additional requirements like a Governing Board Disclosure Form. Additionally, MDCPS completes background checks of all founding governing board members. Founding board members do not need to submit resumes or bios but do need to demonstrate applicable expertise.

The capacity interview process is extremely thorough but could be restructured in certain ways to become less resource-intensive. A subgroup of the ARC conducts a technical review of all of the applications and all comments are consolidated into a summary evaluation that the ARC uses in its review and as preparation for the capacity interview. The ARC, which includes up to a dozen district staff, may attend the capacity interview, while the applicant is limited to no more than three participants, of which only one must be a governing board member. Finally, the orientation and application materials lack substantive information on capacity interview standards and expectations, which makes the process less transparent for the applicant.

APPLIED

MDCPS takes care to ensure that the applications it approves have a high likelihood of success as demonstrated by its detailed review and interview process. School leaders reflected that the interview process is intense, and that the MDCPS team is thorough in its analysis.

However, MDCPS could make the process more efficient and effective. Since the ARC is subject to the Sunshine Law (F.S. Chapter 286), the ARC review team does not meet in advance of the interview to discuss the application and prepare for the interview, nor does it meet post-interview to deliberate. Written comments are consolidated by the ARC chair and distributed to the committee and applicant in advance of the meeting. Any applicants who do not withdraw their applications after receiving the preliminary analysis are interviewed. Additionally, interviews often last two hours or longer, which is partially due to the fact that the ARC members do not have an opportunity to meet and discuss the application in advance, but also because, as noted in Section 1.1, most reviewers do not review the entire application and therefore do not have an understanding of the application's general strengths and weaknesses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide time at the beginning of each applicant interview for the ARC review team to confer and prepare for the applicant interview, understanding that this preparation time will be subject to the Sunshine Law.

Require a majority of the proposed board members and, if applicable, the school leader be present at the interview.

Provide more substantive and detailed guidelines and expectations for the capacity interview during the May application orientation meeting.

1.6 Specialized Applicant Types and Application Priorities

The authorizer's application includes requirements that specialized applicant types (e.g., charter network applicants, virtual school applicants, or applicants planning to contract with an education service provider) provide additional relevant information, and to the extent applicable, the authorizer adapts its application to address identified needs or attract desired program types.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Currently, MDCPS's application process does not identify priorities for application types, service to specific populations, or geographic regions; however, as part of the DCCC, MDCPS plans to solicit applicants who have proven track records for serving youth in an alternative education setting. The district has identified "zones" that include schools that 1) are under-enrolled, 2) are low-performing, 3) offer limited choice, and 4) have facilities in need of attention. It hopes to focus development of proven choice models in these zones. While this strategy is not yet established, discussions with district leadership indicate that this is a promising strategy to bring more options to the district's highest-need populations. In establishing a process that complies with Florida application laws and requirements, MDCPS could draw from the experience of authorizers nationally that have developed a process for communicating priorities to the public while still maintaining an open application process.

Florida's model charter application includes adaptations for applicants planning to contract with an ESP, and MDCPS' policy permits it to request supplemental information to evaluate an applicant's ability to operate a charter school. However, MDCPS application materials do not require applicants partnering with ESPs to include information on past performance.

The state provides a separate model application for virtual schools and one for replications by high-performing charter schools. The Florida model virtual application does not meet all of the NACSA's best practices for virtual applications including enrollment monitoring and verification of full-time student enrollment, student participation in a full course load, and credit accrual.

APPLIED

While MDCPS policy permits it to request additional information from applicants, it is not clear what information MDCPS, in practice, actually requests of replicating operators and ESPs, and how it uses this information to inform decision-making. Recommendations to the board indicate that staff conduct analysis of operator past performance; however, the methodology and data sources of this review are not clear. Furthermore, examples of application evaluations did not include any evidence of analysis of past performance. If MDCPS plans to prioritize solicitation of service providers with success educating underserved populations in its next strategic plan, it will need to develop minimum thresholds of past performance and standardize the supplemental information it collects from these operators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish supplemental criteria to evaluate existing operators' past performance.

Create application priorities to support the district's anticipated strategic plan and seek applications from operators with success educating underserved populations while still maintaining an open application process.

Supplement the state's virtual schools application with national best practices for analyzing and monitoring virtual charter schools.

1.7 Decision Alignment

The authorizer makes application decisions that are informed by and align with documented evidence and analysis of the extent to which the plan satisfies approval criteria, and the extent to which applicants demonstrate strong preparation and capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

The MDCPS board has established policies and clear expectations for charter school application approvals. The policies establish a review process that results in written analysis and recommendations to the board. However, the policy does not explicitly state that only those charter schools that exhibit the highest likelihood of success and meet all the statutory requirements will be recommended for approval.

APPLIED

While policy does not explicitly state the standard for approval, in practice, MDCPS staff have acted appropriately in only recommending applications for approval that meet *all* of the 18 statutory requirements. Documentation to the board of applications recommended for denial include comprehensive analysis of the application's deficiencies.

Applications that meet the statutory requirements and that staff recommend for approval do not include any analysis of the application's strengths, making it difficult for board leadership to understand the background of the recommended applications and the merits of the approval.

Despite this fact, the MDCPS board has consistently followed the superintendent's recommendations and *all* application decisions that have been appealed have been upheld, indicating clear decision-alignment and comprehensive analysis to justify decision-making.

RECOMMENDATION

State explicitly in board policy that only those applications that meet all 18 statutory requirements *and* exhibit a high likelihood of success will be approved.

1.8 Transparency

The authorizer has transparent processes for both application evaluation and application decision-making.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

● Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Available on the district's website, MDCPS provides complete information to prospective applicants regarding the application process and materials used for decision-making. Materials include details of the timeline, orientation information, and criteria used for the evaluation. As noted above, transparency could be improved by providing information required of existing operators' past performance.

APPLIED

In order to comply with the state's Sunshine Law, all of MDCPS' application analyses and deliberation take place in a public forum through the capacity interview. Applicants also receive analysis of the application prior to the capacity interview. At the end of the interview, the ARC deliberates and votes on the application, again in a public forum, and that recommendation is provided to the superintendent and subsequently to the board.

MDCPS highly encourages applicants to attend an orientation; materials are comprehensive and effectively communicate MDCPS' expectations of applicants throughout the process. As noted earlier in this section, MDCPS could strengthen process transparency by including details about the capacity interview in its applicant orientations.

Performance Management Systems

Does the authorizer have effective systems for establishing and monitoring school performance expectations and for holding schools accountable as necessary to protect student and public interests?

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Summary Assessment

MDCPS has a solid foundation in its performance management system with an eye to compliance, but weaknesses remain in the tools and measures used for school monitoring. The district uses Charter Tools to manage data and this has proven effective in minimizing errors through document collection and in keeping a record of schools' compliance-related data. However, MDCPS performance monitoring analysis focuses more on inputs than outcomes and does not differentiate based on past school performance or high-quality status. Adjustment in a few key areas would take the district to the next level in charter school authorizing and oversight. The lack of a performance framework (addressed in Section 3), seriously hinders the district's ability to monitor schools and does not allow for differentiation for schools based on performance. Furthermore, MDCPS does not have streamlined expectations and monitoring processes for renewal, intervention, and termination processes, and the district does not annually report on school performance data outside the state's A-F grading system. As part of the DCCC grant, MDCPS plans to establish a performance framework, a differentiated oversight policy, and a means of reporting to the public on the performance of its charter schools.

Recommended Actions

- ✓ Develop a differentiated oversight process that is 1) outcomes-focused and 2) concentrates less energy on high-performing schools and more on those that are new or low-performing.
- ✓ Develop an intervention policy linked to a performance framework that puts schools on notice and gives them an opportunity to improve prior to termination or nonrenewal.
- ✓ Link renewal decisions to an established performance framework so schools have a clear understanding of performance expectations for renewal.
- ✓ Produce an annual public report on MDCPS charter schools that provides clear and accurate performance data, including individual school reports that are aligned with the performance framework set forth in the charter contract.

2.1 Contracting

The authorizer executes a charter contract for each school that clearly articulates the rights and responsibilities of each party.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Both the current MDCPS charter contract and FDOE model contract (to be used with all future contracts) are comprehensive documents, but can still be improved in two key areas: incorporation of the charter application and modification provisions. The MDCPS charter contract includes the full charter application in its appendix, which is contrary to best practice. The FDOE model contract, on which new MDCPS contracts will be based, also includes the application in its appendix. This practice is legally challenging as it makes the charter school accountable for upholding all aspects of its original proposal. The school district and charter school would be better served if the most critical components of the charter school application were pulled out and included as part of the contract, coupled with a clear and measureable performance framework.

The standard contract is excessively long—84 pages, without the appendix. State law and district charter policy are repeated throughout the contract, which creates a very long document. The contract would be more concise and comprehensible if district policy or state law references are made without restating those laws or policies verbatim. A move to the state model contract will reduce some of these redundancies and the overall length of the contract. Both the district and FDOE contracts currently include a modification clause, but neither contract includes an explanation or definition of material versus nonmaterial amendments. Defining materiality is critical so that the district and school have a clear understanding of what changes require district approval. Certain minor changes should not require district approval while others such as location or number of students are material amendments that should be subject to MDCPS approval.

APPLIED

The charter contract is negotiated in a public meeting, and this can lead to contracts that may differ across the portfolio. Some local charter operators are much larger and more experienced, and, as a result, wield greater political clout. In order to prevent inconsistencies or more favorable terms being granted to certain operators, the core terms of the form charter contract should be non-negotiable, to the extent possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Remove the original charter application from the contract, and replace it with appendices that address key components of the application (e.g., academic plan, student discipline policy, facility plan, etc.).

Utilize a standard template for each school based largely on the FDOE model contract; limit the terms that are subject to negotiation.

Define what constitutes a “material” amendment to the charter contract and develop a formal amendment process for material items.

2.2 School Opening

The authorizer ensures that approved schools are prepared adequately for opening.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

The authorizer's school opening process is simple, and should be further developed to add more depth and assurance that schools are on track for successful openings throughout the pre-opening period. The current pre-opening checklist includes 15 items broken down into sections that include school safety, personnel, and curriculum.

State statute states that charter schools must have an approved contract and provide evidence of permits, licensing, zoning, and other requirements no later than 15 days prior to the initial use of the facility. As a result of this 15-day threshold, MDCPS has delayed implementing its pre-opening checklist until this 15-day period. A well-developed process for monitoring school openings would include benchmarks spread out over the entire pre-opening period (between application approval and school openings). Such benchmarks may include the hiring of a principal and other critical leadership staff, finalizing all handbooks and policies, successfully completing an admissions lottery, and meeting enrollment targets.

APPLIED

Though the current process is simple, it is implemented well and with fidelity. When a school is not ready to open on the approved timeline, MDCPS has granted a deferral so that the school can have another year to get on track. These deferrals have been granted on a case-by-case basis, usually when requested by the school. A more in-depth pre-opening process with defined benchmarks would prevent any last-minute deferrals, which could be disruptive to students and staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a more comprehensive list of pre-opening benchmarks that accounts for the critical actions needed for a successful school opening.

Establish a pre-opening monitoring schedule to ensure timely completion of key benchmarks during the pre-opening period.

2.3 Ongoing Monitoring

The authorizer has an effective process for monitoring education, financial, and organizational performance of the schools it authorizes.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

While MDCPS' ongoing monitoring procedures are extensive and well-designed, they can be strengthened by focusing more on outputs than inputs, developing a differentiated oversight system, and bringing greater clarity to its use of site visits. The foundation of MDCPS monitoring process is the curriculum and compliance review (CCR), a 28-page document listing compliance criteria, which is divided into 16 review categories. The CCR works hand-in-hand with Charter Tools, an online document repository and compliance tracking system. The review categories are comprehensive and include curriculum and instruction, student services, finance, and other categories.

The CCR's overall approach is one-size fits-all and some of its requirements and indicators are input- rather than outcome-focused. For example, all charters are currently required to submit a School Improvement Plan (SIP) and are held accountable to input-driven indicators such as reporting on attendees to all professional development delivered at the school and proof that the principal reviews lesson plans regularly. This level of granularity is not necessary, especially for high-performing charter schools. An opportunity exists to develop a differentiated oversight process that allocates fewer resources to input-focused compliance.

As part of MDCPS' monitoring strategy, schools are divided and CSS staff members visit each school at least once per year, sometimes more if the school is new or struggling. Unannounced visits are also made, some of which are random and some of which are in response to a complaint. Aside from the CCR benchmarks, there is no overarching site visit protocol. School leaders expressed a desire for more consistency in visits.

APPLIED

As applied, the MDCPS monitoring regimen is strong and generally well-received by schools. Charter Tools, a compliance monitoring system used by the CSS office, is well-liked by charter school leaders due to its simplicity and thoroughness. School leaders appreciate how the tool organizes compliance documents and its ability to archive documents over multiple years. They also report that MDCPS staff are accessible and responsive. Principals noted that site visits sometimes lacked clarity of purpose, and expectations were different depending on which CSS staff members were present. MDCPS would benefit from an overall protocol to ensure the consistency and coordination of site visits across staff members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Remove the requirement that all schools create an annual School Improvement Plan, and rely instead on a performance framework to hold schools accountable for outcomes.

Develop a differentiated oversight process that is 1) outcomes-focused and 2) concentrates less energy on high-performing schools and more on those that are new or low-performing.

Design and implement a detailed site visit protocol for school visits.

2.4 School Intervention/Revocation

The authorizer has effective policies and practices for school intervention and revocation, and conducts merit-based interventions, including revocation where appropriate, in response to clearly identified deficiencies in the school's record of educational, organizational, and/or financial performance.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS has established clear guidelines for revocation, but needs to develop an intervention strategy and policy. State law, the current MDCPS contract, and the FDOE model contract all outline a long list of "other good causes" for revocation, and these include failure to meet academic goals outlined in the contract.

The current MDCPS contract includes three pages of "other good causes" for which the contract can be terminated. Though the list is extensive, it is not overreaching, and includes many items also described in state law. Some items on the list are repetitive, and the new state model contract condenses this list.

Current policy only addresses what to do once the charter reaches potential revocation and does not include adequate intervention policies such as how CSS staff should communicate concern, require remedy, and reassess through follow-up analysis. MDCPS should develop an intervention model that can be applied when a charter school starts to veer off track, as evidenced by established academic, financial, and organizational performance frameworks.

APPLIED

Because it does not have a clear intervention policy, MDCPS has intervened only to alert a school once test scores are such that a closure is imminent per state law and the charter contract. In a number of instances, renewal contracts have included a corrective action plan whereby the renewal is conditioned on completion of the outlined actions. Because of the lack of a performance framework, the interventions are often compliance-oriented, but the district has shown a willingness to intervene when necessary.

Additionally, revocations or consolidations have taken place when warranted by terms of the charter contract. With the lack of a performance framework, these revocations or consolidations have occurred either when the school is rated failing according to the state accountability system, or when it fails to "meet the mission" outlined in its contract. While accountability expectations need to be more clearly defined, the district has shown a willingness to take action when justified.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop an intervention policy aligned with a performance framework that puts schools on notice and requires remedy prior to termination or nonrenewal.

2.5 Renewal

The authorizer runs a well-structured renewal process including clear requirements; a meaningful opportunity for the school to present information and respond to the authorizer's findings; clear communication; and prompt notification of decisions.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Although MDCPS has established renewal standards, they are not outcomes-focused, and the corresponding ratings system is not designed to lead to a clear-cut renewal decision. Furthermore, the renewal standards are not established at the time of contract execution, and therefore schools do not have a clear sense of expectations prior to the renewal process. Renewal applicants are rated "meets the standard," "approaches the standard," or "does not meet the standard" on eight items. The standards are divided into topics like governance, facilities, student enrollment and conduct, and academics. The impact of receiving a "does not meet the standard" on the renewal decision is not clear. The minimum renewal term is five years, but some schools have negotiated a longer term, prompting schools to question what factors MDCPS uses to determine term lengths.

Communication with schools eligible for renewal begins at the start of the school year. MDCPS notifies schools up for renewal at the first quarterly principals' meetings, and then meets with the schools to walk them through the process. This past year, renewal packets were due to the CSS office on January 16, and recommendations were presented to the board in March. This timeline should be codified annually so that schools have a clear expectation for when the renewal decision will be made at the start of the process.

The renewal application requirements lack specificity and adaptability. Page limits are not required. While the actual renewal application is simple, principals complained that the documentation needed was unclear and staff confirmed that schools submit vastly different evidence to support renewal applications. In some cases, principals delivered cartloads of supporting documents to MDCPS with their renewal applications. Furthermore, the renewal application requirements do not vary based on school performance. Streamlining the process for high-performing schools would allow MDCPS to focus on the cusp schools and bring greater efficiency to the process.

APPLIED

Currently MDCPS only turns down renewals for schools that are failing in the state's accountability system, per state statute, or in one case, are not meeting the school's stated mission. This raises the issue of what purpose, if any, does the renewal application have on renewal decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Codify the renewal timeline to give all schools an expectation for when the decisions will be made. Inform renewing schools of the process prior to the start of the school year.

Streamline the renewal application process and clearly communicate submission requirements. Differentiate the process for high-performing schools.

Link renewal decisions to an established performance framework so schools have a clear understanding of performance expectations for renewal.

2.6 Closure

Following non-renewal, revocation, or voluntary return of the charter, the authorizer oversees and works with the school governing board and leadership in carrying out an effective plan for the orderly closure of schools.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

● Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS' policies governing school closure are robust and well-developed. Florida state statute identifies student achievement as the most important factor in determining whether to renew or terminate a charter. MDCPS' charter contract closely mirrors state law, but provides a number of examples of when a charter can be revoked for "other good cause shown" (a phrase used but not defined in Florida's charter school law).

The charter contract outlines the necessary actions to be completed once a school is terminated, including securing all student, operational, and financial records. It also includes high-level direction for how to handle school furniture and fixtures, school debt, unencumbered funds, and a final audit. Additionally, MDCPS has a closure action plan with 28 tasks divided into sections including: notifications, transition meetings, curriculum and instruction, student services, personnel, fiscal management, furniture, fixtures and equipment, and miscellaneous. The closure packet also includes a sample letter to parents.

APPLIED

MDCPS has terminated or non-renewed a number of charter schools in recent years. In many cases, after discussions with authorizer staff, schools at risk of non-renewal have opted to close on their own. In other cases, MDCPS has closed schools following the procedure outlined in statute. MDCPS fully appreciates the sensitivities surrounding school closures, and is as proactive as possible in communicating with the schools and with families throughout the process.

2.7 Transparency

The authorizer communicates to schools and the public clearly and consistently regarding expectations for and status of school performance including formal reporting on school performance and status at least annually.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Given Florida's Sunshine Law, MDCPS' authorizing practices are subject to great transparency. However, MDCPS does not produce a digestible annual report on charter school performance, as recommended in Florida's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*.

While information about individual schools is available, a true understanding of status and performance are much less clear to the public. Considered a NACSA Essential Practice, the annual report is the best vehicle for transparently reporting school academic, financial, and organizational performance. It can also be a great tool for publishing student demographics and the comparative analysis that the district already conducts regarding student performance. As part of the DCCC grant, MDCPS plans to develop a public online dashboard that will include school performance information.

State statute requires a great deal of information to be published on the individual charter schools' websites, and the authorizer's monitoring of compliance in this area is commendable. The required information includes the schools' academic performance histories and current budgets, among other items.

APPLIED

MDCPS conducts its practices with a high level of transparency. Contracts are negotiated in public meetings and all board actions are conducted publicly.

MDCPS has compiled a detailed document summarizing academic performance of its charter schools compared to the performance of its traditional schools. However, this document is very complex and not designed in a way that is accessible to parents and the general community.

RECOMMENDATION

Produce an annual public report on MDCPS charter schools that provides clear and accurate performance data, including individual school reports that are aligned with the performance framework set forth in the charter contract.

Performance-Based Accountability

Does the authorizer have rigorous, appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results? Are decisions made with the intent to maintain high standards and protect the students' and the public's interests?

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Summary Assessment

MDCPS has strong tools and an extensive list of standards that are effective for compliance monitoring, but do not adequately assess school performance. The indicators used are largely focused on inputs and should be further developed to encourage high performance and continual improvement. Specifically, the district does not currently have a comprehensive performance framework, one that uses multiple measures to evaluate performance (e.g., comparative analysis, subgroup analysis, or mission-specific academic performance) and that is aligned with the district's strategic plan to continually increase the academic performance of its charter school portfolio. This framework should serve as the primary guide in renewal, intervention, and termination decisions. The MDCPS audit staff has begun to develop a financial performance framework which should be completed and incorporated into CSS's financial oversight model. MDCPS evaluates organizational performance through its CCR system, but the system also includes many requirements that are not critical to evaluating the organizational capacity of the charter school.

Recommended Actions

- ✓ Develop a dynamic academic performance framework that encourages charter schools to continually improve performance over time – taking into account baseline student performance, but not accepting sustained mediocrity.
- ✓ Finalize and implement the financial performance framework, which is currently under development.
- ✓ Use the CCR system to develop an organizational performance framework.
- ✓ Use the performance framework as the basis for renewal, termination, and intervention decisions.

3.1 Educational Performance

The authorizer holds schools accountable for academic performance using objective and verifiable measures, established in the charter contract or performance framework, that address, at a minimum, student achievement, student growth, and post-secondary success as the primary measures of school quality.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Although MDCPS' core values state that it "pursues the highest standards in academic achievement and organizational performance," charter schools are currently held accountable to the minimum academic performance outlined in state law. MDCPS does not have an established academic performance framework against which to measure charter school progress. There is a real opportunity to create a dynamic performance framework, one that uses multiple measures to evaluate performance (e.g., comparative analysis, subgroup analysis, or mission-specific academic performance) and that is aligned with the district's strategic plan to continually increase the academic performance of its charter school portfolio.

Current academic accountability measures are largely compliance-oriented. Some of this is driven by state statute – like the requirement that charter schools adhere to certain reading curricula and deliver the state standardized assessments. Others, like the requirement that schools complete a school improvement plan, are district-imposed compliance mandates. Aside from the state's A-F grade, MDCPS does not require nor analyze and hold schools accountable for their academic performance.

MDCPS' charter school contract does not include consistent academic performance expectations. Schools are not held to or encouraged to perform beyond the minimum threshold outlined in state law.

APPLIED

In practice, MDCPS conducts an annual review of charter school performance that includes a value-added comparison of student performance in charter schools versus the district's traditional schools. This is a valuable measure, but the data are not used in decision-making and only provide one perspective beyond the state letter grade. A performance framework should be comprehensive in nature, providing multiple measures to indicate performance both over time and considering multiple school characteristics.

The closest current application of a performance framework is the renewal rubric. In this rubric, schools are measured by whether they have met federal AYP and whether they are performing at or above schools with a similar student demographic. However, there is no guidance as to whether meeting these standards is essential for renewal. MDCPS has closed more than one school for low academic performance or for failure to adhere to the school's academic mission, despite not having a true performance framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a dynamic academic performance framework that encourages charter schools to continually improve performance over time – taking into account baseline student performance, but not accepting sustained mediocrity.

Incorporate the existing value-added comparison of student performance that into the academic performance framework.

3.2 Financial Performance

The authorizer holds schools accountable for financial performance using appropriate near-term and sustainability measures, established in the charter contract or performance framework, as the primary indicators of a school's financial viability.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS audit staff monitors financial performance extensively, though a detailed financial performance framework has not yet been implemented. Financial compliance indicators are extensive and are included in the CCR. District policy and the charter contract also include a comprehensive list of financial compliance requirements. These include quarterly financial reports and an annual independent audit. The MDCPS contract also includes a "right to audit" whereby district staff can audit the school separately from the annual reporting requirements.

Charter schools are required to provide a sensitivity analysis and financial plans based on 50, 75, and 100 percent of projected enrollment. They must also provide monthly cash flow projections for the first year of operation and contingency plans for the loss of state funds.

State statute defines "state of financial emergency," and schools are held to that standard. Financial emergency can be declared for failure to service debt, pay uncontested claims from creditors, pay income taxes, make benefit contributions, etc. The audit staff is in the process of developing a financial performance framework that will allow more detailed financial oversight, though this framework has not yet been incorporated into the charter contract. The draft framework highlights some of NACSA's recommended financial performance ratios including projected versus actual enrollment, unrestricted days cash, total margin, and debt-to-asset ratios. The implementation of this financial performance framework will provide a more thorough and dynamic assessment of financial health that will allow the district to identify underlying financial issues and take the appropriate actions to remedy these issues before they rise to the level of financial emergency.

APPLIED

Despite not having a financial performance framework, MDCPS employs a number of accountants and auditors who focus exclusively on monitoring the financial performance of charter schools. In the absence of a performance framework, the auditors do an admirable job of monitoring financial health, relying predominately on the schools' annual independent audits. This is a limitation, as the audit results are not typically finalized until after the next school year has begun, making it a backward-looking performance analysis.

Although often challenging due to the various corporate structures and relationships that exist between charter schools and management entities, audit staff do monitor these financial relationships when applicable. Given the number of education management organizations active in Florida, this is an essential function of MDCPS' monitoring of its charter schools' financial performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Finalize and implement the financial performance framework.

Develop an intervention policy to accompany the financial performance framework that describes actions that must be taken when schools do not achieve the established financial benchmarks.

3.3 Organizational Performance

The authorizer holds schools accountable for compliance with organizational performance requirements established in the charter contract or the performance framework, including educational program requirements; governance and reporting; financial management and oversight; and operational requirements related to students, employees, and the school environment.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Despite not having a formal organizational performance framework, MDCPS conducts strong oversight in this area. The CCR includes an audit of procedures for personnel, food services, governance, facilities and environment, and insurance.

As it stands, there is no indication as to what the consequences are for noncompliance. While Charter Tools clearly outlines compliance requirements, these are not tied directly to the charter contract or policy and are lacking in one critical area: establishing the material elements of the educational program for which schools will be held accountable.

As previously noted, the CCR includes a very large number of indicators with which all charter schools, regardless of status with the district, must comply. This means that high-performing charter schools and those in danger of revocation all must submit and be held to the same, very detailed list of compliance requirements. MDCPS should consider implementing a differentiated oversight process for high-performing schools whereby these indicators are distilled to only the most critical items.

APPLIED

When pressed, school leaders could not come up with many areas in which they felt oversight was overreaching, which is a commendation for MDCPS. Compliance is tracked through the Charter Tools portal, which school leaders appreciate. The expectations are clear, and the district has made it as easy as possible to submit the documents and evidence necessary for compliance.

As with the other accountability measures, the results of this compliance review are taken into account during renewal and termination decisions but are not organized in a way that supports transparency of implications for noncompliance in the charter contract.

RECOMMENDATION

Use the CCR system to develop an organizational performance framework, incorporate it into the charter contract, and define what necessitates intervention.

3.4 Decision Alignment

Authorizer makes accountability decisions that are informed by and align with documented evidence and analysis of the extent to which the school satisfies performance expectations. The analysis presented to decision-makers is of high quality and the merits of the decisions themselves show decision-making is based on thoughtful analysis ensuring that only the charter schools that meet or exceed expectations are in operation. (Note: This section focuses on decisions by the authorizer other than the application, which is addressed in 1.7.)

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

● Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Although the performance expectations on which schools are currently judged need to be strengthened, MDCPS school board and CSS staff are very clearly aligned in their decision-making. MDCPS has established policies and contract terms that are used to guide decisions. These decisions are merit-based, as the authorizer's focus is on student achievement—pertaining to the state A-F grade—and overall school health and quality.

MDCPS staff thoroughly reviews renewal applications and monitoring data in order to make recommendations to the MDCPS board.

APPLIED

MDCPS staff recommendations and board decisions are consistent with the organization's policies and protocols. MDCPS board decisions mirror the recommendations presented by staff. Renewal decisions are made based on school performance and quality. Closure decisions are nearly always made on school quality and student safety bases.

Autonomy

Do schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled?

Established:

🟡 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

🟡 Partially Developed

Summary Assessment

In some important ways, MDCPS provides appropriate levels of autonomy to schools—high-performing charter schools have a streamlined application process for expansion and, to an extent, a simplified Curriculum and Compliance Review (CCR) process. However, the district could look for more ways to increase autonomy, which would also decrease resource demand. For example, MDCPS could simplify compliance reporting requirements and clarify the renewal application process and financial performance expectations, adding elements of both earned autonomy and greater transparency.

MDCPS does not define autonomy regarding the educational program and calls for unnecessary requirements in the charter contract. MDCPS incorporates the full application into the charter contract and does not define or limit “faithfulness to the charter” to clearly defined material terms.

Recommended Actions

- ✓ Provide opportunities for earned autonomy when setting reporting requirements, like the School Improvement Plan and monitoring school performance.
- ✓ Streamline the renewal application process and clearly communicate submission requirements. Differentiate the process for high-performing schools.
- ✓ Instead of incorporating the full charter application in the charter contract, insert appendices that address key components of the application (i.e. academic plan, student discipline policy, facility plan, etc.).
- ✓ Use financial performance expectations to define financial autonomy parameters beyond what is already defined in law and use these expectations to limit autonomy, when warranted.

4.1 Autonomy

The authorizer defines and respects the autonomies to which the schools are entitled based on statute, waiver, or authorizer policy. The authorizer does not reduce school autonomy unless there is a compelling reason to do so.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS's charter contract and board policy appropriately define the autonomies that charter schools are entitled to under Florida law. However, as part of its policy, every school must submit a School Improvement Plan (SIP), regardless of performance, even though Florida law only requires SIPs for Title I and low-performing schools. Additionally, the CCR process is not streamlined to grant greater autonomy to high-performing schools.

APPLIED

While the district does offer charter schools many services and access to training beyond those required by law, charter schools appropriately have the option to opt out of such services and trainings.

As noted in Section 2.5, school leaders state that the renewal application process could be better defined; they state that MDCPS often asks for documentation that is already available to the district, creating unnecessary and duplicative work for the school. Additionally, school leaders indicated, and CSS staff confirmed, that it is unclear what the schools must provide for renewal applications. As a result, some schools provide an immense amount of irrelevant documentation while others do not provide the information necessary to justify renewal. The renewal application process is the same for all schools, regardless of performance status. MDCPS has the opportunity to incentivize performance and increase autonomy for high-performing charter schools by differentiating the renewal process for its strongest schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide opportunities for earned autonomy when setting reporting requirements and monitoring school performance.

Streamline the renewal application process and clearly communicate submission requirements. Differentiate the process for high-performing schools.

4.2 Educational Program

The authorizer defines and respects school autonomy over the educational program.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS does not define autonomy regarding the educational program and calls for unnecessary requirements in the charter contract. MDCPS incorporates the full application into the charter contract and does not define or limit “faithfulness to the charter” to clearly defined material terms. In policy, “Significant changes to the curriculum” constitutes an amendment to the charter; however, “significant” is not defined. Additionally, the district requires that every charter school submit an SIP, which is also incorporated into the charter contract. This is an unnecessary requirement, especially for high-performing charter schools, and the SIP is focused too heavily on inputs.

APPLIED

As discussed in Section 2.3, site visits are focused on inputs rather than outcomes, and this may potentially limit a school's autonomy over its educational program, as district personnel may be more apt to recommend process changes to an educational program, rather than communicate outcome expectations. The absence of a site visit protocol creates inconsistency of visit processes and goals. School leaders state that visits are dependent upon the personnel conducting them and there is a general lack of clarity as to what is expected of the school. District staff, in discussing site visit processes, noted that site visits are very often focused on processes and implementation of the SIP, rather than performance outcomes.

The SIP unnecessarily contributes to the authorizer’s general focus on compliance and inputs, rather than performance expectations and outcomes. However, during the school leader interview, school leaders indicated that they do not mind developing the SIP, even though they believe it to be an arduous, time-consuming process. Removing the SIP as a requirement may warrant a significant culture shift for the CSS office as it works to become more focused on outcomes rather than compliance, as will development and implementation of a comprehensive performance framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instead of incorporating the full charter application in the charter contract, insert appendices that address key components of the application (i.e. academic plan, student discipline policy, facility plan, etc.).

Limit development and inclusion of a School Improvement Plan only when necessary (i.e. when school performance warrants it).

4.3 Financial Management

The authorizer defines and respects school autonomy over financial operations.

Established:

● Well-Developed

Applied:

⊕ Approaching Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Other than dictating the format of monthly financial statements, MDCPS does not establish unwarranted requirements of school spending or management. Additionally, schools that earn high-quality status only need to submit financials quarterly, providing an opportunity for earned autonomy.

In recent years, state law has relaxed the definition of public schools in “financial emergency” or in a “deteriorating financial position,” potentially limiting the authorizer’s ability to intervene with schools in poor or declining financial health.

APPLIED

Without clearly defined financial performance expectations established in board policy, district intervention and monitoring is limited to what is established in Florida statutes.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop financial performance expectations to define financial autonomy parameters beyond what is already defined in law and use these expectations to limit autonomy, when warranted.

4.4 Differentiated Oversight

The authorizer periodically reviews compliance requirements and evaluates the potential to differentiate school oversight based on flexibility in the law, demonstrated school performance, and other considerations.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

While MDCPS visits every charter school annually, it differentiates site visits based on the school's current compliance status. Additionally, once a school achieves "high-performing" status, the district is able to differentiate oversight and monitoring, like requiring quarterly rather than monthly financial statements. However, high-performing charter schools are still subject to the same renewal application process.

APPLIED

MDCPS's compliance system, Charter Tools, provides an opportunity to differentiate compliance monitoring of schools by type or performance status; however, other than virtual school requirements, MDCPS does not differentiate oversight. As noted earlier, all schools must submit an SIP, and oversight is based, at least partly, on adherence to the SIP regardless of performance.

RECOMMENDATION

Limit development and inclusion of a School Improvement Plan only when necessary (i.e. when school performance warrants it).

Organizational Capacity

To what extent do the organizational structure and systems support quality authorizing practices and forward the authorizer's mission?

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Summary Assessment

While the current strategic plan does not include charter school authorization, leadership envision the next strategic plan to incorporate charter school authorization as a key lever for improving school performance in some of the district's most challenged communities. Additionally, the CSS office has its own mission and operational goals that establish how it will operate. Unfortunately, these goals are not pursued to their full potential and operations do not always align with the stated goals. CSS and MDCPS have an opportunity to refocus their practices around these operational goals and the goals of the DCCC grant.

With an authorizer fee ranging from two to five percent, MDCPS has the resources necessary to be a high-quality authorizer, but the district needs to reconsider how these resources are allocated. An organizational challenge facing the CSS office is its ability to staff its team, and due to this limitation, some key skills are lacking across the team that would potentially support a shift in team culture toward outcomes-focused, strategic authorizing.

Recommended Actions

- ✓ Refocus the CSS team on charter school outcomes, rather than inputs, as aligned with established strategic goals; adjust plan as necessary to ensure successful implementation of DCCC grant goals.
- ✓ Diversify staff talents and skills by seeking individuals with academic analytical expertise and strategic/entrepreneurial expertise.

5.1 Strategic Planning

The authorizer articulates and implements a clear strategic vision and plans for authorizing, including clear priorities, goals, and time frames for achievement.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

While the district strategic plan does not explicitly reference charter schools, the CSS office does have an established mission and vision that supports quality authorizing and demonstrates a commitment to high-quality charter school performance. This vision and mission includes four established operational goals related to quality application decision-making, oversight of charter schools, adherence to state requirements, and a commitment to quality authorizing standards. While this statement of priorities and goals demonstrates a commitment to quality, CSS does not have any mechanisms for reviewing achievement of its goals or time frames for achievement.

MDCPS is in the process of revising its current district-wide strategic plan, and leadership indicate that charter schools and choice strategies will be more central in this version. Specifically, the district plans to include in its next strategic plan the aforementioned “zones” strategy, as part of the DCCC grant, to attract and retain high-performing, proven operators to work in some of the district’s highest-need areas.

APPLIED

There is no evidence that MDCPS regularly tracks performance against CSS operational goals. Additionally, while the goals are aligned with best practices and performance outcomes for charter schools, CSS operations are much more compliance-driven. MDCPS has the opportunity to use these goals to align CSS operations with a new focus on outcomes rather than inputs.

RECOMMENDATION

Refocus the CSS office on charter school outcomes, rather than inputs, as aligned with established CSS goals; adjust the strategic plan as necessary to ensure successful implementation of DCCC grant goals.

5.2 Organizational Structure

The authorizer purposefully and economically staffs its office to effectively carry out its authorizing duties. Staff positions are clearly defined both in policy and in practice.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS currently employs 10 full-time equivalent staff in CSS that oversee almost 130 charter schools in the district. A ratio of 1:13 is not uncommon for authorizing offices; however, the organizational structure and duties could be realigned to match stated goals of the office. Staff are dedicated to application management, finance, facilities, and operational compliance monitoring in addition to administrative support. Leadership notes a lack of capacity in academic performance data analysis.

Job descriptions provided differ slightly from the organizational chart and include positions such as school leadership, teaching and curriculum, and instruction support are less appropriate for an authorizing office.

APPLIED

As previously noted, the CSS office is not overtly focused on progressing toward its strategic goals, and this may be due to staffing limitations or assigned duties. The CSS team skills emphasize school and instructional leadership but lack an orientation toward data and outcomes, which contributes to its compliance-heavy focus. Additionally, the team could benefit from more strategic or entrepreneurial-focused talent to address the complex issues facing authorizing.

MDCPS uses a compliance monitoring system, Charter Tools, which effectively decreases the administrative burden of organizational oversight.

RECOMMENDATION

Diversify staff talents and skills by seeking individuals with academic analytical expertise and strategic/entrepreneurial expertise.

5.3 Human Capital Processes and Systems

The authorizer has systems necessary for building and maintaining a strong workforce and implements them with fidelity.

Established:

 Partially Developed

Applied:

 Partially Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

Generally speaking, staff are assigned to work in CSS, and the assistant superintendent is not afforded hiring rights, making staffing for specific skills very challenging. However, the CSS office is cohesive and the culture appears to be dedicated to CSS responsibilities, especially related to school oversight and compliance.

Professional development to build comprehensive knowledge and buy-in of Florida's *Principles & Standards* is still emerging for the CSS team, even though team leadership and directors have begun working to build its knowledge of quality authorizing. The team does show much promise given the attention to building capacity in this area.

APPLIED

Staff are committed to the work, even if the work is not always completely aligned with the team's stated operational goals. Leadership support staff members as evidenced by strong staff retention.

RECOMMENDATION

Either provide CSS leadership the right to hire or develop or seek creative opportunities, like a "fellowship" program that can provide data-driven, entrepreneurial talent.

5.4 Conflict of Interest

The authorizer operates free from conflicts of interest.

Established:

 **Approaching Well-Developed**

Applied:

 **Approaching Well-Developed**

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS does not require charter schools to contract with the district for fee-based services, but does make such services available if schools wish to take advantage of district expertise. Schools identified as “focus” or “priority” schools may request additional district support and coaching. All 15 of the lowest-performing charter schools choose to take advantage of these district-support services.

Some charter schools are “district-managed” but any service agreement is appropriately structured separate from the charter contract and managed out of a different office within the district so as to avoid any conflicts of interest. District-managed charter schools have their own school board and apply for charter school renewals in the same way as other charter schools.

The Board does not have a charter school-specific conflict of interest policy, but does have a broad conflict of interest policy in its bylaws that it applies to charter school decision-making.

APPLIED

Under the state law, board member activities with ESPs are not considered conflicts of interest because ESPs are not direct vendors of the school district, and as a result, individuals employed by ESPs may make financial contributions to board members. Many MDCSP charter schools contract with ESPs.

5.5 Organizational Budget

The authorizer's budget allows for organizational effectiveness and stability. The budget is aligned with the strategic goals and supports quality authorizing practice.

Established:

 Approaching Well-Developed

Applied:

 Well-Developed

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS's current budget is based on a school-based administrative fee to support staffing, implementation of strategic plan goals, and planning for the future. Generally, as allowed by law, MDCPS collects a three percent authorizing fee, but two-thirds of this revenue is absorbed by other district divisions, while the remaining third is allocated to the CSS budget. While the allocation outside CSS is higher than typical, the CSS office does utilize other district staff for supplemental monitoring and oversight, such as financial audit analysis and application reviews. The authorizing budget does not illustrate authorizing fee usage outside of the CSS office.

As mentioned earlier, CSS's operations, which are input-driven, do not reflect implementation of its organizational goals, which are much more outcomes-focused. Similarly, the emphasis on compliance monitoring is apparent in its budget allocations, and so when realigning its team operations toward outcomes, it will be critical to realign budget allocations as well. For instance, the budget should ensure comprehensive analysis of academic performance beyond the state's accountability system, which may require additional resources in this area.

APPLIED

Funding is structured similar to most authorizers in that the district collects an authorizing fee based on the size of the school. No evidence suggests that this funding structure creates conflicts of interest, inducements, incentives, or disincentives that would compromise the district's oversight or decision making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritize budget allocation to academic, financial, and organizational oversight of performance rather than solely compliance.

To promote transparency, provide the public with a budget that illustrates how the authorizer fee is allocated between the CSS office and other divisions that support authorizing work (e.g., finance division that supports audit work).

5.6 Leadership and Decision-Making Body

The authorizer leadership and decision-making body understand their roles and responsibilities; are invested in the mission, vision, and strategic plan of authorizing; and have the expertise necessary to make well-informed decisions that support the tenets of a high-quality authorizer.

Established:

 **Approaching Well-Developed**

Applied:

 **Approaching Well-Developed**

Analysis

ESTABLISHED

MDCPS demonstrates a commitment to quality charter school authorizing and strive for continuous improvement. At all levels in the organization, leadership believe in the potential that high-quality choices provide for the community. Leadership are interested in taking advantage of opportunities to bring high-quality choices to the district, especially for its most challenged communities, and express a willingness and desire to be reflective of its authorizing practices.

APPLIED

While leadership are committed to quality charter school authorizing, CSS-specific goals and objectives are not monitored by leadership regularly to ensure continuous reflection of practice. That said, the district's commitment to the DCCC grant and its involvement in development of the state's *Principles & Standards for Quality Authorizing* demonstrate an interest in authorizer quality at both the district and state levels. Again, the next step will be in implementing these established standards within the CSS office.

Sources

Background and Organizational Capacity

Organizational Mission, Vision, and Strategic Goals
Florida Charter School Law
District Strategic Plan
Budget Information
Organizational Chart
Staff Job Descriptions
Board Member Biographies

Application Decision-Making

Model Charter School Applications
New School Applicant Orientation Materials
Application Evaluation Instruments
Application Evaluations
Board Policy (Applications)
Final Recommendation Reports

Monitoring Operations

Form Charter School Contract and Checklists
School Opening Checklist
Curriculum and Compliance Review Forms
Financial Reports
Corrective Action Plans
Academic Coaching Materials
Compliance Documents
State Reporting Documents
Charter School Renewal Application and Forms
School Closure Documents

Performance-Based Accountability

Annual Review of Charter Schools
Record of Evaluations over Past Three Years
Renewal Applications and Evaluations
School Accountability Report Sample

School Histories

Charter Applications
Charter School Contracts
Renewal Applications and Reports
Compliance Reviews
Financial Audits
Corrective Action Plans

School Performance Data

School Academic Performance Data

Biographies

Katie Piehl is a director of Authorizer Development at NACSA. Katie, formerly the director of authorizing with Volunteers of America-Minnesota and a legislative program evaluation analyst focusing on education reform issues, brings her knowledge of improving charter school and authorizer accountability through state policy reform to the organization. In her role at NACSA, Katie leads implementation of model practices for authorizers and develops comprehensive authorizer partnerships that focus on improved practice. Katie is a former teacher and holds an M.P.P. from the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Jacob Landry is a consultant for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. He has worked in public education for nine years as a classroom teacher in Hawaii, in teacher recruitment for a national nonprofit in the Pacific Northwest, and as a charter school authorizer. Jacob led the charter school office at the Louisiana Department of Education where he oversaw 70+ schools, and he served as chief strategy officer for Jefferson Parish Public Schools, Louisiana's largest school district. In that role he oversaw charter school authorizing, communications, data systems, and testing. Jacob holds bachelor degrees from Louisiana State University, a master's in education from the University of Hawaii, and an MBA from Tulane University.