Rethinking Charter School Accountability Frameworks

Charter authorizers provide an important function in ensuring that public charter schools are serving students well. Although some performance indicators may be state-required, authorizers have flexibility to develop measures beyond those used for federal accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹ Through authorizer accountability systems, often referred to as performance frameworks, authorizers have the opportunity to not only hold public charter schools to high academic standards but also use different measures in different ways to evaluate how well charter schools are serving students.

Although authorizers started discussing revising accountability systems before the pandemic through work such as A-GAME, an initiative to create goals not captured by traditional measures,² and SUNY Charter Schools Institute’s Active Ingredients,³ the pandemic provided the opportunity for authorizers to collect even more metrics and consider those metrics differently within frameworks.

For example, the pandemic changed the way authorizers could treat statewide assessment data. Given school closures, there was a lack of assessment data in the 2019-20 school year⁴ and incomplete data in the 2020-21 school year, as not all students participated in testing.⁵ In addition to the problems of missing test data, state tests measure on-grade-level academic standards,⁶ which may be less helpful when students are far off grade level due to missing instruction. The pandemic made more salient the need to identify other measures of academic performance data to monitor student progress toward grade-level standards.

The pandemic also highlighted the importance of other conditions for student learning, such as mental health support and connecting families to agencies to help meet basic needs such as food and housing.⁷ By collecting additional nonacademic data and incorporating it into accountability systems, authorizers and schools can not only monitor how students are doing but also monitor the effectiveness of any programming the school is offering to help students and families in these areas.

Given the interest and need for using additional indicators of school quality, in this case study, we will explore the question: How might we better use meaningful student data for school-based accountability?
Methodology

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools to learn more about their efforts to retain teachers and conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff across the country.

Strategies to incorporate meaningful student data for school-based accountability

Through these efforts, we identified a variety of strategies to incorporate meaningful student data for school-based accountability:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanding the types of indicators</td>
<td>In states including Colorado, Delaware, Indiana, and Ohio:</td>
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<td>Measuring academic growth using nationally normed assessments (e.g., i-Ready or NWEA MAP)</td>
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<td>Conducting stakeholder surveys of students, family, and/or staff that measure safety, school climate, etc.</td>
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<td>Measuring student engagement indicators such as improvements in attendance or truancy rates and 5-year graduation rates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Noting operational efficiency and capacity including within-year stay rates, returning rates, and spending down of grant funds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using more targeted indicators to better measure unique missions</td>
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<td>Using differentiated school targets or goals</td>
<td>Creating goals based on levels of student engagement or readiness to learn (Delaware Department of Education)</td>
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<td>Creating equity goals specific to a school (Indiana’s Education One at Trine University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding supplementary performance frameworks</td>
<td>Redesigning performance frameworks to incorporate additional measures of school quality and student learning</td>
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Supplementary performance frameworks

This case study focuses on one of the strategies we saw among the authorizers we talked with — developing supplementary performance frameworks to more holistically measure school quality and student learning.

Public charter schools are diverse in their models and missions

Public charter schools are designed to maintain high academic standards. However, traditional performance frameworks do not always capture the full picture of how well the school is serving students.

In some cases, the picture is incomplete because of the unique model of the school. For example, a Colorado authorizer described a Montessori school where students are in classrooms that span multiple grades, such as grades 4-6. The students will cover the state’s content standards by the end of sixth grade but may not cover all of the fourth-grade content standards during fourth grade. For that school, the fourth-grade state assessment may not provide as complete a picture of student performance as the sixth-grade assessment.

In other cases, the picture is incomplete because the school’s mission is to serve students who enter well below grade level, or the school has other characteristics such that students are making progress but performing poorly on standard performance metrics. For instance, a Delaware authorizer described a small school serving higher-need students where 60-70% of the students have disabilities. Schools with a significant proportion of such students often face unique challenges and may focus on improving their nonacademic as well as their academic skills. The authorizer noted that while the school is recognized for its efforts in supporting its students, this progress is not adequately captured by traditional performance frameworks, which are based primarily on end-of-year test scores.

Similarly, an Indiana authorizer became interested in revising their performance framework when they noticed a discrepancy between the qualitative measures of instructional practices they were monitoring and student performance. The authorizer’s portfolio contains schools primarily serving high-need students. During the authorizer’s monthly or quarterly observations (frequency varied depending on the school), some schools were providing high-quality instruction and making academic gains but were still not meeting proficiency benchmarks. The authorizer wanted to adjust the performance system to acknowledge progress toward the proficiency benchmarks, while still maintaining high expectations.
Although authorizers were aware of these challenges with performance frameworks pre-pandemic, the pandemic offered an opportunity to make revisions. One authorizer described starting the work of adjusting the performance frameworks pre-pandemic and deciding to include even more metrics than initially identified. The expansion was due to the need to provide schools with a better sense of how students were progressing after the pandemic.

**Authorizers maintain a commitment to high academic achievement while providing schools additional routes to show progress toward that goal**

Authorizers are continuing to prioritize academic achievement data but are increasingly placing greater weight on other indicators of school quality, particularly indicators of academic progress, than they were pre-pandemic. The ways that authorizers consider these other factors vary.

Some authorizers are adopting a two-stage process where they consider the supplemental information only if the school does not meet the performance expectations of the statewide assessment.

A second approach is providing alternative pathways for schools to demonstrate success. For example, in Indiana, Education One schools have multiple paths to meeting the achievement standards. Schools can select the assessment, which could be the state assessment or a separate commercially available assessment (e.g., i-Ready or NWEA MAP). The schools can meet expectations by having either a certain percentage of students demonstrate grade level achievement at the end of the year or by increasing the percentage of students meeting achievement standards. For instance, a school may meet expectations if “70.0-79.9% of students demonstrate grade level achievement at the end of the year” or if the “percentage of students increased overall achievement by 10.0-15.0% from beginning of the year to end of the year.”

A third approach considers all of the indicators and looks for patterns across the academic and supplemental measures. These patterns can be important to help identify areas where the public charter school can use additional support. The patterns are also valuable to help triangulate information about the school. As one authorizer mentioned, it is problematic when a school is doing poorly on both the academic and the supplemental measures.

A final approach is putting more weight on the statewide assessment while considering the other indicators. In determining the weights, one expert noted that 15% is typically the highest percentage for other school quality measures.
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Authorizer considerations when designing the supplemental performance frameworks

Authorizers are balancing charter autonomy with the need for valid, reliable, and comparable data in identifying the specific measures within each indicator.

Most of the authorizers we spoke with provided schools with a recommended list of vetted options. For instance, schools are required to select among assessments that include national norms instead of developing their own interim assessments. By having lists of approved measures, charter authorizers are better able to control and monitor the reliability and validity of the measures and have more comparable results.

For stakeholder surveys, there were two alternative approaches. One is to have a specific question (or questions) that the school needed to ask, but the school can supplement with additional questions if desired. For example, one authorizer requires one specific item on school satisfaction. Another approach is to have schools administer surveys and make the data public but not to otherwise require schools to select a particular survey instrument. The rationale for this approach is to provide public charter schools with the autonomy to measure what they would find the most valuable, and because the public charter school leaders in that state believe that families will be more likely to participate in the survey if it’s led by the school. In this case, the authorizer provides optional support to the public charter schools in developing a survey, in which the authorizer reviews it and provides feedback. The authorizer uses other measures, such as the percentage of returning students, as indicators of school satisfaction.

In adopting supplemental performance measures, authorizers are also balancing having schools collect new data versus using what is already available. The authorizers note that many of the schools have staffing shortages and do not have the capacity to collect new measures. To avoid overburdening staff, authorizers have largely been trying to identify data points that schools are already collecting for new metrics. For example, one authorizer mentioned using already-collected enrollment data in the form of return and stay rates as an indicator of school satisfaction.

For some of the newer measures, when the schools are using a common instrument, schools can more easily send data files to the authorizer or enter into a data sharing agreement for the vendor to directly send the data to the authorizer, reducing the workload on school staff.
Conclusion

Public charter school authorizers have a unique ability to provide oversight and accountability beyond what is federally required under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

To help monitor how public charter schools are addressing the impacts of the pandemic, authorizers should consider broadening the types of indicators they require and the way those are used. By embracing the flexibility, they have in their accountability systems, authorizers can continue to adapt and improve, ultimately fostering an environment where charter schools can thrive in serving their students effectively and enabling a more holistic picture of school quality and student learning.

4 Catherine Gewertz, “It’s Official: All States Have Been Excused From Statewide Testing This Year,” Education Week, April 2, 2020, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/its-official-all-states-have-been-excused-from-statewide-testing-this-year/2020/04.