

Testimony of Greg Richmond
President & CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers
To the House Committee on Education and Labor
February 24, 2010

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, authorizers have a responsibility to maintain high standards and to hold schools accountable for achieving those standards. Organizations that would like to start a new charter school should be required to demonstrate a high capacity to succeed. Charter schools that are

already operating should be required to demonstrate a track record of academic achievement in order to stay open.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As you consider legislation like the All-STAR Act, be certain to include provisions that improve authorizing. While my organization supports the overall goals of the All-STAR Act, the provisions related to authorizing are inadequate and need to be improved.

All-STAR does not require grant applicants to have any plans to strengthen authorizing. In fact, the "Use of Funds" section of the bill *does not allow* grant recipients to use funds for any activities to improve authorizing.

All-STAR identifies preferences for grant applications in three areas that are related to quality authorizing: contracts, public reporting, and authorizer evaluation. Applicants with those three elements are more likely to receive funds. We are pleased by those elements but must recognize that they are optional, not required.

All-STAR literally does not require quality authorizing practices to be in place as a condition to receive federal funds and specifically does not permit funds to be used to strengthen authorizing. NACSA does not believe that quality authorizing should be optional.

Beyond the proposed All-STAR Act, as you vote to authorize funds for more charter schools, ensure that some of those funds go directly to support improved authorizing. And as you talk with officials at the Department of Education, let them know that you believe authorizing is an important component of a quality charter school sector.

While I have been pleased by Secretary Duncan's strong support for the growth of quality charter schools, the Department of Education needs to be equally supportive of quality authorizing. For example, within the *Race to the Top* competition, the criteria related to authorizing are relatively weak. And despite a \$40 million increase for charter schools in the 2010 budget, the Department is not planning to dedicate any new funds directly for authorizing.

Just as in years past, more money for new highways and no money for guardrails.

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

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

Biography for
Greg Richmond

Greg Richmond is the President and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), a membership organization that strengthens the professional practices of the agencies that oversee charter schools.

From 1994 to 2005, Richmond worked for the Chicago Public Schools, where he established the district's Charter Schools Office. Under his leadership, Chicago was the first urban school district in the nation to release an RFP, requesting educators and community organizations to start charter schools. He also established the nation's first district-funded capital loan fund for charter schools and developed model accountability and monitoring practices.

From 2003 to 2005, he launched Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative as the district's Chief Officer for New Schools Development, under Arne Duncan, then the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools. In that capacity he continued to work with the district's charter schools, as well as small schools, contract schools and new, autonomous district-operated schools.

Richmond serves on many boards and committees, including the Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind, Tulane University's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Advanced Certification for Educational Leaders Steering Committee and the Haitian Development Fund.