



Getting Down to
FACTS



Structuring Charter School Accountability: How State Policy Shapes Authorizer Practice in California

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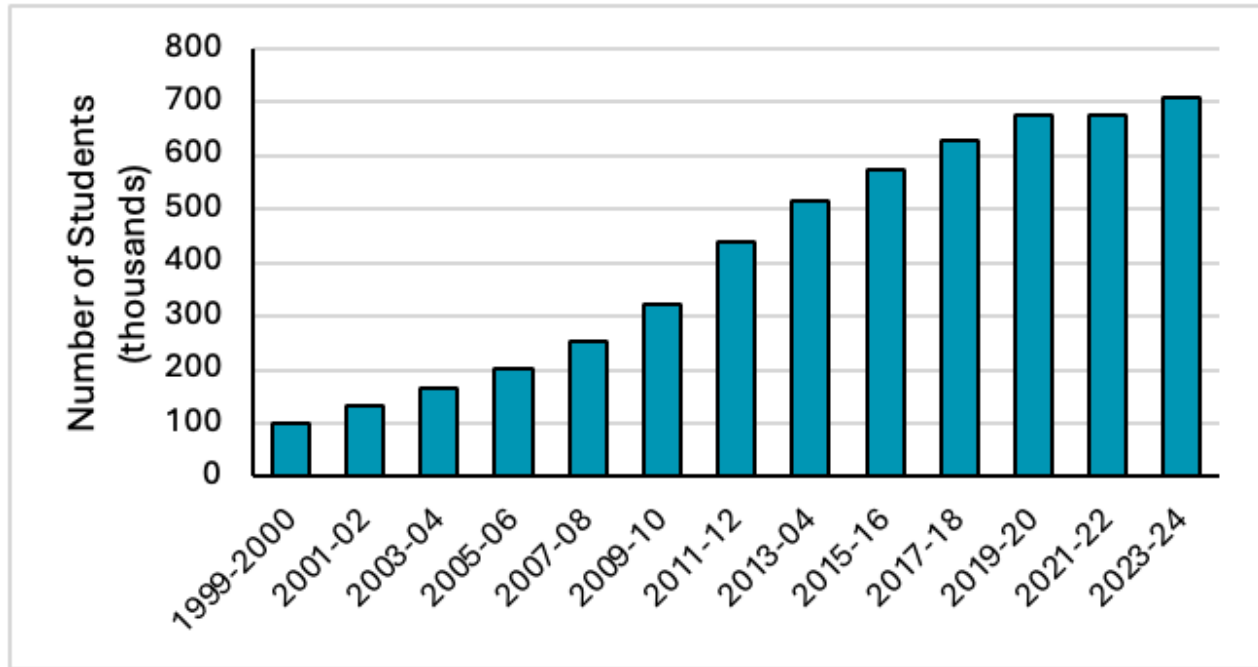
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Introduction: The Governance and Accountability of California Charter Schools

Among the various educational reforms of the past half-century, few have garnered as much attention as charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate with increased autonomy – often under private operators – which families can choose to send their children to instead of their assigned traditional public school (Tong et al., 2023). Established through state legislation, charter schools are often exempt from many regulations governing traditional public schools, leading to their greater operational and instructional autonomy. Since the first state charter law passed in 1991, 45 states and the District of Columbia have opened charter schools (Jacobs & Veney, 2024). Today, over 3.7 million students attend more than 8,100 charter schools across the United States (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, n.d.-a).

In 1992, California became the second state to pass a charter law. Since then, charter school enrollment has grown significantly, as shown in Figure 1. By the 2024-25 school year, there were approximately 727,000 students attending nearly 1,300 charter schools in California – more than in any other state. In California, charter school students make up about 12 percent of public school enrollment, compared to the national average of 7 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This large representation of charter school students in California can partially be explained by the diverse set of charter school models allowed by the state. In addition to newly created brick-and-mortar charter schools, California permits some traditional public schools to convert to charters and also allows for non-classroom-based (NCB) charter schools, which offer at least 20 percent of instructional time outside of an in-person classroom setting.

Figure 1: California Charter School Enrollment Trends



Source: <https://edsources.org/2025/california-charter-school-enrollment-fraud-scrutiny-rise/736350>

In exchange for autonomy, California charter schools – like those in other states – are held accountable for academic and financial outcomes. Although charter school performance remains the subject of national debate, research in California has found generally positive results. A study comparing charter school students to similar peers in traditional public schools found that California charter students performed comparably in math and outperformed their peers in reading – equivalent to approximately 11 additional days of learning (Raymond et al., 2023). At the same time, California charter schools’ use of public funds has faced recent scrutiny following two high-profile cases of fraud involving approximately \$580 million in misappropriated funds (California Charter Authorizing Professionals, 2025). Both cases involved NCB programming, including one school that exclusively provided NCB instruction (Fensterwald, 2024; Pendleton, 2025). As a result, questions about the adequacy of financial accountability for charter schools have emerged, with particular attention to NCB charter schools.

The entities that are responsible for holding charter schools accountable for their academic and financial outcomes are charter school authorizers. Authorizers are government-designated agencies that oversee charter schools' fixed term contracts. This role is carried out across three key responsibilities: (1) screening proposals for new charter schools, (2) monitoring school performance, and (3) renewing charter contracts or closing charter schools (Vergari, 2001). To the extent that authorizers oversee charter schools well, they can promote increased quality schooling options for families while minimizing poorly managed and low-performing charter schools.

This report examines the current state of charter school accountability and governance in California by focusing on the public entities charged with upholding it – charter school authorizers. Because charter schools are granted autonomy in exchange for accountability, authorizers' structure and effectiveness play a central role in determining the quality and integrity of the charter school sector. We examine how California's evolving charter laws and policies have shaped authorizers' responsibilities, authority, incentives, and capacity over time. Where possible, we address best practices within authorizers' responsibilities and discuss how policy enables or constrains authorizers' abilities to adopt them. In this report, we also pay particular attention to NCB charter schools and the role of authorizers in shaping their approval, oversight, and continued operation given the prominence of NCB charter schools in recent public debate and legislative reform efforts.

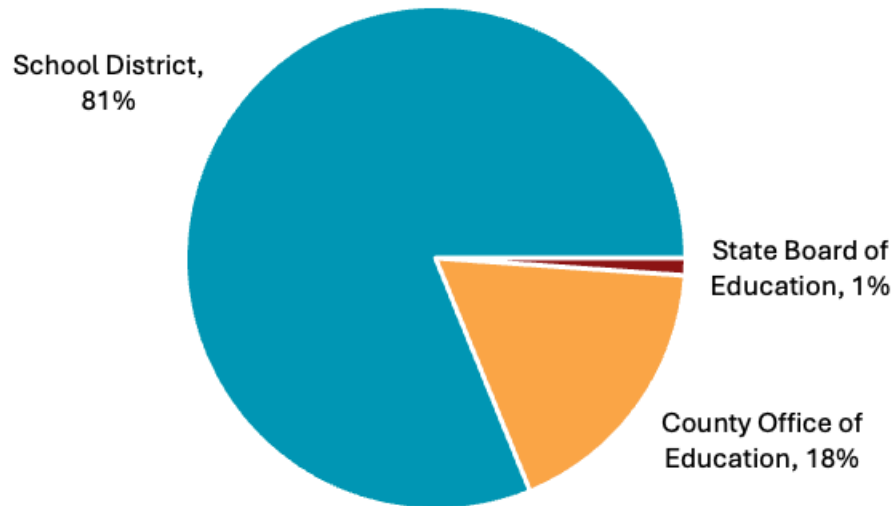
To conduct this analysis, we first provide context on the entities that currently serve as charter school authorizers in California. Next, we identify the set of California policies that have most directly affected the state of charter school authorizing since 1992. Considering this policy context, we then discuss how California authorizers carry out the roles of authorizing, overseeing, and renewing charter schools. In examining these roles, we draw on multiple sources of evidence that provide insight on authorizers' practices and current trends, including policy documents, administrative data from the California Department of Education, reports from stakeholder organizations, and findings from peer-reviewed academic research. By triangulating these sources, this report provides a comprehensive assessment of how legislative design has structured authorizing practices – and how those practices in turn have shaped the development and accountability of California's charter school sector.

Current Charter School Authorizer Landscape

Across the United States, various entities are granted the authority to authorize charter schools. Some states establish independent charter boards to authorize charter schools; others, like California, designate existing entities as charter school authorizers including local education agencies (e.g., school districts), state education agencies, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and non-educational government entities (National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2021).

In California, local school districts hold the primary authority to authorize new charter schools; though, new charter schools generally must operate within the geographic boundaries of the authorizing district. In addition to school districts, County Offices of Education (COEs) – regional public agencies that support school districts in their geographic boundaries – hold limited authority to authorize charter schools. COEs may authorize charter schools within their county, but only after a district has denied the proposal or when the school intends to serve students across multiple district boundaries (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.-b). The State Board of Education (SBE) has even more limited authority and may only approve charter schools that demonstrate a statewide benefit, such as schools operating across multiple counties (AB 1505, 2019).

Given the limitations placed on COEs and the SBE to authorize new charter schools, most California charter schools are authorized by their local school district. While school districts oversee 47% of all charter schools nationally (National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2023a), 81% of active charter schools in California have been authorized by their local school district (as shown in Figure 2). In contrast, COEs and the SBE have respectively authorized 17% and 1% of California charter schools. Consistent with this distribution, as of the 2024-25 school year, 287 of 936 school districts and 42 of 58 COEs authorized at least one active charter school. Although a larger share of COEs than districts participate in charter authorization, COEs oversee far fewer schools overall, reflecting statutory constraints on their authorizing authority.

Figure 2: Percentage of Charter Schools by Authorizer Type

Note: The figure displays the percentage of active charter schools authorized by type of authorizer as of the 2024-25 school year. Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

Despite the prominence of school district authorizers in California, researchers and charter advocates alike have deliberated on the ability of districts to effectively carry out the responsibilities of a charter school authorizer. Some have raised concerns that school districts lack adequate capacity to or may have a conflict of interest in overseeing charter schools which reduces their desire to serve as an authorizer (Palmer, 2007). However, others claim that school districts have the unique ability to consider charter schools a part of their larger portfolio, ensuring that all student needs are met through diversified options.

While there may be theoretical debates on the merit of different types of authorizers, research suggests that student achievement at charter schools overseen by different types of authorizers is generally similar (Carlson et al., 2012; Ferrare et al., 2023; Gleason et al., 2010; Harris & McKenzie, 2023; Jankens, 2021; Zimmer et al., 2014). The one exception is that schools with authorizers that are nonprofit organizations may have more uneven or lower student achievement (Carlson et al., 2012; Zimmer et al., 2014). In the California context, these findings suggest that the state's heavy reliance on school district authorizers is unlikely to have systematically shaped charter school performance.

History of California Charter School Legislation

The entities granted authority to authorize charter schools is dictated by state charter law. Like in other states, California’s charter sector operates within a statutory framework established by state legislation. The state’s original charter law, enacted through Senate Bill 1448 in 1992, amended the Education Code to allow for the creation of charter schools and formally designated local school districts as the state’s primary charter school authorizers (Cal. Educ. Code § 47600, 1992). The law indicated that communities and educators could petition their local school district to open a charter school or convert an existing traditional public school to a charter. School districts were – and continue to be – responsible for reviewing all petitions they receive, making approval determinations, and issuing renewal or revocation decisions at the conclusion of each charter term. While the law assigned these responsibilities to districts, it did not establish a funding stream to support implementation or clearly define requirements for ongoing supervision of charter schools (Cal. Educ. Code § 47600, 1992). This combination of assigned authority and limited statutory specificity set the stage for subsequent legislative amendments to clarify authorizers’ roles, expand accountability provisions, and refine the governance of the charter sector.

Since 1992, California’s charter law has been revised through voter-approved propositions and multiple legislative mechanisms, including Senate bills (SBs), Assembly bills (ABs), and budget and trailer bill legislation. These statutory changes have reshaped numerous aspects of the charter sector, including school approval processes, funding structures, renewal standards, and accountability requirements. In doing so, they have also significantly altered the authority, responsibilities, incentives, and capacity of charter school authorizers. Table 1 summarizes major policy developments affecting California’s charter sector over time, with particular attention to provisions that have influenced the role and operation of authorizers.

Table 1: Key Charter School Laws and Policies Over Time

Year	Law / Policy	Key Provisions and Impacts
1992	SB 1148	Established charter schools in California; capped at 100 schools; authorization limited to local school districts. ¹
1998	AB 544	Beginning in 1998-99 school year, charter school cap was raised to 250 charter schools, with annual increases of 100 thereafter; allowed appeals of denied petitions to COE or SBE; authorized SBE to grant and revoke charters under specified conditions. ²
2000	Proposition 39	Required districts to provide “reasonably equivalent” facilities to classroom-based charter schools; allowed districts to charge charter schools a facilities fee. ³
2000	SB 326	Clarified authorization process by allowing charter schools to appeal revoked charters to COE or SBE.
2012	AB 1290	Required charter schools seeking renewal to meet minimum academic performance standards for student subgroups. ⁴
2016	SB 828	Codified minimum supervisory oversight duties for charter authorizers, including annual site visits, fiscal monitoring, verification of required reporting, and notification of charter status changes. ⁵
2018	AB 406	Explicitly prohibited for-profit organizations from operating charter schools. ⁶
2019	AB 1507	Prohibited charter schools from locating outside the chartering district’s jurisdiction, with a temporary exception for existing charter schools until renewal.
2019	AB 1505	Allowed authorizers to consider fiscal and community impacts of new charters; eliminated the SBE’s authority to review and authorize appeals from district or COE denials; limited appeals to cases of abuse of discretion; created a two-year moratorium on NCB charter schools. ⁷
2019	AB 1505 (Renewals)	Established renewal guidelines using the state accountability system; allowed charter terms of up to 7 years for high-performing schools and 5 years for middle-performing schools; prohibited renewal of low-performing schools; barred denial of renewal based on generalized community interest concerns. ⁸
2023	SB 114	Extended the NCB charter moratorium, which expired on January 1, 2026; provided automatic one-year charter term extensions for certain schools; clarified the standard of review for SBE appeals.

Notes: This table relies on information from the following sources:

1 <https://lao.ca.gov/handouts/education/2016/overview-of-charter-schools-california-080316.pdf>.

2 https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Final_Report_Charter_Schools.pdf

3 https://lao.ca.gov/2004/charter_schools/012004_charter_schools.htm

4 <https://lao.ca.gov/handouts/education/2016/overview-of-charter-schools-california-080316.pdf>.

5 <https://law.onecle.com/california/education/47604.32.html>

6 [https://publications.csba.org/california-school-news/november-2018/california-bans-for-profit-charter-schools-after-passage-of-ab-406/#:~:text=Assembly%20Bill%20406%20\(AB%20406\)%20was%20signed,to%20avoid%20the%20requirements%20of%20the%20bill.](https://publications.csba.org/california-school-news/november-2018/california-bans-for-profit-charter-schools-after-passage-of-ab-406/#:~:text=Assembly%20Bill%20406%20(AB%20406)%20was%20signed,to%20avoid%20the%20requirements%20of%20the%20bill.)

7 <https://sclscal.org/legal-update-memo-no-27-2019-changes-to-law-governing-charter-school-authorization-oversight-appeals-and-renewals-k-12>

8 Later, Ed Code § 47607.2 clarified performance standards: <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/education-code/edc-sect-47607-2>

As highlighted by Table 1, three pieces of legislation have amended the array of entities that can authorize charter schools in California. When the charter sector was first established in 1992, school districts were designated as the primary charter school authorizer (Cal. Educ. Code § 47600, 1992). Only if a proposal was denied by a school district could a petitioner appeal to the COE. However, the role of COEs expanded in 1998 when SB 544 dictated that charter school proposals could be directly submitted to COEs or the SBE (Legislative Analyst Office, 2006). This bill also established the SBE as an appellate option if a petition was denied by a COE. However, the extension of the appeals process to the state level was later reversed in 2019 by AB 1505, returning to the charter law’s original intention of local authority.

Beyond the policies listed in Table 1 which have shaped authorizer authority over the past three decades, the responsibilities of California charter school authorizers continue to be debated in legislative forums. Following the recent cases of financial fraud by individual charter schools, lawmakers pushed two competing bills in 2025 to strengthen financial accountability. AB 84, which was supported by teacher labor unions among other groups, pushed for expanded auditing procedures and stricter funding determinations, especially for NCB charters (Charter Schools Development Center, 2025). In comparison, SB 414 was supported by charter advocates and prioritized building the capacity of authorizers to carry out financial audits and increasing state oversight of the auditing process (Charter Schools Development Center, 2025). Ultimately, neither bill passed in 2025 – AB 84 was tabled for the next legislative session, and while SB 414 was approved by the state legislature, it was vetoed by Governor Newsom under the belief that features of the bill were unworkable, would face legal challenges, and require significant resources to implement (Newsom, 2025). However, in January 2026, Newsom proposed changes to the financial oversight requirements of all public schools in a trailer bill (Department of Finance, 2026). This drafted legislation has the potential to increase guidelines and oversight for financial audits across all California schools – including charters.

Despite these ongoing adaptations to legislation that refine or alter the responsibilities of charter school authorizers, the practice and standards of charter school authorizing remain minimally codified in California compared to other states. The California Charter Authorizing Professionals (CCAP) – a professional association that provides support to charter school authorizers – has recently sought to

clarify the tasks required by authorizers' responsibilities. Through interviews and active collaboration with authorizers in California and nationally, CCAP (2025) identified that authorizers' legal responsibilities of authorization, oversight, and renewal translate into more than 100 distinct tasks spanning the life cycle of a charter school. However, many of these tasks are not codified by the state's Education Code; instead, charter school authorizers are afforded a high level of discretion in how they carry out their legal responsibilities.

The Responsibilities of California Charter School Authorizers

In California's context of substantial authorizer discretion, the following sections examine authorizers' responsibilities, assessing the extent to which they are defined in statute and how variation in their implementation shapes the structure and accountability of California's charter sector. Given limited systematic research on charter school authorizers, we draw on CCAP's framework of authorizing tasks to describe the responsibilities of authorization, oversight, and renewal beyond their limited statutory definitions. In doing so, we recognize that not all authorizers carry out every task enumerated by CCAP, nor are all tasks necessary in every context. We also acknowledge that many of these practices are grounded in professional knowledge rather than a strong empirical base. Accordingly, we focus on the broader categories of activities described by CCAP rather than discrete tasks, and reference empirical evidence where it exists on the implications of specific tasks.

The Approval of New Charter Schools

The first responsibility of an authorizer is the approval of new charter schools. While this process can be simply described as receiving, reviewing, and making approval determinations for plans to open a new charter school, CCAP (2025) identified 43 tasks that should be carried out before a school opens. These tasks constitute eight categories of work: (1) policy development, (2) initial authorizer board training, (3) staffing, (4) new charter petition review, (5) technical support for applicants, (6) contracting, (7), "year zero" monitoring, and (8) charter integration into district. These tasks highlight that the work of the charter school authorizer begins before proposals for new schools are received and extends well past approval decisions.

While the authorizing process is complex across all states, California’s process does have unique features that both enable and constrain the actions of authorizers. In California, a group of individuals who are interested in opening a charter school can submit a petition to an authorizer with the 13 elements required by state law, including proof of community support via signatures and a comprehensive school plan (Legislative Analyst Office, 2017). While the collection of written proposals is standard across the United States, the use of the term “petition” is unique to California – most other states consider the documents submitted to be “applications.” The CCAP (2025) points out that the term petition “implies a political act by a group of citizens, connoting an exercise of the right to compel a governmental entity to consider, and hopefully, address a topic or concern” (p.27). This logic aligns with California’s requirement for charter authorizers to approve all petitions that meet legal requirements, regardless of the authorizer’s capacity to oversee the school.

An authorizer in California can only reject a petition for one or more of the following reasons:

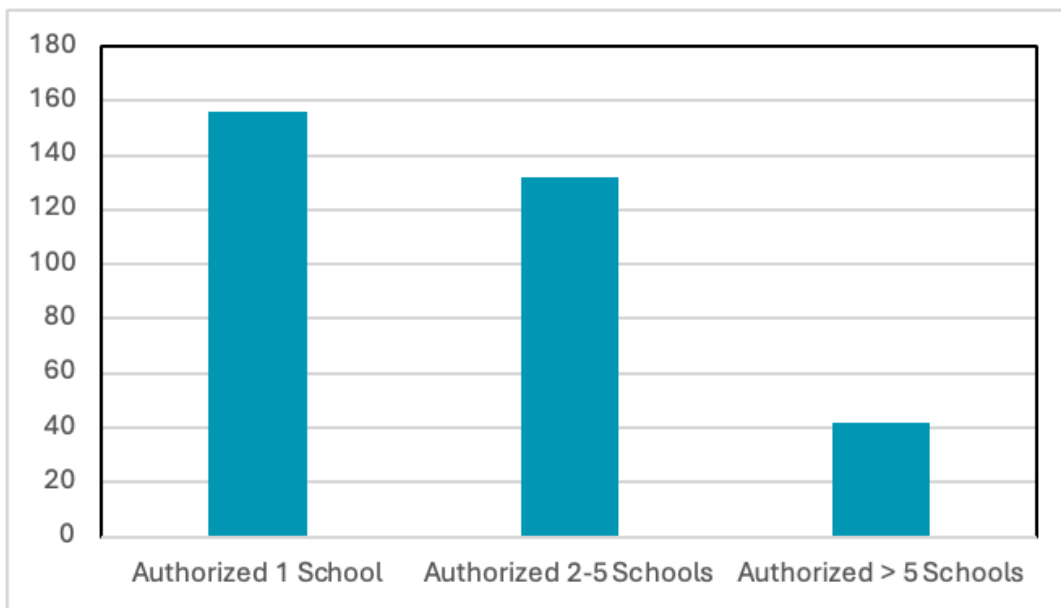
- (1) unsound educational program,
- (2) the applicant is unlikely to successfully implement their program,
- (3) insufficient signatures,
- (4) the applicant does not adequately address the three basic requirements for all charter schools, which are the provision of nonsectarian instruction, no tuition is charged, and admitting all interested students up to the school’s capacity
- (5) the application does not include a reasonably comprehensive vision for the school.

While some of these criteria allow an authorizer to utilize discretion in their approval decisions, state law largely obligates authorizers to approve all reasonable petitions. Research suggests that there are key trade-offs made when authorizer discretion is limited like in the case of California. In other states, authorizers’ discretionary decisions about application quality have been found to predict student performance at the schools that open (Bross & Harris, 2016; Kho et al., 2024; Nicotera & Stuit, 2017). However, authorizers’ discretionary decisions have also been found to limit innovation in the charter sector (Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Mote, 2022; Renzulli et al., 2015), as some authorizers prefer school models with track records of success. Notably, trade-offs between authorizer discretion and racial equity have also been evidenced by the disproportionate denial of applications from racially

marginalized founders (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lu & Williams, 2023). These findings suggest that California’s limits on authorizer discretion may protect innovation and equity at the cost of allowing some potentially lower-performing schools to open, though California charter schools do, on average, produce positive results for students’ academic achievement (Raymond et al., 2023).

Despite the statutory obligation for authorizers to approve reasonable petitions, most California authorizers oversee a small portfolio of charter schools. Figure 3 displays the number of authorizers with one, two to five, and greater than five active charter schools. As of the 2024-25 school year, there were nearly 160 authorizers of 330 in the state that oversaw one charter school. This likely occurs, at least in part, because of authorizers’ constraint to only approve schools within their geographical jurisdiction in most cases. For authorizers with only one charter school, it is important to note that it may be difficult for their office to devote a full-time staff member to the oversight of charter schools, as there would not be enough resources or work to justify a full-time staff member (Palmer, 2007). Therefore, these districts or COEs likely add the responsibilities of charter school authorizing and oversight to staff members who have other roles within the organization, which may make it difficult to fully carry out the many responsibilities of a charter school authorizer.

Figure 3: Number of Authorizers by Number of Charter Schools Authorized

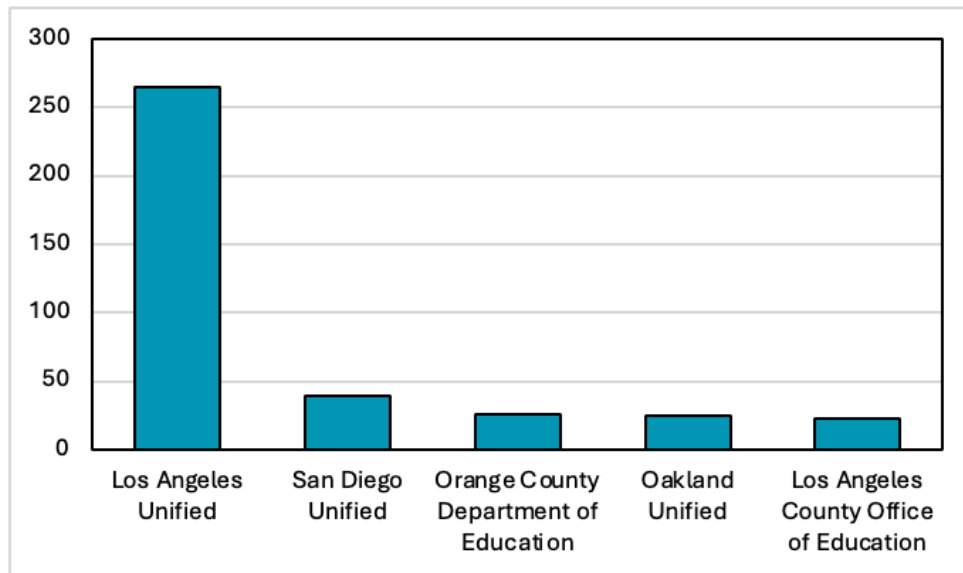


Note: The figure displays the number of active charter schools authorized by authorizers as of the 2024-25 school year.

Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

Despite the prevalence of what would be considered small charter authorizers in California, the state also has some districts with a high concentration of charter schools. In Figure 4, we highlight the authorizers with the greatest number of active charter schools. As the figure suggests, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has the largest number of schools authorized with over 260 charters, representing about 20 percent of all active charter schools in the state. For context, LAUSD accounts for only about 8 percent of the state’s public schools, highlighting the large size of their charter sector relative to their public school population. In comparison, no other authorizer represents more than 4 percent of all charter schools. Though, it is notable that within the Greater Los Angeles Area, LA COE also has authorized over 20 charter schools that were active as of the 2024-25 school year, contributing to a rich landscape of charter school choice within the county alongside the schools authorized by LAUSD.

Figure 4: Number of Active Charter Schools Authorized: Top Five Authorizers



Note: The figure displays the number of active charter schools authorized by authorizers as of the 2024-25 school year.

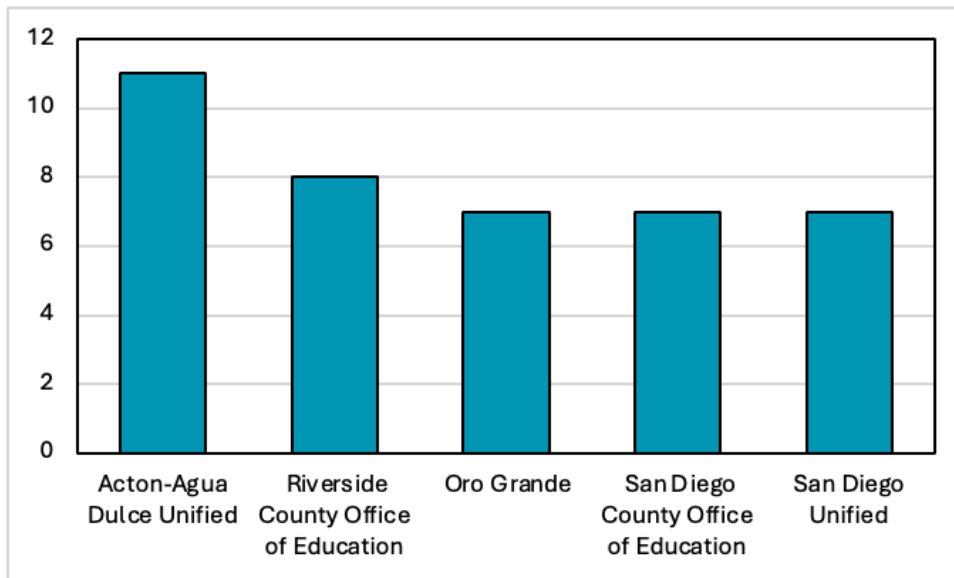
Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

While the five largest authorizers in California are all districts or COEs in highly populated areas, some authorizers in smaller locations also oversee large portfolios relative to their public school population. As part of our data exploration, we examined the frequency of authorizers with a large number of charter schools relative to the number of students enrolled in their geographic boundaries.

More specifically, we calculated the ratio of active charter schools per 100 students enrolled in traditional public schools for the 2023-24 school year. The vast majority of districts have a ratio much smaller than 1 (e.g., districts have large public school enrollments with a relatively small number of charter schools). However, 16 district authorizers have a ratio greater than 1 charter school authorized per 100 students. Oro Grande has the largest ratio, which indicates that the district has 8 charter schools per 100 public school students.

In some cases, authorizers from low-density locations may approve NCB charter schools which can contribute to an uneven representation of students between charter and traditional public school sectors. Figure 5 shows the authorizers with the greatest number of active NCB charter schools authorized. Interestingly, Oro Grande and Acton-Agua Dulce Unified – each of which have a ratio greater than 1 charter school per 100 traditional public school students – are amongst the top five authorizers of NCB charter schools in the state. The disproportionate representation of NCB charter students in these districts may suggest that the authorizers were incentivized to approve NCB charter schools that serve students beyond their schooling system to bring in additional revenue from oversight fees (discussed in greater length in the following section) (Bulkley, 2001).

Figure 5: Number of Active Nonclassroom-Based Charter Schools Authorized: Top Five Authorizers



Note: The figure displays the number of active charter schools authorized by authorizers as of the 2024-25 school year.
 Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

While NCB charter schools make up over a quarter of California’s charter schools, authorizers’ ability to approve new NCB schools was stunted for several years. In 2019, AB 1505 created a 2-year moratorium on opening new NCB charter schools following the first case of financial fraud that arose from an NCB charter school (California Federation of Labor Unions, 2025). While this moratorium was later extended, it was lifted at the start of 2026. This recent change suggests that California may see a high concentration of petitions for new NCB charter schools in the coming year, emphasizing the importance of regulations that ensure proper oversight of NCB charter schools particularly with regards to their financial accountability.

Oversight

Once a petition is approved and a charter school opens, the authorizer is responsible for the oversight of school operations, performance, and finances (Rausch et al., 2017). Despite the importance of this role in ensuring quality educational options for students, the original charter school law in 1992 did not explicitly dictate the extent to which charter school authorizers would be responsible for the oversight of charter schools between contract approval and renewal. Rather, reasonable oversight was an expectation given the need to ensure charter schools remained in compliance with their charter. To fund these efforts, California charter authorizers were granted the authority in 1998 to charge schools an oversight fee up to 1% of the school’s revenue or up to 3% if the authorizer provides rent-free school facilities (Cal. Educ. Code § 47604.32).

As the charter school sector has continued to expand and serve a greater portion of California’s students, authorizer oversight has become increasingly important. In 2016, SB 828 codified minimum supervisory oversight duties for California’s charter authorizers – these duties include (Cal. Educ. Code § 47604.32):

- (1) identify a contact person at the charter school;
- (2) visit the charter school at least annually;
- (3) ensure the charter school completes all required reports, including the Local Control and Accountability Plan;

- (4) monitor the charter school's finances; and
- (5) notify the SBE if a charter is renewed, revoked, or the school closes.

These responsibilities outline the minimum expectations of authorizers in carrying out charter school oversight once a school's doors open and are in contrast with the 46 discrete tasks that CCAP (2025) identified as necessary for effective oversight. The tasks identified by CCAP (2025) cover the following categories: (1) monitoring and oversight, (2) developing an oversight system, (3) annual reporting, (4) intervention, (5) ensuring student rights, (6) site visits, and (7) providing support to schools. These categories exemplify that effective oversight extends beyond monitoring and includes a proactive and vigilant approach to protecting students and supporting schools. The discrepancy between these tasks and the five that are formally included in California's Education Code leads to a high amount of discretion for the extent to which authorizers carry out oversight.

The strength of authorizer oversight is tied to both capacity and desire to carry out the responsibility. In a national study of 48 authorizers at the start of the charter school movement, Anderson and Finnigan (2001) found that larger authorizers and those that are not local education agencies are more likely to have well-defined accountability systems. There is evidence that this may also be true in California, as CCAP's 2025 report found that large districts and COEs have greater resources and capacity to carry out oversight. In addition to organizational capacity, the political environment that authorizers operate in may also affect the oversight of charter schools (Bulkley, 1999). For example, districts that are in more conservative regions of the state may adopt a more laissez-faire approach to oversight which is aligned with a belief that parental choice serves as adequate accountability.

Given the variation in oversight across the state, the California legislature has recently sought to codify increased expectations for charter school oversight. With specific attention to fiscal accountability, SB 414 and AB 84 were introduced in 2025 to increase the extent to which authorizers effectively prevent financial mismanagement (Charter Schools Development Center, 2025). While neither policy was passed in 2025, Newsom's proposed trailer bill would increase financial audit requirements for all California schools (Department of Finance, 2026). Many charter advocates see this

as a step in the right direction but also argue that audits are insufficient for preventing fraud (Baron, 2026).

Central to the debate about effective charter school oversight is whether authorizers have sufficient funds to support necessary tasks. Despite the centrality of this argument to debates about reforms, CCAP (2025) found that with few exceptions, only medium- and large-sized authorizers in California track the use of their oversight fee. The lack of reporting is partially driven by authorizer capacity, but also a belief that oversight duties exceed the 1-3% fee that authorizers collect from schools (CCAP, 2025). In the case of a 1% fee, it can be estimated that authorizers receive approximately \$11,000 for every 100 charter students in their schools, assuming a per-pupil allocation of \$11,000. For authorizers who only oversee one small charter school, this fee only provides minimal support for oversight duties. Given that Newsom’s new proposed audit requirements will be an unfunded mandate, California will have to assess whether authorizers, especially those with small portfolios, have adequate funding to carry out audits in a manner that meaningfully reports and deters fraud.

Aside from financial compliance, authorizer oversight is also intended to ensure that student performance meets state and contract standards. However, an evaluation by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) of 46 large authorizers across the United States revealed that authorizers’ oversight tends to primarily focus on financial management, with key weaknesses in the oversight and enforcement of schools’ educational and operational performance (Rausch et al., 2017). This is particularly true for California, which relies on approved petitions to serve as charter contracts rather than the adoption of discrete performance frameworks like those used in other states. While petitions are intended to include clear performance goals and serve as a performance contract (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.), the state does not provide the authorizer clear authority to intervene and require specific corrective actions when a school is not meeting adequate standards during their contract period (CCAP, 2025). Rather, authorizers are often limited to relying on contract revocation – effectively school closure – in the most extreme cases of when standards are not met.

To ensure adequate oversight of charter school performance, CCAP (2025) and NACSA (2023b) suggest that authorizers should conduct and publish annual reports on the performance of schools they

oversee. While some authorizers in California generate these reports, few publish them online in a manner that creates public accountability (CCAP, 2025) – this is driven by a lack of a legal obligation to do so. As of 2020, California was one of 19 (out of 46) states that did not require authorizers to publish performance reports online (Education Commission of the States, 2020). The lack of obligation to formally evaluate and report on schools’ performance only increases the importance of comprehensive reviews at the end of contract terms when a determination is made on whether to renew or close a charter school.

Renewing or Closing Charter Schools

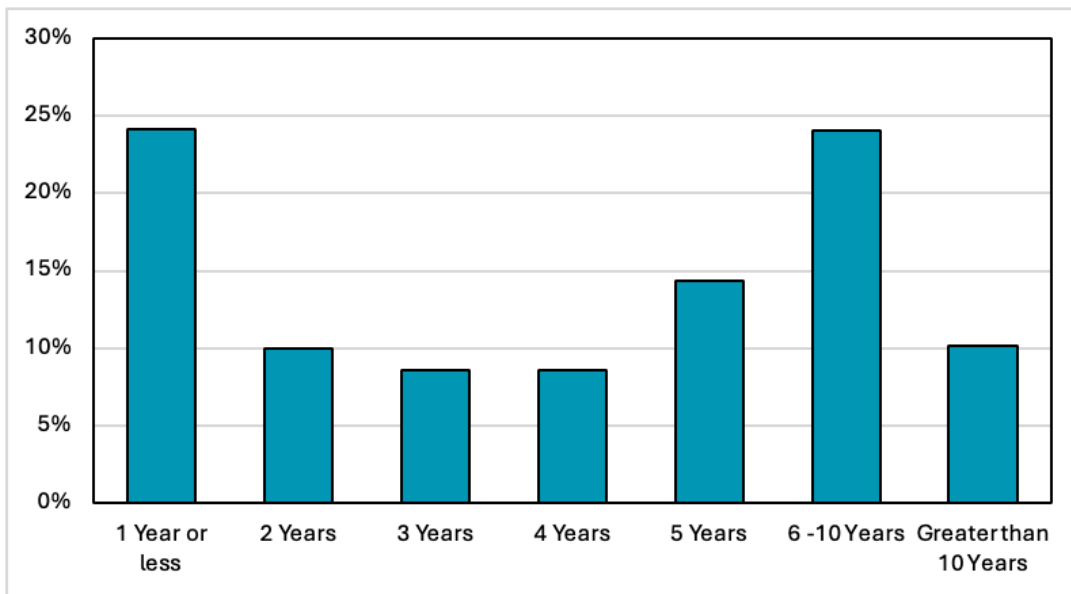
Once a petition is approved in California, the charter contract typically expires after five years and at the end of this period, the charter can either be renewed or terminated. The purpose of the renewal process is to ensure that the charter schools that remain open serve students well and remain in compliance with their contract. When CCAP (2025) evaluated the tasks associated with this process, they found 19 discrete tasks that fall into three categories: (1) renewal evaluation, (2) revocation if necessary, and (3) the protection of stakeholder interests throughout closure processes. While renewal or revocation may involve fewer procedural tasks than other authorizer responsibilities, it remains a critical function. Through this process, authorizers determine whether a school is permitted to continue operating and, thus, serves as the ultimate mechanism for upholding school quality. At the same time, exercising this authority to close schools can be politically sensitive, as continued family enrollment signals that some members of the community view the charter school as desirable and worth preserving (Hess, 2004).

While some closures occur at the time of contract review, authorizers can also close schools that are noncompliant during contract terms. Additionally, charter schools can surrender their contract on their own volition for reasons such as financial challenges due to low enrollment. Nationally, over 25 percent of charter schools close within 5 years of their inception which is often before renewal decisions are made (Network for Public Education, 2024); the rate in California is similar at 24 percent.

In Figure 6, we highlight the percentage of charter schools closed by years of operation. There is a high rate of closures for schools within their first year of being authorized, which may be partially

driven by charter schools approved but never opened due to possible issues with school facilities, leadership, or contracts. For years 2-4, the rates of closures are relatively consistent. Then, the closure rate jumps in the fifth year of operation, likely as the result of the renewal process. While the figure suggests that the renewal process is a strong contributor to school closures, it also highlights that nearly a quarter of charter schools in California do not reach the end of their initial five-year contract.

Figure 6: Percent of All Closed Charter Schools by Years of Operation



Note: In the data, 104 of 867 schools listed as closed have no reported closed date and are excluded from the analysis.

Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/cs/ap/rpt.asp?page=1&s=>

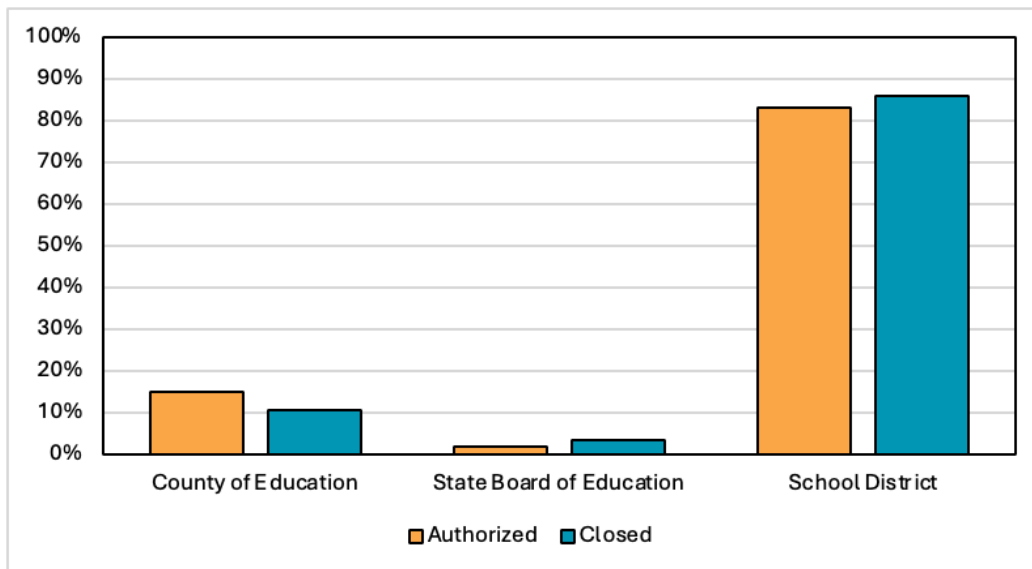
While California does not consistently publish the reason for charter school closures, national trends can provide insights. In 2024, the Network for Public Education published a national analysis of charter school closures. The report found that between 2022 and 2024, nearly 47 percent of charter school closures were due to low enrollment, 22 percent due to fraud or financial mismanagement, 10 percent due to finances, and 14 percent due to poor academic performance (Network for Public Education, 2024). It is striking that less than a fifth of schools close because of academic performance, while over a fifth close because of fraud or mismanagement. As previously discussed, this may be due to a lack of clear authority for some authorizers to enforce performance expectations.

While California does not require performance contracts, the state has increased the focus of the renewal process on academic performance through various legislative revisions to the Education Code. First, in 2012, SB 1290 revised the charter statute to require measurable pupil outcomes in petitions that address increases in academic achievement for all students and by sub-populations, subsequently increasing the importance of academic performance in renewal and revocation decisions. Following this revision, AB 1505 in 2019 made a substantial change to charter statute, revising how academic performance is measured and its impact on possible renewal terms. Authorizers are now required to consider school performance, as reflected by the California School Dashboard which considers standardized test scores, English Learner progress, graduation rate, college and career preparation, chronic absenteeism, and suspension rate. Based on the Dashboard, charter schools are categorized as either low-, middle-, or high-performing which dictates the renewal term they are eligible for. Under AB 1505, a high-performing charter school is eligible for a renewal term up to seven years, a middle-performing school can be renewed for five years, and a low-performing school may only receive a renewal term up to two years. This change represents the first major alteration to the way that authorizers make renewal decisions, substantially increasing the consideration of academic performance.

The efficacy of California's performance-forward renewal process will be revealed over the coming years. AB 1505 included a transition provision that extended the terms of certain charter schools, delaying renewal decisions to allow for the implementation of the revised accountability framework and the availability of sufficient Dashboard performance data. As a result, about 75 percent of California's charter schools (over 900 schools) are up for renewal between late 2024 and 2027 (California Charter Schools Association, 2024). Although many of these renewal decisions have yet to be made, the CDE annually publishes information on charter school performance which provides an overview of what can be expected. Across California's 1,159 charter schools with Dashboard performance data in 2025, the vast majority (917 schools) were classified as middle-performing, 185 as high-performing, and 57 as low-performing (California Department of Education, 2025). Although these data do not distinguish between those schools that are up for renewal and those that are not, it provides an early indication that California's charter school system is likely to remain largely stable amid the large wave of reviews currently underway.

While California can likely expect a low number of non-renewals based on performance, it remains important to understand which charter schools, absent performance data, have previously been more likely to close. As part of our data exploration, we first compared closure rates amongst schools authorized by school districts, COEs, and the SBE. In Figure 7, we compare the percentage of schools authorized to the percentage of schools closed by authorizer type across all years. As the figure shows, COEs account for a slightly smaller proportion of closures than they do total schools authorized. However, each group of authorizers' contribution to school closures closely mirrors their share of California's charter school sector. This suggests that schools opened by each type of authorizer in California face similar likelihoods of closure.

Figure 7: Comparison of Closed versus Authorized Charter Schools by Authorizer Type

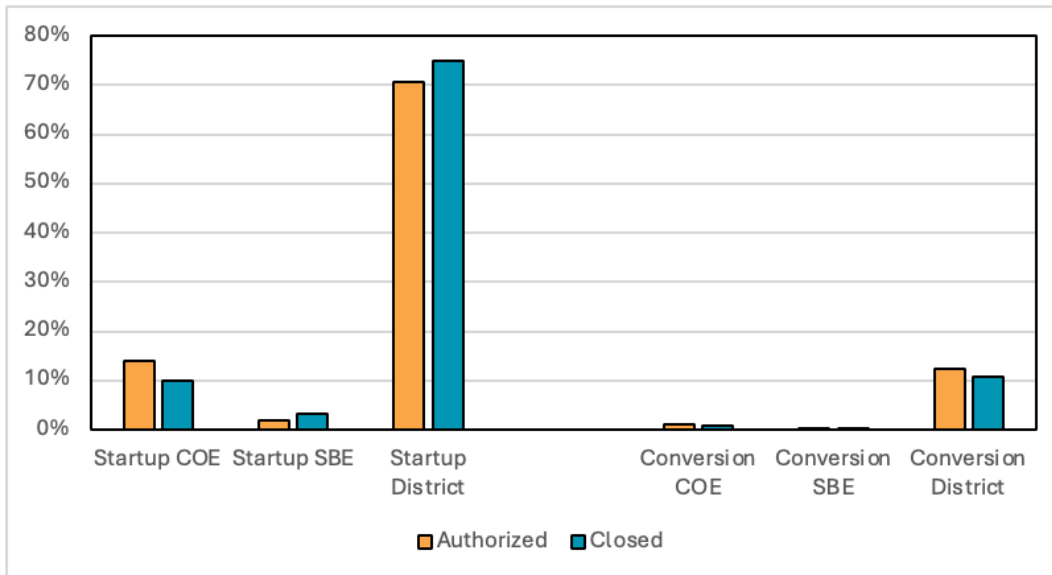


Note: In the data, 104 of 867 schools listed as closed have no reported closed date and are excluded from the analysis.

Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/cs/ap/rpt.asp?page=1&s=>

In Figure 8, we make a similar comparison, but this time we break down the authorized and closure rates by school type — startup and conversion schools. Similar to Figure 7, we do not see major differences by authorizer type or school type. However, startup charter schools authorized by a school district or the SBE are slightly more likely to be closed relative to their representation in the charter sector.

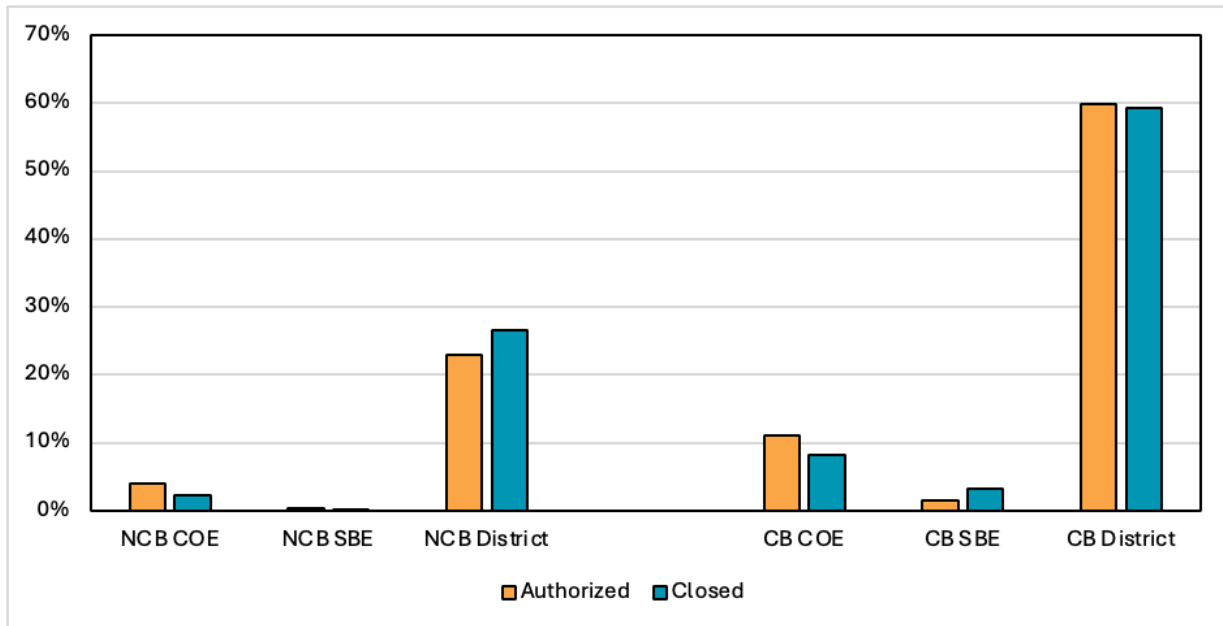
Figure 8: Comparison of Closed versus Authorized Charter Schools by Authorizers of Startup and Conversion Charter Schools



Note: In the data, 104 of 867 schools listed as closed have no reported closed date and are excluded from the analysis.
 Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/cs/ap/rpt.asp?page=1&s=>

Finally, in Figure 9, we break down the analysis by classroom and NCB charter schools, which have received significant scrutiny because of the recent scandals of fraud previously discussed. We show the closure rate by classroom and authorizer types. Across both classroom and NCB charter schools, there are similar closure and approval rates across the authorizer types, with slightly lower closure rates for NCB charter schools authorized by COEs and slightly higher closure rates for NCB charter schools authorized by districts. Overall, this suggests that type of authorizer is not substantially related to school closure.

Figure 9: Comparison of Closed versus Authorized Charter Schools by Authorizers of Classroom Based (CB) and Nonclassroom Based (NCB) Charter Schools



Note: In the data, 104 of 867 schools listed as closed have no reported closed date and are excluded from the analysis. COE = County of Education, SBE = State Board of Education

Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/cs/ap/rpt.asp?page=1&s=>

Discussion and Recommendations

California’s charter school accountability system is shaped in large part by the actions of charter authorizers – the entities responsible for the approval, oversight, and renewal of charter schools. Since the enactment of the Charter Schools Act in 1992, state legislation has repeatedly revised and refined authorizers’ responsibilities, authority, incentives, and capacity. Our review of these changes suggests that statutory reforms have done relatively little to codify or enforce consistent standards of authorizing practice relative to the expansive role associated with charter school authorizers. A gap remains between the limited responsibilities explicitly required by the Education Code and the extensive range of tasks necessary for effective authorizing, as identified by CCAP (2025). This gap creates substantial discretion within a highly decentralized system, where districts, COEs, and the SBE exercise authorizing authority with varying levels of capacity and oversight.

Future state policy efforts should move beyond broadly defining authorizers' responsibilities and instead provide clearer guidance regarding the specific tasks, standards, and processes that effective authorizing requires. The Governor's recently proposed trailer bill, which would require annual financial audits for all California schools (subject to review by the State Controller), represents a step in this direction. Beginning in the 2027–28 fiscal year, the proposal would require the Controller to issue an audit guide and accompanying desk review checklist to assess whether audit reports conform to reporting requirements (Department of Finance, 2026). However, given the inherent lag between the occurrence of financial misconduct and its detection through retrospective audits, it is critical that the guide not only specifies what information must be collected but also establishes clear expectations for how audits are conducted and reviewed in order to strengthen fraud deterrence. Clarifying the role of authorizers in overseeing the audit process – such as verifying the completeness and accuracy of financial reporting and enrollment data, especially for NCB charter schools – could further reduce variation in audit quality and enhance fiscal accountability across the charter sector.

California's gradual move towards more explicit guidelines for how charter school authorizers should enact accountability is also reflected in how the state now structures performance-based renewal decisions. AB 1505 established a structured framework for evaluating charter school performance by anchoring renewal decisions in the California School Dashboard and linking renewal terms to defined performance tiers, thereby reducing variation in how authorizers assess academic outcomes. However, this level of specificity has not been extended to the ongoing oversight of academic performance between renewal cycles. California remains one of 19 (out of 46) charter states that does not require authorizers to produce annual performance reports on the schools they oversee (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Although the California Department of Education publishes Dashboard results annually, best practices for charter school governance emphasize that authorizers should conduct independent evaluations and publicly report on both individual school performance and the health of their overall portfolio. This practice promotes transparency and accountability. Organizations such as CCAP (2025) and NACSA (2023b) support this approach, and several states, such as Tennessee, provide standardized reporting templates for district authorizers. Adopting a similar requirement in California with a standardized reporting template could help reduce variation in performance oversight and strengthen accountability.

The recommendations advanced here to strengthen guidance and expectations for charter school authorizers are consistent with longstanding national and state-level calls for policy to codify clear authorizer standards. Since 2004, NACSA has regularly published and updated *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* which are developed through research, authorizer engagement, and policy analysis (NACSA, 2023b). The purpose of states adopting these standards when appropriate to their context is to establish consistent expectations for high-quality authorizing – this is especially important in the case of decentralized authorizing systems like California’s. In addition to the reforms suggested above, California legislators should consider codifying further standards aligned with NACSA’s (2023b) recommendations. For example, California authorizers would benefit from clearer guidance on when to intervene based on unsatisfactory school performance (CCAP, 2025). At the same time, any expansion of statutory standards should also be paired with attention to authorizer capacity, particularly where new requirements may function as unfunded mandates.

While thus far our recommendations have emphasized the need for clearer statutory standards, we also recognize that strengthening charter school authorizing in California may alternatively require granting authorizers greater flexibility to exercise professional judgment for certain tasks. As discussed earlier, CCAP’s (2025) recent report highlights that California’s petition-based approval system constrains authorizers’ ability to consider their own capacity and local community needs when making approval decisions. Transitioning from a petition model to an application process – like most states have – could restore meaningful discretion in approval decisions. Research suggests that authorizers’ discretion during the approval process is associated with stronger school outcomes (Bross & Harris, 2016; Kho et al., 2024; Nicotera & Stuit, 2017), thus, increased discretion may lead to increased school quality. Additionally, this change could also improve authorizer capacity for the oversight of the schools that they authorize without necessitating new funding. While we do recommend increased discretion in the approval process, this change should be paired with clear statutory guardrails to reduce the risk of bias or inconsistent decision-making that could disadvantage underrepresented communities during the approval process. We recognize that this is a delicate balance and recommend looking to other states’ authorizing laws as models.

In alignment with creating clear guidelines for quality charter school authorizing, we also recommend that California establishes a process for holding authorizers accountable for their responsibilities. Currently, 16 states have sanctions in place for cases of authorizer shortcomings (Education Commissions of the States, 2020). For instance, in Minnesota, the state’s Commissioner of Education reviews authorizer performance every five years and authorizers can be subject to corrective action if found to not meet expectations (Education Commissions of the States, 2020). These authorizer evaluations include assessments of their ability to monitor school performance, comply with state statutes, and manage their portfolio of schools (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023), providing insight into the quality of an authorizer’s work. A similar evaluation with associated sanctions in California would ensure that all authorizers are incentivized to meaningfully engage with any new standards that are adopted, effectively shaping accountability for California charter schools.

As California continues to revise the statutory framework governing charter school authorizers, policymakers should remain attentive to both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the current system. While California’s charter schools have demonstrated positive academic performance overall (Raymond et al., 2023), recent events have exposed weaknesses in financial accountability and oversight (Fensterwald, 2024; Pendleton, 2025). The state has begun to respond through targeted legislative reforms, but sustained progress will require a more comprehensive approach that clearly defines authorizer responsibilities, aligns expectations with available capacity, and ensures that accountability standards are not only articulated but enforceable. Establishing clearer standards, alongside sanctions for cases of persistent authorizer shortcomings would reinforce that accountability applies not only to schools, but also to the public entities charged with overseeing them. Ultimately, the strength and credibility of California’s charter sector will depend on an authorizing system that is transparent, consistent, and capable of upholding both performance and public trust.

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