



**Colorado Charter Schools  
Annual Conference**

February 25-27, 2026  
Denver Marriott Tech Center



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# An Introduction to NACSA's Updated New School Applications

Karega Rausch, President & CEO  
CACSA

Melissa Izzo, Sr. Manager of Instructional Design  
CACSA

Longs Peak  
February 26, 2026 | 11:00—12:00  
Authorizers



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# New School Applications, Part I

An Introduction to NACSA's Guidance



**M. Karega Rausch, PhD**  
President & CEO  
NACSA

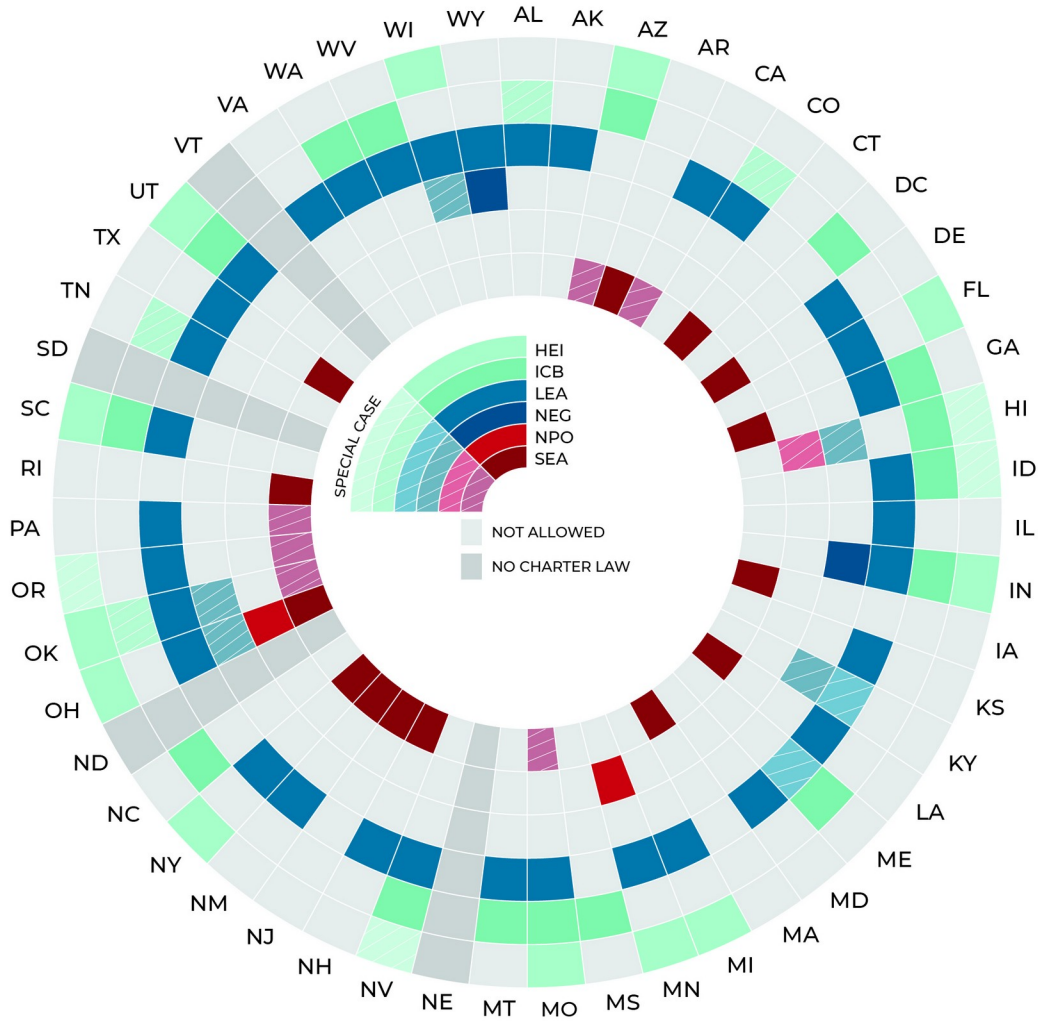


**Melissa Izzo**  
Sr. Manager of Instructional Design  
NACSA

# **NACSA's Mission**

**NACSA advances and strengthens the ideas and practices of authorizing so students and communities - especially those who are historically under-resourced - thrive.**

# Types of Authorizers by State



# Colorado Authorizers

- Independent Charter Board (ICB)
  - Colorado Charter School Institute
- Local Education Agency (LEA)
  - District Authorizers

# Who's in the Room?

- Colorado District Authorizer
- Colorado Authorizer (other)
- School founder, leader, board. or staff
- Support organization, operator, or incubator
- Independent consultant
- Other

# Agenda

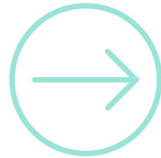
- The WHY of NACSA's Updated NSA Guidance
- What's New and Different
- New School Applications from Start to Finish
- Closing Reflections

# About NACSA's New School Application Guidance

- The Why

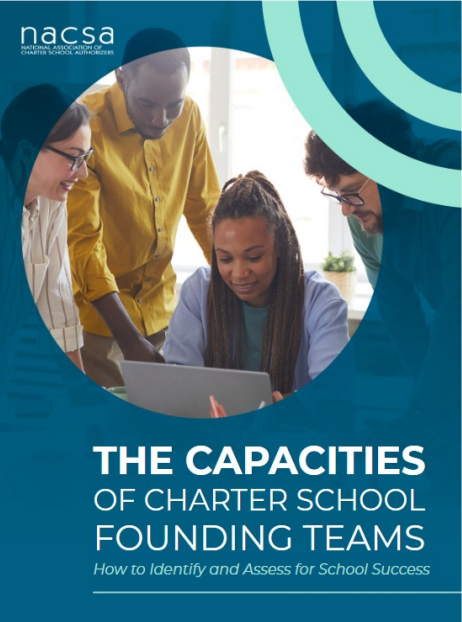


# We've made big changes to NACSA's New School Application Guidance.




Over time, the application process has added more and more written requirements, resulting in a sea of paperwork, rather than a way for school founders to demonstrate their vision, plan, and capacities. The result is a sector that has become more bureaucratic, more rigid, and less innovative—the opposite of what charter schools are meant to be.

# What's informed revising the New School Application Guidance?



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**THE CAPACITIES  
OF CHARTER SCHOOL  
FOUNDING TEAMS**  
*How to Identify and Assess for School Success*



**READY  
TO OPEN  
PLAYBOOK**



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Recommendations for Rethinking the New School Application



**LEADERSHIP  
IN ACTION**



**NEW SCHOOL  
APPLICATION  
SUMMIT**



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# Grounded in the Recommendations

We knew from everything we learned that the updated New School Application Guidance had to lean all the way into:



Shifting rigor from  
paper to people



Aligning the  
application to how  
new schools actually  
develop



Doubling down on  
known quality  
authorizing practices

In shifting the focus from paper to people, we aligned the process with how schools actually develop. We center on the founding team and the community, with a structure that emphasizes the people, model, and execution.

## OLD VERSION

- ⊗ School Overview
- ⊗ Educational Program Design and Capacity
- ⊗ Operations plan & capacity
- ⊗ Financial plan & capacity

## NEW VERSION

- ✓ Executive Summary
- ✓ People
- ✓ Model
- ✓ Execution

# Pair & Share

Which recommendation resonates the most with you and why?

- **Shifting rigor from paper to people**
- **Aligning the application to how school actually develop**
- **Doubling down on quality practices**

# The New School Applications Process

- From Start to Finish



1

# Request for Proposals

4-5 months prior to written proposal deadline

The Request for Proposals (RFP) should communicate chartering priorities, provide clear application guidance, outline evaluation criteria - including focus on founding team capacities, and articulate proposal written prompts.

# Information/ Orientation Sessions

3-5 months prior to written  
proposal deadline

Information sessions offer potential applicants a clear overview of the new school process and key authorizer priorities.

3

# Notice/Letter of Intent

8-12 weeks prior to written  
proposal deadline

Authorizers use NOIs to prepare for the application review process and to begin to understand each proposed school and founding team's capacities.

# Pitch Meeting/ One-on-one Session

8-12 weeks prior to written  
proposal deadline,  
following NOI submission

This brief presentation from the founding team provides the authorizer with baseline information about the school's model, founding team capacities, and development progress.

Founding teams can also ask clarifying process questions and seek clarification of stated authorizer priorities.

# Full Written Proposal

Authorizers provide prompts designed to elicit evidence from the founding team that aligns with established criteria.

These prompts and criteria prioritize demonstrating the founding team's capacity to open and operate a high-quality school.

# What are the Model Criteria?

## New School Application Criteria

A quality charter school application starts with the criteria for success. These criteria clarify what an applicant needs to demonstrate for an application to be approved.

### Universal Criteria

- The proposed school's mission, vision, and key design elements of the educational model are consistent throughout in the application; responsive to the community the school seeks to serve; and grounded in sound research, proven practice, and/or other reasons demonstrating likely effectiveness.
- The founding team has the capacities and commitment to successfully launch and operate the proposed school.
- The financial and operational plans and assurances are viable, meet legal requirements, and are aligned throughout the application.

### People

#### 1.1 Community and Coalitions

- The founding team has a deep understanding of the community the proposed school seeks to serve.
- The founding team builds and maintains relationships across diverse interest groups and engages others in understanding, supporting, and acting on behalf of the mission.
- The founding team can navigate power and influence within local systems, structures, and people.

#### 1.2 Founding Team

- The founding team has the relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities to execute in areas of education, finance, governance, and the proposed school's identified key design elements.
- The founding team demonstrates a track record of success in a variety of endeavors, large and small, as well as experience with failure and a demonstrated ability to learn, grow, and adapt.
- The founding team demonstrates an awareness of their areas for growth and how they plan to address them.
- The founding team understands how the organization will have to mature.

### Model

#### 2.1 Mission, Vision, Purpose

- The proposed school's mission is clear, cohesive, and measurable, and centers students and the community. The mission outlines the proposed school's purpose, what it does, and for whom.
- The vision outlines a clear aspirational long-term goal or ideal state the school aims to achieve.

#### 2.2 Key Design Elements

- Key design elements of the educational model are aligned with the mission and designed to achieve positive outcomes for the proposed student population.
- The approach to serving special populations is likely to lead to high-quality educational outcomes for students with diverse needs.
- The school environment will be safe, supportive, and conducive to student learning for all students.

#### 2.3 Outcomes

- Goals are clear, rigorous, and relevant, and include indicators of performance for all students, including subgroups.
- Goals are aligned with the school's mission.
- Measures are aligned with the goals.
- The founding team has a clear plan for establishing goals and using data to track progress and inform practice.

#### 2.4 Addressing Community Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities

- The founding team presents an evidence-based assessment of the challenges and opportunities this school is acting on and articulates how the proposed school addresses an unmet need in the target community.
- Current student and parent demand suggests that the proposed school will meet projected enrollment targets for Year 1 through full enrollment.

### Execution

#### 3.1 Organizational Systems

- The school's organizational design supports the fulfillment of the commitments and responsibilities of a public school, implementation of the key design elements, oversight of school finances, and achievement of the school's mission.
- Governance structures and systems ensure that the board meets its governance and fiduciary responsibilities while avoiding infringement on management's prerogatives and obligations.

#### 3.2 Plan of Execution

- The founding team understands the necessary steps and timeline to effectively launch a new school and is making sufficient progress toward the start-up. The school's core components are well-planned-for: education program, facility, transportation, enrollment, staffing, governance, etc.
- The founding team effectively plans for a sustainable organization with measurable benchmarks to assess progress and adjust course as needed.

#### 3.3 Policies and Assurances

- The founding team is aware of and is devoting staff capacity to ensure adherence to laws applicable to charter schools, including those related to governing a public organization and protecting the rights of all students, including students with disabilities and English learners.
- The founding team provides approved organizational and school policies or drafts/plans to develop such policies related to organizational founding, conflicts of interest and code of ethics, school discipline, school safety, and commitments to serving and ensuring access for all students.

#### 3.4 Financial Plan

- The budget is realistic, viable, and aligned with the educational model and execution plan.
- The financial plan includes the resources, fiscal planning, and expertise necessary to carry out effective budgeting, financial management, and oversight, and achieve the school's mission and intended outcomes.
- The proposed school is likely to be financially viable.
- The contingency plan ensures and includes services to all students consistent with the school's mission, key design elements, and execution plan.

## Model Criteria, Evidence, and Prompts

- What criteria do founding teams need to demonstrate?
- What evidence could address that criteria?
- How do authorizers go about gathering that evidence?

### 2.3 Outcomes (2 pages)

MODEL CRITERIA		Capacities that Support Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goals are clear, rigorous, and relevant, and include indicators of performance for all students, including subgroups.</li><li>• Goals are aligned with the school's mission.</li><li>• Measures are aligned with the goals.</li><li>• The founding team has a clear plan for establishing goals and using data to track progress and inform practice.</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflective Learning</li><li>• Creative Problem Solving</li><li>• Knowledge, Skills, Execution</li></ul>
Potential Evidence and Look-Fors	Written Application Prompts	Sample Capacity Interview Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clarity, rigor, and relevance of goals and measures across student subgroups.</li><li>• Inclusion of all students and student subgroups in goals and measures.</li><li>• Systems for identifying, measuring, evaluating, and reflecting on performance, and adjusting practices as appropriate.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Outline the proposed school's student outcome goals and describe how they will be measured.</li><li>• Explain the rationale for these goals and targets.</li><li>• Describe how internal and external stakeholders, including the public, will know the extent to which the school is achieving its mission.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How will school leadership and the board know the school's mission is being achieved? What challenges do you see in measuring your school's achievement of its mission? How might you address those challenges?</li><li>• How will you use the goals and measures to evaluate and adjust the school's instructional approach?</li></ul>
Additional Touchpoints (Pitch Meeting, Due Diligence, Observations, etc.)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenge Scenario prompting the founding team to contemplate the school's underperformance in a certain area.</li><li>• If applicable, a due diligence review of the academic performance of replicated schools in the operator's portfolio.</li></ul>		

# Guidance includes editable Written Application Prompts and Evaluation Rubric documents

## NACSA's New School Application Guidance: Written Application Prompts



### School Overview

Name of proposed school: \_\_\_\_\_

Proposed location of the school: \_\_\_\_\_  
City/Town

\_\_\_\_\_  
School District/LEA

Primary contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street/PO Box

\_\_\_\_\_  
City State Zip

Phone: (day) \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you applying as a:  New Operator  Existing Operator  Conversion Operator

Names, roles, and current employment of all persons on the founding team (add lines as needed):

Full Name	Role with Proposed School	Current Role and Organization

Does the school intend to contract with a third-party education service provider (ESP) to manage the educational program and operations of the school, but not hold the charter directly?

Yes  No

If yes, identify the ESP or other partner organization: \_\_\_\_\_

## NACSA's New School Application Guidance: Sample Evaluation Rubric



This rubric is used to evaluate new charter school applications. In each section, evaluation criteria are provided, along with the primary [capacities of charter school founding teams](#) that align with the criteria. This rubric allows evaluators to assess and document evidence gathered throughout the new school application process.

### RUBRIC RATINGS

Evaluators use ratings to evaluate the extent to which a new school application meets the criteria. Within each subsection, specific criteria define the expectations for how an application and founding team demonstrate that they "Meet the Standard." Evaluators will rate evidence by applying the following guidance:

Rating	Definition
Meets the Standard	Evidence is multi-faceted and demonstrates that the application and team members, as a whole (or multiple individuals on the team), substantially meet the criteria.
Partially Meets the Standard	The evidence demonstrates that the application and team members, as a whole (or multiple individuals on the team), meet the criteria in some respects, but are insufficient in other respects or not observed in multiple instances with sufficient completeness.
Does Not Meet the Standard	The evidence is wholly insufficient or significantly lacking; or opportunity was provided to demonstrate that a given criterion was met, and neither the application nor the founding team provided demonstrative evidence that met the criteria.

### IDENTIFYING SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

This rubric provides space for evaluators to document evidence and analysis of the written application as well as anything gathered in additional touchpoints with the founding team. When citing the written application, include page numbers/appendix labels for reference. When referencing additional touchpoints, use a short-hand guide like this to annotate comments:

- P Pitch Meeting
- NOI Notice of Intent
- DD Due Diligence
- O Other Touchpoints
- CS Challenge Scenarios
- CI Capacity Interview
- R Request for Additional Information

# Full Written Proposal

Authorizers provide prompts designed to elicit evidence from the founding team that aligns with established criteria.

These prompts and criteria prioritize demonstrating the founding team's capacity to open and operate a high-quality school.

# Completion Check and Remedy

1-2 weeks after written  
proposal deadline

Ensure all required components are submitted and provide an opportunity to address any missing elements.

# Review of Written Proposal

2-6 weeks after written  
proposal deadline

Ensure a thorough, unbiased  
evaluation of applications.

Authorizers use published criteria  
that prioritizes assessment of  
founding team capacities, provide  
training to ensure consistent  
standards and unbiased  
treatment, and maintain a  
conflict-free process.

# Due Diligence

~1 week-3 months after written proposal deadline

For authorizers, due diligence involves evaluating data from sources other than the applicant to inform the evaluation process, particularly with existing operators. This might also include conducting school site visits for new school applicants who are already operating a school.

# Request for Clarifications

6-8 weeks after written proposal deadline

The authorizer may seek information about the proposal to avoid using capacity interview time for clarifications.

This step focuses on obtaining specific details about the written application that may be contradictory or unclear.

# Challenge Scenarios

~6-8 weeks after written  
proposal deadline

Evaluate the team's ability to  
handle key challenges and make  
strategic decisions.

## Founding Team and Community in Action

~1-3 months after written  
proposal deadline

Authorizers can gain valuable insights into the work of an applicant team by participating in various activities such as attending community meetings and observing board or planning meetings.

# Capacity Interview

~2 months after written proposal deadline

Capacity interviews are a critical step in the review process, allowing authorizers to assess the founding team's capacities both individually and as a cohesive group with complementary skills, experiences, and perspectives.

("Community Meeting")

## Public Hearing

~3 months after written  
proposal deadline

Opportunity for the decision-making body to hear presentations and testimony from the community and to seek proposal clarifications.

## Update Memorandum (Optional)

~3 months after written  
proposal deadline

Founding teams often continue developing their school models, building their team, and executing start-up plans even while applications are under review. During this time, they may have updates that could impact the proposal.

## Recommendation/ Final Decision

~3.5 months after written  
proposal deadline  
(no later than June 30)

The authorizer conducts a qualitative review of the gathered evidence and evaluates the quality of the full application, including both written and observed evidence of capacities. Based on this comprehensive review, the authorizing staff makes a recommendation to the decision-making body. This body ultimately decides whether to approve the new school application.

# Table Talk

- How might this process impact the school experience?
- How might this process impact the authorizer experience?
- How might this process impact who applies and who is approved?

1. Request for Proposals (RFP)
2. Information/Orientation Sessions
3. Notice/Letter of Intent
4. Pitch Meeting/One-on-One Session
5. Full Written Application
6. Completion Check and Remedy
7. Review of Written Proposal
8. Due Diligence
9. Request for Clarifications
10. Challenge Scenarios
11. Founding Team & Community in Action
12. Capacity Interview
13. Public Hearing
14. Update Memorandum
15. Recommendation/Decision

# Wrap Up

- Takeaways & Next Steps



# NSA Resources

Full NSA Guidance, resources, tools, templates, RTO  
Playbook, and more!



# Thinking about Implementation?

- Start with model criteria for success.
- Reduce the number of written application questions and lean into people through multiple touchpoints.
- These updates can't happen overnight, but NACSA is here to help!



# NSA Implementation Community

Share, collaborate, and learn with other authorizers  
updating their Application processes

Led by NACSA's Jay Whalen



# Join Us

## Upcoming Events

<https://qualitycharters.org/nacsa-events/>



**From Guidance to Practice: Making People-Centered New School Applications Work in Colorado, Part II**  
w/**Karega Rausch, President & CEO of NACSA**

**Tomorrow @ CLCS!**

11-12pm

**Communications Collaborative** | Design Smarter:  
Practical Tips for Non-Designers  
w/ **Alison K. Mason, Founder & Principal Creative of Lilacs on York**

*March 12, 12-1pm CT*

**Third Thursdays** | Rules of Engagement: Designing  
Charter Contracts for Real Accountability  
w/ **Tayo Adeeko and Molly Ferrer of Jeffco Public Schools**

*March 19, 12-1pm CT*



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**Thanks for joining us!**  
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helps us all  
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