



Tennessee Department of Education

Foundations of Quality Authorizing

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Foundations of Quality Authorizing

Before diving into the practical steps of authorizing charter schools in Tennessee, it is essential to understand the foundations of this work—what authorizing is, why it matters, and how Tennessee’s framework aligns with national standards for quality.

Authorizing is more than a set of compliance tasks; it is a professional practice grounded in judgment, transparency, and relationships. At its core, quality authorizing ensures that every charter school delivers its promise to provide students with a high-quality public education. This means holding schools accountable for results while also creating the conditions for them to thrive.

Three Principles of Quality Authorizing

Authorizers are stewards of public trust. Every decision they make impacts students, families, and communities. This section provides an overview of the philosophy and practice of charter school authorizing and explains how Tennessee’s laws and policies reinforce the three principles of quality authorizing:

- **Maintain high standards** by approving applicants that show strong capacity and by holding schools accountable for results.
- **Uphold autonomy** by minimizing unnecessary administrative burdens and focusing oversight on performance, not process.
- **Protect students and the public interest** by ensuring equity, transparency, fiscal responsibility, and legal compliance.

These principles, adapted from NACSA’s *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, serve as the foundation for all effective authorizing practices. They also align closely with [SBE Policy 6.111 – Quality Authorizing Standards](#), [SBE Rule 0520-14-01](#), and [T.C.A. §§ 49-13-101–145](#), which collectively define the purpose of charter schools and the responsibilities of authorizers.

Importantly, research from NACSA’s [Quality Practices Project](#) underscores that **how** authorizers do their work matters as much as **what** they do. The strongest authorizers build trust-based, transparent relationships with their schools. They communicate expectations clearly, provide timely and consistent feedback, and view oversight as a collaborative process aimed at improving outcomes for students.

Maintaining High Standards

When authorizers hold schools accountable to high expectations and provide them with the freedom to meet those expectations creatively, students win.

High-quality authorizers set and enforce rigorous expectations for school performance. This pillar aligns directly with:

- [T.C.A. § 49-13-102](#), which establishes the purposes of charter schools, including improving student learning and closing achievement gaps;
- [SBE Policy 6.111](#) (Standards 2 & 4), which require rigorous application review and evidence-based decision-making; and
- [T.C.A. §§ 49-13-121, 49-13-122](#), which outline renewal and revocation procedures grounded in performance data.

Through these provisions and utilization of a performance framework, authorizers maintain high standards across academic, financial, and organizational domains and ensure that decisions to open, renew, or close schools are transparent, evidence-based, and student-centered.

Relationship-Centered Practice:

Research from the *Quality Practices Project* shows that maintaining high standards depends on open, predictable communication. Effective authorizers engage schools in ongoing dialogue about performance expectations, provide timely feedback, and use monitoring as an opportunity for learning rather than only compliance. They help schools understand how performance frameworks and renewal decisions are applied so that accountability feels fair, consistent, and focused on continuous improvement.

Upholding Autonomy and Accountability

Charter schools are afforded autonomy and flexibility to innovate in exchange for being held accountable for performance outcomes. Tennessee law explicitly provides this flexibility in [T.C.A. § 49-13-102](#), granting charter governing boards the authority to manage school operations, curriculum, staffing, and budgeting.

In turn, [SBE Policy 6.111](#) (Standard 4) requires authorizers to respect school-level decision-making, minimize unnecessary administrative burdens, and focus oversight on outcomes rather

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than processes. Upholding autonomy allows schools to innovate and respond to the unique needs of their students and communities.

Autonomy means schools control their own staffing, budgeting, curriculum, and daily operations within the bounds of the law.

Accountability means authorizers evaluate schools based on their outcomes—not their inputs or processes.

Upholding this balance ensures that authorizers focus on student success, in addition to compliance, and that charters have both the freedom and responsibility to deliver positive student outcomes. Strong authorizers uphold the charter bargain by setting clear, measurable expectations in the charter agreement, respecting each school’s independent governing board, monitoring performance with fairness and transparency, and taking timely action when a school fails to meet its obligations.

Relationship-Centered Practice:

The *Quality Practices Project* found that strong authorizers strengthen autonomy by building relationships grounded in mutual respect and clarity. Successful authorizers establish clear expectations upfront, maintain consistent points of contact, and differentiate oversight based on a school’s performance and capacity. They engage in regular, structured touchpoints such as pre-opening readiness reviews, annual performance meetings, and renewal planning discussions to stay connected without micromanaging.

Protecting Student and Public Interests

Authorizers safeguard equity, access, and the responsible use of public funds. Tennessee statute and SBE rule underscore these obligations by requiring:

- Equal access to all students
- Transparent fiscal management
- Due process and accountability in renewal or closure decisions
- Public reporting and oversight

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These provisions ensure that charter schools operate with integrity, serve all students equitably, and remain accountable to the public they serve.

Relationship-Centered Practice:

Protecting student and public interests also means building trust. Effective authorizers keep communication lines open between the authorizing office, charter school leaders, families, and the community. They respond quickly to concerns, support schools in addressing compliance issues before they escalate, and promote transparency by sharing clear and accessible performance information. Strong relationships enable authorizers to balance accountability with partnerships, ensuring that schools can both meet high standards and serve students equitably.

Bringing It All Together

Tennessee's authorizing framework is built to empower authorizers to uphold these three principles. The state's statutes, rules, and policies provide the guardrails, but it is the quality of relationships—how authorizers and schools communicate, collaborate, and build trust—that determines whether those principles translate into better outcomes for students.

When authorizers maintain high standards, uphold autonomy, and protect the public interest through authentic partnership with schools, they create the conditions for lasting excellence across Tennessee's charter sector.

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