



Tennessee Department of Education

Effective Support and Oversight

Authorizer Toolkit | August 2026



Table of Contents

Effective Support and Oversight..... 3

Support Structures 3

 Charter School Authorization Handbook..... 3

 Annual Calendar 4

Key Conversations 5

 Functions of Key Conversations..... 5

 Key Conversation Best Practices 6

Indicators of Distress (IOD): An Early Warning System 7

 Categories of IOD 9

 Implementation of IOD 11

Oversight Responsibilities..... 12

 Annual Authorizer Report..... 12

 Site Visits 12

 Intervention Protocols 13

Appendices 14

 Appendix A: Sample Annual Calendar 15

 Appendix B: Suggested Structure for Key Conversations..... 16

 Appendix C: Example Conversation Starters 17

Effective Support and Oversight

As outlined in greater detail in the Planning for Quality Authorizing section, the local education agency (LEA) is responsible for the support and oversight of the charter schools that the local board of education authorizes. The LEA includes several different bodies that have different roles, but those bodies are collectively referred to as the “authorizer.” Authorizers are responsible for gathering and analyzing performance information, ensuring schools fulfill legal and contractual obligations, and acting early and decisively when concerns arise, but the best oversight happens when authorizers foster mutual trust, minimize compliance burdens, and prioritize supportive, two-way communication with schools.

Effective oversight balances **support and compliance monitoring** but communicates clearly which is happening at any moment.

Support Is:
Coaching, thought partnership, collaboration
Forward-looking and improvement-oriented
Flexible, responsive, and tailored
Building trust and strengthening relationships
Helping schools understand expectations and solve problems

Compliance Monitoring Is:
Verification, documentation, and contract oversight
Backward-looking and evidence-based
Standardized and required
Ensuring legal obligations are fully met
Confirming expectations were met

Support Structures

Charter School Authorization Handbook

Authorizers may consider developing a charter school authorization handbook to support consistent, transparent practices. It would outline the policies, procedures, and expectations as the authorizer partners with the charter leader in year zero, and outline expectations for the entirety of the charter agreement. The handbook would go through the phases of the

Effective Support and Oversight

authorizing cycle and explain each phase. It could serve as a central resource for essential information, including pre-opening support, oversight and monitoring expectations, financial responsibilities, compliance reporting requirements, and procedural guidance for charter school leaders. Additionally, some authorizers have created a resource handbook as part of or in addition to the authorization handbook. This could include district-wide support and resources to help school leaders be successful. The following are some important areas that authorizers may want to include:

- Application Process and Decision Making
- Charter Agreement Process and Content Requirements
- Annual Reporting Requirements and Timeline
- Oversight Processes and Intervention Protocols
- Renewal Processes
- Revocation and School Closure Processes

Annual Calendar

The first step in implementing effective support is to define and communicate how school performance and compliance information will be gathered, reported, and used. An annual calendar is one of the most valuable tools an authorizer can provide to promote transparency, predictability, and equity in the process. A clear, published calendar helps schools understand exactly what information will be required, when submissions are due, how data will be used, and what to expect throughout the year. In the absence of a calendar, schools can experience oversight as “piecemeal,” duplicative, or reactive, leading to confusion, frustration, and unnecessary administrative burden.

High-quality authorizers proactively eliminate friction by establishing a yearly oversight rhythm connected directly to the charter agreement, rules and policies, and the performance framework. Meaning that every request for information, every check-in, and every site visit is grounded in purpose and scheduled at a reasonable, predictable time. An annual calendar also helps charter schools manage internal workflows such as planning staff time, preparing board agendas, scheduling data pulls, and organizing documentation so that oversight respects instruction and operations of the school.

Integrating the authorizer’s timelines into the annual calendar ensures the district and schools share a single, unified schedule. This reduces last-minute requests, prevents duplication of data submissions, and allows schools to proactively prepare for periods of heavier reporting. It also

Effective Support and Oversight

ensures that oversight is conducted in a manner that protects school autonomy—schools should always know why a data or document request is being made and how it aligns to state rules or the performance framework.

Clear timelines matter because they build trust, reduce operational burden, and set the conditions for meaningful relationship-driven oversight. When schools know what to expect, conversations shift from compliance to shared problem-solving. When authorizers demonstrate discipline in following their own calendar, schools experience oversight as fair, transparent, and consistent, not arbitrary or unpredictable. The [Sample Annual Calendar](#) aligns with the Tennessee charter law and national best practices, while giving authorizers the flexibility to tailor specific activities to their local context and national best practices.

Key Conversations

Having key conversations is one of the most powerful tools an authorizer has for fostering relationships and effective oversight. Regularly scheduled conversations provide structured, predictable moments each year when the authorizer and school sit together to examine performance, align expectations, and identify priorities for improvement. Unlike formal reporting or site visits, these conversations are explicitly collaborative, forward-looking, and centered on shared commitments to students. These key conversations can be a proactive step to ensure compliance with charter school requirements.

When conducted consistently and well, these conversations strengthen trust, surface early indicators of distress (IOD), clarify renewal trajectories, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure schools experience the authorizer as a partner, not just a compliance monitor. They also clarify roles, ensuring that schools receive consistent information and are not caught between conflicting directives.

Functions of Key Conversations

Conversations serve multiple interconnected functions that go far beyond simply exchanging information. They are a core social technology for building, maintaining, and transforming relationships. After any conversation, schools should feel:

- Respected and heard
- Supported
- Informed about expectations and timelines
- Confident about what comes next
- Clear on their performance and trajectory
- Connected to the authorizer as a reliable, transparent partner

Functions of Key Conversations	
Ensure a Shared Understanding	Scheduled conversations provide a designated time for the school and authorizer to align on: • Where the school stands academically, financially, and organizationally • The data's true conclusions versus common interpretations • How the school and authorizer each interpret emerging trends
Recognize Early Warning Signs	IODs such as leadership instability, inconsistent instructional systems, declining enrollment, or governance concerns often surface first in conversation long before they appear in data.
Provide Support for Continuous Improvement	These conversations allow the authorizer to: • Reflect the school's strengths • Highlight areas of opportunity • Provide clarity about expectations without dictating solutions
Identify Expectations	These conversations create transparency and provide an opportunity to bridge important topics such as those listed below to avoid surprises: • Site visit observations • Compliance reviews • Academic and financial data • Board oversight patterns
Clarify Responsibilities	They help avoid confusion by reinforcing: • What the authorizer will evaluate • What district departments handle as LEA responsibilities • Who the school should contact for specific needs
Improve Relationships	Conversation builds trust in a way reports cannot. When schools feel heard, respected, and supported, their willingness to engage openly increases.

Key Conversation Best Practices

Conversations with operators should be on-going with a regular cadence, including at least mid-year and annual conversations. More frequent touch points and conversations can occur, if needed. These conversations serve as a grounding mechanism that ensures schools are not navigating district structures alone. They provide a strategic opportunity to reinforce roles,

Effective Support and Oversight

correct misinformation, coordinate support, and build shared understanding. They play an essential role in helping schools understand the following so that decisions do not feel sudden or unexpected:

- Why an issue is concerning
- What will happen if patterns persist
- What support exists before formal intervention
- How the authorizer interprets trends
- How the performance framework connects to consequences

Authorizers will have times when conversations must be compliance driven and may be difficult. When encountering these types of conversations, it is good practice to plan the conversation and try not to deviate from the topic. Maintaining a structure can help alleviate emotion-driven situations. Keep the conversation focused on one topic, and when the conversation moves in a different direction, simply redirect and continue with the conversation. These strategies will help authorizers navigate difficult conversations. A suggested structure for key conversations is provided in Appendix B, and some potential conversation starters are outlined in Appendix C.

Indicators of Distress (IOD): An Early Warning System

High-quality charter authorizing requires more than responding to compliance violations or waiting for end-of-year academic results. Tennessee authorizers can protect students and strengthen school performance by identifying early signs of distress long before they show up in test scores or financial audits. NACSA's Indicators of Distress research, supported by national studies and field experience, shows that schools almost always exhibit predictable, observable early-warning signs one to three years before serious decline or closure.

IOD are not compliance tasks; they are a relationship-driven practice, grounded in curiosity, shared problem-solving, and proactive communication. It is not about "catching" schools. It is about responding early in ways that are fair, transparent, and supportive. IOD systems help schools feel that oversight is done with them, not to them. They allow authorizers to intervene early enough to preserve school stability, protect student learning conditions, strengthen leadership and governance, and prevent emergency closures or dramatic late-stage interventions.

Effective Support and Oversight

Schools should feel invited into problem-solving, not placed on the defensive. IODs are a tool for support, not punishment. When done well, an IOD conversation feels like:

- “We are noticing a pattern. Let’s talk about the underlying factors.”
- “Here’s what we’re seeing. Does this align with your internal perspective?”
- “We want to partner early so this doesn’t become a bigger issue later.”
- “Let’s figure out what support you need and who within the district or externally can help.”

Functions of IOD

Schools rarely experience sudden failure; rather, they typically decline gradually. Early warning signs are often qualitative – such as shifts in culture, operations, staffing, governance, or leadership – before quantitative performance data reflect the issues. Authorizers should understand these indicators and use them to do the following:

Functions of IOD	
Intervene Early	Catch issues <i>before</i> they manifest as academic failure, fiscal crisis, or safety risks.
Protect Students and Families	Students experience the consequences of decline long before the accountability system does. Prompt action prevents harmful learning environments from persisting.
Strengthen the Authorizer-School Relationship	Schools experience early-warning conversations as supportive rather than punitive when: • Expectations are clear. • Conversations are framed around student well-being. • Solutions are developed collaboratively. • Oversight does not feel like “surprise compliance.”
Promote Stability and Reduce Disruption	Authorizers that identify distress early can: • Provide guidance • Facilitate access to resources • Coordinate support with district departments • Reduce the likelihood of emergency interventions or closures
Avoid Blind Spots	Academic data often reflect issues only after internal conditions have been declining for some time. By the time test scores show a significant drop, underlying challenges are

Functions of IOD	
	usually well established. IOD monitoring strengthens predictive capacity.

Categories of IOD

There are three broad categories of IOD: Foundational, Academic, and Cultural/Operational. Schools might exhibit signs in one or multiple categories simultaneously. These indicators should always be interpreted in context, in conversation with the school, and with a focus on patterns—not isolated incidents.

Category	Description	Examples
Foundational	These are structural red flags that undermine a school's capacity to function effectively. NACSA's research shows that foundational IODs are often the strongest predictors of later decline. These indicators suggest that the systems sustaining the school may be fragile and need immediate attention.	Examples of Foundational indicators include: • Chronic leadership turnover (multiple leadership changes in a short period) • Governance dysfunction (board infighting, lack of quorum, inconsistent meetings, board micromanagement) • Conflicts between the board and school leader • Lack of internal controls or repeated audit findings • Inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete reporting • Enrollment challenges • Cash flow instability or reliance on frequent short-term borrowing • Breakdowns in communication between the school and authorizer • Loss of key operational staff (e.g., special education coordinator, business manager)
Academic	Academic distress indicators reveal emerging instructional issues that may precede declines in test scores or TVAAS results. These issues are	Examples of Academic indicators include: • Chronic failure to meet interim academic benchmarks • Inconsistent or fragmented curriculum implementation

Effective Support and Oversight

Category	Description	Examples
	often observed through classroom observations, instructional artifacts, or leadership interviews, not just test data.	• Teacher turnover in tested grades • Weak instructional coaching or data-driven instruction systems • Gaps between observed instruction and the school's stated academic model • Poor internal assessment reliability or questionable grading practices • Significant subgroup disparities
Cultural and Operational	These indicators reflect a school community showing signs of fraying or instability. These indicators often surface in site visits, family engagement, or district-level touchpoints.	Examples of Cultural and Operational indicators include: • Unsafe or chaotic school climate • High student attrition or mobility, especially mid-year withdrawals • High suspension, expulsion, or discipline disparities • Declining enrollment (voluntary or due to reputation) • Staff morale issues or high staff attrition • Breakdowns in daily systems (arrival/dismissal, special education service delivery, communication with families) • Inconsistent implementation of school policies • Parent complaints indicating systemic issues

Effective Support and Oversight

Implementation of IOD

IOD should be embedded into routine oversight, including site visits and annual reporting. When applied effectively, IODs enable authorizers to support schools proactively and collaboratively, ensuring issues are addressed early rather than becoming unexpected. The following are some best practices when implementing IOD.

Start With Curiosity, Not Conclusions

IOD conversations often uncover root causes early. Authorizers should do the following when an indicator appears:

- Ask questions
- Seek context
- Validate with additional data
- Assume positive intent

Communicate Promptly and Transparently

Schools should never hear about concerns for the first time in a report. Transparent communication strengthens trust. When an indicator is identified, it should be addressed:

- in real time;
- in writing and in conversation; and
- with a clear explanation of why the issue matters.

Calibrate Responses Proportionately

Not every IOD requires formal intervention. Many simply require a conversation, technical clarification, coaching on best practices, or a targeted follow-up visit. Be sure to not escalate issues unless warranted. The following are examples of when escalation is warranted:

- Identified patterns persist after conversations with the school leader.
- The school does not respond effectively to identified issues.
- Student well-being is compromised.

Document Patterns Thoughtfully

This documentation informs later decisions but should remain objective and evidence based. Authorizers should maintain internal notes on the following:

- When indicators first appeared
- Evidence supporting the indicator
- School explanations
- Follow-up steps

Effective Support and Oversight

Integrate IODs Into Support and Oversight Activities

The inclusion of IODs into the regular support and oversight activities conducted ensures consistency and transparency for the schools. The IODs should be explicitly integrated into the following:

- Annual performance reports
- Site visit summaries
- Mid-year check-ins
- Intervention decisions

Oversight Responsibilities

Authorizers are responsible for implementing a comprehensive system of oversight and accountability that is grounded in the charter agreement and aligned with the [Quality Charter Authorizing Standards](#). This system should give the authorizing board the information it needs to understand school performance, support continuous improvement, and make fair and timely high-stake decisions. The following is a high-level overview of the components; more detail is provided in subsequent sections of the toolkit.

Annual Authorizer Report

The annual report is both a compliance requirement and a crucial tool for building shared understanding about progress and expectations. Pursuant to [T.C.A. § 49-13-120\(b\)](#) and [T.C.A. § 49-13-121\(a\)](#), authorizers must notify each of their charter schools annually if they are “on-track” or “off-track” for renewal and provide this information in the Annual Authorizer Report which summarizes academic outcomes, financial health, and organizational compliance for each charter school. The report provides the following for the school’s governing board and school leader:

- Performance across the major domains of quality
- Identification of strengths and early signs of concern
- A clear picture of the renewal trajectory

Site Visits

Site visits provide authorizers with qualitative insight that cannot be captured through data submissions alone. Visits should be differentiated intentionally based on each school’s performance, stage of development, and specific context. They are evidence-gathering activities

Effective Support and Oversight

and are designed to minimize disruption. The information collected should clearly be tied back to outcomes in the charter agreement and performance framework. When conducted effectively, differentiated site visits do the following:

- Put academic and operational trends into context
- Help verify or clarify reported information
- Provide early visibility into emerging issues or Indicators of Distress (IODs)
- Strengthen relationships through open communication and transparency

Site visits are usually conducted by the charter school authorizing office staff, but other LEA staff may also want to be present to check on a specific area or to integrate other required site visits into one. For example, LEA special education staff may need to visit the school to check on services or provide training. The charter school authorizing office and the special education staff may collaborate and jointly conduct the site visit. When doing this, communication with the school should clearly state each kind of site visit taking place, the purpose, and who will be involved.

Intervention Protocols

[T.C.A. § 49-13-122](#) requires that a progressive intervention policy be adopted which outlines the process for intervention should an authorizer determine that a school's charter agreement may be revoked for one or more of the following:

- A material violation of the conditions, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter agreement
- Failure to meet or make sufficient progress toward the performance expectations set forth in the charter agreement
- Failure to meet accepted standards of fiscal management

The development of an intervention protocol provides a transparent, predictable, graduated sequence of responses that correspond to the severity and persistence of performance or compliance concerns. Any findings that arise from data collected, performance on the designated framework, or a site visit should connect to the progressive intervention protocol. An effective intervention protocol should do the following:

- Focus on **material** issues tied to student outcomes, legal compliance, or financial viability
- Use graduated levels of response (e.g., Notice of Concern, Notice of Breach, Probation, Revocation Review)

Effective Support and Oversight

- Clearly communicate expectations, timelines, and possible consequences
- Preserve autonomy by identifying problems without dictating how schools must solve them

More specific information on the development of an intervention protocol is provided in the Intervention Protocols section.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Annual Calendar

Quarter 1 (July–September)

- Review submitted budgets and board calendars
- Establish communication expectations for the year—release of authorizer handbook and annual reporting calendar

Quarter 2 (October–December)

- Fall site visit (differentiated based on school needs)
- Financial monitoring (first quarter statements, cash flow)
- Preliminary analysis of academic leading indicators
- Check-ins regarding special education compliance

Quarter 3 (January–March)

- Mid-year performance conversation
- Organizational health monitoring (governance, staffing, culture)
- Annual Authorizer Report due Jan. 1
- Interim Reviews or renewal work (if applicable)

Quarter 4 (April–June)

- Verify student enrollment and lottery documentation (as applicable)
- End-of-year site visit or targeted walkthrough
- Assessment readiness check
- Financial audit follow-up
- End-of-year performance conversation

Appendix B: Suggested Structure for Key Conversations

Suggested Structure for Key Conversations:

- **Welcome and Framing:** Emphasize partnership and transparency.
- **Academic Update:** Review of interim assessments, instructional systems, subgroup performance.
- **Financial Snapshot:** Budget to actuals, enrollment effects, cash flow, audit readiness.
- **Planning Ahead:** Identify priorities and supports needed.
- **Next Steps:** Allows for an opportunity to identify next steps for charter leaders.

Suggested Structures for Annual Performance Conversations

- **Framing and Purpose:** Reinforce that this is a two-way conversation.
- **Walk Through Annual Report Ratings:** Clarify the story behind any “Does Not Meet” or “Falls Far Below” ratings.
- **Review Strengths:** Celebrate progress to build trust.
- **Discuss Opportunities for Improvement:** Grounded in performance framework indicators.
- **IOD Pattern Review:** Summarize patterns across the year.
- **Renewal Trajectory:** Provide clear, honest, evidence-based expectations.
- **Plan for the Coming Year:** Identify 2-4 priorities that matter most.
- **Reflection and Feedback:** Reflect on what went well and what needs improvement.

Appendix C: Example Conversation Starters

These questions emphasize curiosity—not judgment.

- “What is the story of your year so far? What are you most proud of?”
- “Which data trends are most encouraging or most concerning to you?”
- “What surprises have emerged in the first half of the year?”
- “What systems or roles have been hardest to stabilize?”
- “Are there areas where district processes are creating barriers we should help resolve?”
- “We’re noticing some early indicators of distress. Would you help us understand what’s happening behind the scenes?”
- “How can we make the second half of the year more successful for you?”

These questions help deepen trust, encourage reflection, and reinforce shared goals.

- “Looking at this year holistically, what does success look like to you?”
- “Where do you see the strongest alignment between your internal self-assessment and our report?”
- “Are there areas where the report doesn’t capture the full context?”
- “These indicators suggest a pattern—does that align with your internal experience?”
- “If you had to identify the top three priorities for next year, what would they be?”
- “Here’s how this year’s data informs your renewal trajectory—how does that align with your expectations?”
- “How can we strengthen our support and communication next year?”