



Why We Authorize Charter Schools

Charter schools offer teachers, parents and community members the opportunity to create new public schools in response to community needs. In return, these chartered schools agree to be held accountable by their authorizer for student performance outcomes. If the charter school fails to produce the promised student outcomes the authorizer may intervene in a variety of ways, and as a last resort can close the school. Quality charter school authorizing is the linchpin of the charter promise of accountability for results and the creation of quality educational opportunities. While charter authorizers are not responsible for the ultimate success or failure of a charter school, they can have a major impact on that outcome by providing strong oversight and accountability.

In 2000 the Minnesota state legislature made it possible for non-profit organizations with a \$2,000,000 fund balance and membership in the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits to authorize charter schools. At this time, Volunteers of America-Minnesota became the first non-profit charter school authorizer in the nation. VOA-MN became an authorizer because we recognized it as a new and effective way of carrying out our mission. This decision was the result of a number of factors. Through our experience as an operator of two contracted alternative schools in the Minneapolis Public Schools we witnessed the significant positive impact that small, personalized learning environments can have on students and their families. The opportunity to assist teachers, parents and community members to create and sustain small schools in their communities was a natural extension of our positive experience with our alternative schools. Thus, we had both the vision and experience to assume this role.

In the years that we have been authorizing, VOA-MN has developed and practices a model of charter school authorizing that goes beyond the compliance-based role vaguely outlined in state statute. We engage in proactive relationships and add value to the schools with which we work. During the start-up phase VOA-MN works closely with founding groups to ensure that tasks necessary to a successful opening (facility, finance, human resources, marketing/recruitment, curriculum development) are accomplished in a timely manner. Once operational, VOA-MN vigilantly monitors the financial and academic performance of its schools through frequent communication and site visits and regular review of financial and program documents. When signs of trouble arise, we work closely with the school's board to problem solve and identify resources that may be helpful. This is a departure from the traditional reactive relationship between charter school authorizers and schools.

VOA-MN has much to offer charter schools in the way of expertise in non-profit management and board governance. Our track record of responding to *emerging* community needs with effective social service programs and experience starting and operating two alternative schools makes our organization particularly qualified to authorize charter schools. We recognize the great challenges and difficulties in starting a charter school and can help school developers navigate this complex process while respecting the autonomy and uniqueness of each school.