



January 22, 2021

Anna Hinton  
Director, Charter School Programs  
U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education  
400 Maryland Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20202

**Re: Request for Comments on Proposed Priorities, Requirements, and Definitions—  
Expanding Opportunity Through Quality Charter Schools Program (CSP)—National  
Dissemination Grants, Docket No.: ED-2020-OESE-0172**

Dear Ms. Hinton,

The Center for American Progress (“CAP”) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments regarding the *Proposed Priorities, Requirements, and Definitions—Expanding Opportunity Through Quality Charter Schools Program (CSP)—National Dissemination Grants* as issued in the December 23, 2020, Federal Register (Docket No. ED-2020-OESE-0172).

CAP is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through bold, progressive ideas and action. As part of its core mission, CAP conducts research and develops policy ideas that advances the interests of a high-quality education for every child. One of the priority areas for the CAP K-12 education team includes taking a balanced approach to charter school policy that recognizes high-quality charter schools as one tool in the toolbox for providing all students with a [quality education](#), while also addressing challenges in the sector.

In 2017, we published [The Progressive Case for Charter Schools](#), arguing that, when there is a high bar for approval and accountability, public, nonprofit charter schools can embody progressive ideals to provide students of color and students from families with low incomes with equal educational opportunity. Our team followed this piece with pieces reflecting the balanced approach: a 2018 [column](#) about how high-performing charter schools with nontraditional schedules can be especially beneficial for working families, a report examining DC charter schools’ [backfilling practices](#), and a report highlighting the misplaced priorities of for-profit, [virtual charter schools](#).

In 2019, CAP published a [column](#) about how to modernize the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP). This piece made the case that the program’s focus on opening new schools does not address the range of current needs in the charter sector and outlined how the CSP can meet the moment by encouraging smart growth, helping existing charter schools improve, and addressing problems in the charter sector. In spring, 2020, CAP’s [event](#) “Beyond the Talking Points: Charter School Policy and Equity” brought experts together to discuss nuanced issues facing charter schools and emphasize the importance of community input in charter school policy.

The proposed priorities of the National Dissemination Grants are generally aligned with the above work; however, we have several comments that we believe would strengthen the priorities and ensure grantees address pressing needs in the charter school sector.

### Comments

- **The priorities should require more specificity about how to prevent conflicts of interest and confront challenges in the sector.** The majority of charter schools use their increased autonomy to develop innovative and beneficial practices for students, but there remain some bad actors that can take advantage of flexibility in the sector for the wrong reasons. Priority 1—Strengthening Charter School Authorizing and Oversight—includes laudable goals to expand best practices. However, it should be more specific about problems related to conflicts of interest and risks of profiteering through real estate and management contracts. For example, to meet this priority, there should be a focus on ensuring transparency such that the public has full access to information charter school operations and finances, and contracts with external management companies are available to authorizers and the community.
- **The priorities should include an emphasis on helping existing charter schools improve.** Research on charter schools has shown that even though many schools have significant positive effects on academic achievement, there are also schools that are not as successful and hundreds close annually due to academic, financial, or other management issues. In addition to aiding the development of public chartering agencies, Priority 2 should focus on supporting existing schools. Grantees should consider activities such as promoting partnerships with institutes of higher education, helping successful networks disseminate curricular resources and other best practices to newer or struggling schools, and creating cooperative agreements for charter schools to gain more affordable access to things like special education expertise.
- **National Dissemination grantees should be encouraged to pursue and emphasize community input.** For too long, education policy has been done to communities rather than for and by communities. Priority 4—Empowering Underserved Students and Their Families to Choose a High-Quality Education that Meets Their Unique Needs—should include funding for national dissemination grantees to fund pilots for communities to study enrollment patterns and conduct surveys of interest in school models that could inform authorizing decisions. Grantees should be encouraged to develop and provide tools for these activities and could fund a few states or communities to begin this work. Within Priority 4, grantees could also support the development of pilot programs for unified enrollment systems that would improve equitable access to schools underserved students. Additionally, grantees should not only consider traditionally underserved student groups, but also traditionally underrepresented populations in school leadership, such as community-created schools and schools led by Black, Latinx, and Native leaders.
- **The proposed priorities do not include consideration of the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for charter schools and authorizers.** With nearly all schools shifting to remote learning at some point, COVID-19’s massive effects on students and schools will spread through multiple academic years. Priority 1 and 2 should include references to support charter schools as they seek to help students most affected by the pandemic. Recovering from the academic, emotional, and health effects of the pandemic’s disruption will be a multi-year endeavor. And it will also require adjustments

to authorizers' accountability frameworks given disruptions to statewide assessments, attendance patterns, and other framework inputs. Priority 1 should address how grantees can support authorizers facing these challenging questions. Priority 2 should consider communities hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis as part of the educational agencies with the most need.

- **The proposed funding restrictions should allow grant funds to be used for the pilot programs mentioned above.** Grantees should be able to use funds to support the development and piloting of cooperative agreements to help existing charter schools improve as recommended above within Priority 2. Those pilots could be structured as sub-grants to authorizers or consortia of charter schools. This would also allow for sub-grants for pilot programs to assess enrollment patterns and community interest or to implement unified enrollment systems to improve equitable access to high-quality education options under Priority 4.

### **Recommendations**

The proposed priorities for these dissemination grants address many important topics within the charter sector, but we believe the suggestions above could further strengthen this grant competition. Allowing funds to be used for the development and launch of pilot programs in addition to dissemination efforts would also allow the Department to broaden the focus of the CSP to focus on smart growth, helping existing charter schools improve, and addressing challenges in the charter sector.

Sincerely,

Neil Campbell  
Director of Innovation, K-12 Education Policy  
Center for American Progress