District of Columbia (D.C.)
Charter School Law Overview

Initially enacted in 1996, the D.C. charter law allows two authorizers: The D.C. Board of Education and the D.C. Public Charter School Board (whose sole responsibility is authorizing charter schools). This arrangement was established by Congress as part of an overall education reform package for D.C. Each of the two boards may authorize up to 10 schools per year.

As of Fall 2002, 42 charter schools were operating. The D.C. Public Charter School Board was responsible for 25 of these, the Board of Education for the other 17.

State Policy Environment

Support for Charter Schools: As a whole, D.C. has a modestly supportive policy environment for charter schools, with a C+ for the category. Survey respondents gave a very low score for acceptance by the local district. However, the Mayor is on record as supporting charter schools and the Superintendent of Schools has not been outspoken against them. The strongest support for charter schools comes from the city council.

Respondents give high marks for the law’s provision for school autonomy, although some operators report that authorizers are becoming too intrusive. (The one conversion school, not surprisingly, reports being happy with its enhanced autonomy.) D.C. also received high marks for having two authorizers to choose from, which make decisions based on merit and not politics. Respondents indicate that the D.C. Board of Education is less enthusiastic in its authorizing role than the Public Charter School Board. However, this may change as the D.C. Board of Education recently changed its own basic structure from fully elected to half elected and half appointed (by the charter-friendly Mayor).

Support and Accountability for Authorizers: D.C. received a C– for this category with low marks for periodic examination by an oversight body and for having a comprehensive accountability system. Although there are two authorizers, applicants have no appeals process other than legal action.

Authorizer Practices

Application Processes: D.C. was given a B– by survey respondents for its application processes. Two criteria were rated quite high: detailed application
timelines and informational meetings for potential applicants.

Approval Processes: Several aspects of D.C.’s approval process were rated quite high, leading to an average grade of B+ for this category. These criteria were multiple expert reviewers, the opportunity for applicants to address and correct weaknesses, and written notification of weaknesses for denied applications.

Each authorizer has a slightly different process, although some aspects are required by law of both. The Board of Education has a one-stage application process that includes a panel review of applications and public hearings. The Public Charter School Board has a two-step process. Applicants that don’t get approved during the first round but that meet minimum requirements may revise their application for round two. This application process also includes information meetings, technical review panels, public hearings, and an interview. One criticism offered by respondents is that the Charter School Board has been too cautious in issuing charters.

Performance Contracts: With a B+ in this category, too, respondents indicate that D.C. performance contracts contain the necessary provisions for mission, student recruitment, and data collection.

Oversight: D.C. received a B for oversight. It earned high marks for announced site visits, annual audits and progress reports, using the reports to notify schools of weaknesses, and establishing a defined set of actions to address problems. However, survey responses indicate a difference between the two authorizers regarding the quality of interaction with charter schools. There is concern that the Board of Education is often at cross purposes with its schools.

Renewal and Revocation Processes: D.C. received a B+ for its renewal and revocation processes. Charter schools are reviewed during every fifth year of their 15-year contract. As the first generation of D.C. charter schools reaches its fifth year of operation, authorizers are starting to focus on the renewal process. So far, they receive high marks from survey respondents on many criteria. For example, authorizers use value-added measures to determine student achievement. The Public Charter School Board analyzes school data and posts school performance reports on the web. Its oversight process is designed to be less regulatory and based more on self-evaluation.

The Board of Education has shown its commitment to accountability by revoking six schools primarily for financial reasons. (The law is written so that revocation for student performance cannot occur until the fifth year, although a school can be put on probation because of it.) The Public Charter School Board has not revoked any charters, but has also been more cautious in its approvals. Authorizers received good marks from survey respondents in this area.

D.C. also rated well for notifying poorly performing schools of imminent closure in enough time to remedy problems, and for establishing specific provisions for closing schools.

Transparency and Internal Accountability: Survey respondents gave D.C. a C+ for this category, with mediocre scores in most criteria. However, D.C. did receive high marks on criteria related to easily accessible applications. (Both authorizers post application instructions and materials on the web.)

Overall Grade

Based on scores for 56 criteria, the District of Columbia earned a C for its policy environment and a B for authorizer practices, resulting in an overall grade of B-. When observer and school operator survey respondents were asked to provide a single “holistic” grade, the average grade given was a C+.

Nothing in the D.C. authorizing picture stands out as exemplary or atrocious. However, survey respondents are generally more satisfied with their experiences with the Public Charter School Board than with the Board of Education. Authorizers and policymakers should review the specific criteria in Appendix A of this report, and on the web at http://www.edexcellence.net/tbfinstitute/authorizers.html, to determine ways to move the District of Columbia to “the next level” of successful authorizers.

Note: The grades for the District of Columbia are based upon survey data received from four authorizer respondents (representing both major authorizers); eight observer respondents; and six charter operator respondents (of 42 total operating charter schools, or 14%).
### District of Columbia

#### Charter School & Authorizer Numbers

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<tr>
<th><strong>Year Initial Charter Law Enacted</strong></th>
<th>1996</th>
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#### Total Charter Schools & Students (as of Fall 2002)

| **# Approved Charter Schools** | 42 |
| **# Operating Charter Schools** | 42 |
| **# Charter Students (% of Total Public School Students)** | About 11,500 (14.5%) |

#### Total Closures (to date)

| **# Revocations or Non-renewals** | 6 |
| **# Voluntary Closures** | 0 |

#### Major Authorizers (those with three or more schools)

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<tr>
<th><strong>Name</strong></th>
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<tbody>
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Data Sources: D.C. Public Charter School Board, D.C. Board of Education, and the D.C. Public Charter School Resource Center