

## Audubon Center of the North Woods – Minnesota Authorizers Performance Evaluation System (MAPES)

### Authorizer Information

**Authorizer:** Audubon Center of the North Woods

**Authorizer Type:** Non-Profit Organization

**MDE approved:** 2010

**Operational Schools:** Academic Arts High School (formerly River Heights Charter School), AFSA High School (formerly Agriculture and Food Science Academy), Aurora Charter School, Best Academy, Bright Water Elementary, Cannon River STEM School, Crosslake Community School, Discovery Public School of Faribault, Discovery Woods Montessori School, East Range Academy of Technology and Science, Excell Academy for Higher Learning, Glacial Hills Elementary School, Great Expectations School, Harvest Preparatory School, Higher Ground Academy, La Crescent Montessori and STEM School, Laura Jeffery Academy, Metro Schools (formerly Lighthouse Academy), Natural Science Academy (formerly Michael Frome Academy), Minneapolis College Preparatory, New Discoveries Montessori Academy, Noble Academy, North Lakes Academy, Northern Lights Community School, Odyssey Academy, Oshki Ogimaag Charter School, Pillager Area Charter School, Prairie Seeds Academy, River's Edge Academy, Riverway Learning Community, Swan River Montessori Charter School, Vermilion Country School, Voyageurs Expeditionary School, World Learner School of Chaska

**Schools approved, but not open:** N/A

**Closed Schools:** Emily O. Goodridge Grey Accelerated Charter School, Metro Tech Career Academy (formerly Metro Tech – Dunwoody Academy)

### Characteristics of the Authorizer

- Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW) has a Charter School Division whose mission is “to provide superior oversight, evaluation, feedback, and strategic support to its authorized schools, resulting in increased academic, financial, operational, and Environmental Education performance of each school.” Their vision, as part of the larger Audubon organization, is “to authorize a portfolio of high-performing charter schools that instill a connection and commitment to the environment in their school communities, while working towards a healthy planet where all people live in balance with the Earth.”
- ACNW currently has a staff of people to oversee, monitor, and evaluate its portfolio of schools. This includes a Director of Charter School Authorizing, a Performance and Accountability Manager, an Information and Communications Coordinator, an Environmental Educational Evaluator, and a Strategic Initiatives Fellow. The Charter School Division is supported by ACNW’s Board of Directors through the Charter School Committee.
- Through its contracting, the authorizer meets nationally-recognized principles and standards from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). Specifically, it meets NACSA’s three Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing that are considered core to quality authorizing.
- ACNW’s portfolio includes thirty-four schools, all of which are implementing Environmental Education as part of their contract with the authorizer. The schools are located throughout the state of Minnesota and include a range of educational experiences, such as Montessori; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and the Arts.

## Performance Rating Drivers

- The authorizer has clear staff structures to support its portfolio of schools. In 2014, the organization made a conscious decision to restructure the Charter School Division to ensure that job titles corresponded to the responsibility associated with the position. Additionally, the restructuring led to the establishment of an Environmental Education Evaluator position.
- The authorizer has a clear vision that is central to its authorizing practice. Environmental literacy is a central component of the authorizer’s contracts with each school; they offer financial and technical supports to help schools implement their Environmental Education program. Additionally, the authorizer has a clear mission that is focused on increasing school performance in the areas of academics, finances, governance, and Environmental Education.
- The authorizer has established clear structures around its authorizing, including transparent application criteria for new and existing schools. Processes are outlined clearly in application materials and accessible through a variety of mediums, including the authorizer’s web site.
- The authorizer executes contracts with clear, measurable and attainable performance standards and oversees the charter schools in the areas of academics, operations, and finances according to the processes outlined in the contract and approved authorizer application. .
- Although the authorizer has a rigorous and comprehensive renewal process – including an extensive review of school performance data, as well as a site visit – documentation was not presented to demonstrate how ACNW determines renewal contract terms; it is unclear whether the decisions are merit-based and aimed to promote the growth of high-quality charter schools.

## Overall Performance Rating

**MAPES Overall Performance Rating for Audubon Center of the North Woods is 3.44: Satisfactory**

*Note: Authorizers must receive at least Level 2 – “Satisfactory” on all performance measures in order to receive a rating of “Commendable”.*

## Ratings Summary

### PERFORMANCE MEASURES A: AUTHORIZER CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE – 25% Weight of Overall Rating

#### *Authorizer Mission and Vision*

A.1: Authorizer Mission (5%)	4
A.2: Authorizer Vision and Organizational Goals (10%)	4

#### *Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure*

A.3: Authorizer Structure of Operations (15%)	4
A.4: Authorizer Staff Expertise (10%)*	4
A.5: Authorizer Capacity and Skill Development of Leadership and Authorizing Staff (5%)*	3
A.6: Authorizer Operational Budget for Authorizing the Portfolio of Charter Schools (10%)	3
A.7: Authorizer Operational Conflicts of Interest (10%)	3
A.8: Ensuring Autonomy of the Schools in the Portfolio (15%)	4
A.9: Authorizer Self-Evaluation of Capacity, Infrastructure and Practices (5%)*	3
A.10: Authorizer High-Quality Authorizing Dissemination (5%)*	4
A.11: Authorizer Compliance to Responsibilities Stated in Statute (10%)	4

**Total Performance Measures A Rating:** 3.7

**PERFORMANCE MEASURES B: AUTHORIZER PROCESSES AND DECISION MAKING– 75% Weight of Overall Rating**

*Authorizer Process and Decision making*

B.1: New Charter School Decisions (20% / 5%)**	4
B.2: Interim Accountability Decisions (10% / 5%)**	4

*Authorizer Performance Contracting*

B.3: Contract Term, Negotiation and Execution (10%)	4
B.4: Performance Standards (10%)	4

*Authorizer Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation*

B.5: Authorizer’s Processes for Ongoing Oversight of the Portfolio of Charter Schools (10%)	4
B.6: Authorizer’s Standards and Processes for Interventions, Corrective Action and Response to Complaints (10%)*	4
B.7: Charter School Support, Development and Technical Assistance (5%)*	4
B.8: High-Quality Charter School Replication and/or Dissemination of Best School Practices (5%)*	3

*Authorizer Renewal and Decision Making*

B.9: Charter School Renewal or Termination Decision (20%)	1
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**Total Performance Measures B Rating:** 3.35

*\*Continuous Improvement Measure*

*\*\*Weights adjusted for authorizers not engaged in B.1 and/or B.2 activities*

## Evidence to Support the Performance Rating

The review team considered documentation for Audubon Center of the North Woods using MAPES. Following the review of the authorizer's evidence of mission, capacity and infrastructure, process and decision making, performance contracting, ongoing oversight and evaluation, and renewal decision making, the team determined consensus findings. These findings and the evidence to support them are presented below. These findings form the basis for the team's MAPES performance rating.

### PERFORMANCE MEASURES A: AUTHORIZER CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

#### Authorizer Mission and Vision

#### A.1 - Does the authorizer have a clear and compelling mission for charter school authorizing?

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has a clear and compelling mission for charter school authorizing. Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW) – Charter School Division's (CSD) mission is "to provide superior oversight, evaluation, feedback, and strategic support to its authorized schools, resulting in increased academic, financial, operational, and environmental education performance of each school." The mission fully aligns with *Minnesota Statute §124E.05, Subd. 4*, that states that authorizing charter schools is a means for an organization to carry out its mission. ACNW's mission appears in a variety of areas, including the CSD's annual report, the CSD web site, and in documents such as the proposal to become an ACNW-authorized charter school. Additionally, the mission is consistent with the authorizer's Approved Authorizer Application (AAA). During interviews with internal stakeholders, both Board members and staff verbally stated the mission. The authorizer's mission was also verified externally by school representatives. In the Charter School Leadership Survey (n=38), the majority of participants agreed (15) or strongly agreed (23) that they are "aware of, and knowledgeable about, the authorizer's mission." They explained that the mission was made known to them through leadership workshops, visits to Board meetings, trainings, through the representatives who work with the school, and through the evaluation process. School directors, during interviews, also confirmed the mission.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.1 Narrative Template p. 1
- Approved Authorizer Application
- ACNW Request for New Charter School Proposal
- ACNW CSD web site: <http://auduboncharterschools.org/>
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions I and J
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015
- Board member interview - October 23, 2015

## A.2 - Does the authorizer have a comprehensive vision for charter school authorizing with clear organizational goals and timeframes for achievement that are aligned with the purposes of Minnesota Law?

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has a comprehensive vision for charter school authorizing with clear organizational goals and timeframes for achievement that are aligned with the purposes of the Minnesota law. ACNW CSD's vision is "to authorize a portfolio of high-performing charter schools that instill a connection and commitment to the environment in their school communities, while working towards a healthy planet where all people live in balance with the Earth." This vision, specifically the emphasis on high-performing charter schools, aligns with *Minnesota Statute §124E.01. Subd. 1*, to increase all pupil learning and all student achievement. ACNW's vision is at the core of the Strategic Plan for FY 2014, in which the organization goals and timeframes are clearly laid out. For example, the outcome statement for Item I of the Strategic Plan FY2014 states: "One new school will be approved by the ACNW Board of Directors by June 30, 2015;" and the accompanying measure is: "Board approval of one additional school with a clear commitment to environmental education." The outcome measure for Item IV states: "ACNW-authorized schools will increase the environmental literacy of their students, faculty, staff, and school community." The associated timeline for this measure is listed as July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2016. The Strategic Plan minutes for FY2014 includes an action plan chart that outlines tasks and deadlines associated with each outcome statement.

ACNW CSD is actively measuring and achieving established goals. For example, the authorizing program staff provided Harvest Preparatory School feedback that was based on a review of the school's Epicenter (data collection software) submissions and Board meeting observations. One area for improvement listed that "No discussion of environmental education was evident at any of the Board meetings during the period. Environmental education goals are central to the contract with the authorizer and performance on these goals is critical element of the authorizer's decision to renew the school's contract." A recommendation made by ACNW is to "include the 'Environmental Education Report' or something similar on the agenda and provide minutes that briefly summarize the report provided by staff."

In the narrative and interviews, internal staff stated that ACNW CSD evaluates its work regularly against its vision and organizational goals. This occurs through weekly staff meetings, weekly school update meetings and monthly strategic planning meetings. The ACNW Board measures progress against the organizational goals at charter school committee meetings and an annual meeting dedicated to charter schools. A comparison of the Strategic Plan for FY2015 and FY2016-FY2018 showed that, while the CSD was focused on adding one new school to the portfolio in FY2015, in FY2016-FY2018, ACNW's goal is to "[s]trengthen the quality of ACNW's charter school portfolio by: a) adding high-quality new schools; b) adding high-quality existing schools (transfers); c) improving performance of current schools; and d) closing schools that are not meeting expectations.

### **Key Evidence:**

- A.2 Narrative Template p. 1
- ACNW CSD – FY2015 Strategic Plan 6/30/14 p. 2
- Strategic Plan Meeting – September 2, 2015 – Minutes pp. 4-5, 9-10
- ACNW CSD – Strategic Plan: April 2015 through June 2018, p. 4
- HPS Semi-Annual Board Review pp. 1-2
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- Board member interview - October 23, 2015

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES A: AUTHORIZER CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure

#### A.3 - To what degree does the authorizer operate with a clear structure of duties and responsibilities and sufficient resources to effectively oversee its portfolio of charter schools?

##### Performance Level Rating: Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer operates with a clear structure of duties and responsibilities, as well as sufficient resources to effectively oversee its portfolio of charter schools. ACNW clearly describes the organizational structure in the narrative; it is also outlined in the ACNW organizational chart. The authorizer states that in 2013, the ACNW Board restructured the internal organization “to advance quality authorizing.” Changes included an increase in internal staff from 1 full-time equivalent (FTE) in FY2012 to 4.1 FTE in FY2016, and were enacted to meet the needs of the portfolio. Additionally, CSD staff roles and responsibilities have evolved to communicate each position’s level of responsibility/ authority. For example, a role that was once titled Charter School Coordinator has been elevated to Director of Charter School Authorizing to reflect the position’s greater responsibility. In 2013, the authorizing staff also shifted one staff member’s position to become a .5 FTE Environmental Educator. Prior to 2013 and the restructuring, however, the staffing level was sufficient to meet the needs of the portfolio. A review of the job descriptions for ACNW shows an emphasis on recruiting staff members knowledgeable about environmental literacy. Further, all core authorizing staff bring charter school experience, with the exception of the current NACSA fellow. According to the ACNW’s staffing history, ACNW has employed at least three staff since FY2012 to support its portfolio of schools. During the authorizer interview, ACNW explained that, as the program has grown its internal capacity, the authorizer has diminished its reliance on contracted evaluators. This was confirmed by ACNW’s Charter Division Staffing History that reflected a decrease in contracted evaluators from five in FY2012 to three in FY2016. Evidence supports that the authorizer had sufficient staff to support its portfolio of schools over the past three years; however, ACNW made a strategic decision to hire and restructure its staffing organization to emphasize key areas of its strategic plan.

The authorizer contracts with external evaluators who help review school proposals and transfer school applications, charter school renewal applications, and expansion applications. External evaluators also participate in ongoing oversight site visits, Board meeting observations and monthly Board and financial reviews. The ACNW Evaluator Job Description outlines duties, including conducting monthly reviews, Board meeting observations, annual site visits, and performance evaluations, as well as performing as a renewal team member and new or transfer school review team member. During the interview, the authorizer stated that it is currently working with three contractors on a regular basis. Some of these contractors attend team meetings, especially around norming, to ensure consistency. For new school application reviews, ACNW engages external reviewers to ensure that the review team has a variety of expertise, including finance and operations.

During the authorizer interview, internal staff described the different roles for each staff member. School representatives also consistently verified that there is a clear structure of duties and responsibilities that is defined and meets the needs of the portfolio. In the Charter School Leadership Survey, the majority of respondents agreed (17) or strongly agreed (19) that the structure of duties and responsibilities of the authorizer is clear and at a level adequate to meet the needs of the school. As one respondent wrote, “ACNW offers a variety of resources to meet the needs of the school. Whether employed by ACNW or contracted, resources are available.” In both the Charter School Leadership Survey and

interviews, school directors verified that ACNW has adequate resources to effectively oversee them at the school level.

In the agreement between the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and ACNW, there is a list of provisions that the authorizer must take to safeguard student data. A review of the Dropbox Security Whitepaper shows that the authorizer is appropriately managing and safeguarding school, student information and records relating to authorizing.

Finally, in the Charter School Leadership Survey, the majority of respondents agreed (23) or strongly agreed (10) that the staffing level of the authorizer is sufficient to meet the needs of the school. As one respondent wrote, “Staffing to effectively complete these reports and conduct site visits has fluctuated over the terms of our contract, but they are trying to maintain staff to provide this oversight in a timely fashion.” It should be noted that three respondents disagreed that the current staffing is sufficient, citing issues such as staff turnover and the limited number of annual visits as challenges. During interviews with school directors, participants gave specific examples as to how different ACNW staff are working with their schools. For example, the Environmental Educator Evaluator has been providing technical assistance to schools as they work to implement environmental literacy programs, and the Information and Communications Coordinator has been providing technical support to schools around Epicenter.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.3 Narrative Template
- ACNW CSD Staffing History
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions K and L
- ACNW Organization Chart
- Dropbox Security Whitepaper
- State of Minnesota, Data Sharing Agreement between the Department of Education and the Audubon Center of the North Woods p. 4

**A.4 - To what degree does the authorizer have appropriate experience, expertise and skills to sufficiently oversee the portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has appropriate experience, expertise and skills to sufficiently oversee the portfolio of charter schools. ACNW’s current core staff have diverse experience, documented expertise and skills in charter schools, curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance, and law. All four FTE staff have charter school experience ranging from 16 years (Director of School Authorizing) to three years. Additionally, the Director of Charter School Authorizing has experience in management, facilities, finance, and law. For example, before joining ACNW, the Director was a founding teacher and executive director at a charter school, during which time he oversaw all aspects of charter school operations, including administrative and educational programs. Two of the FTE staff have experience in management and finance. For example, before joining ACNW, the Information and Communications Coordinator coordinated before- and after-school youth programs; the Performance and Accountability Manager worked for MDE, overseeing Minnesota’s Federal Charter Schools Program Grant Project. Finally, one FTE has experience in facilities. As stated above, evidence supports that the authorizer had staff with appropriate expertise to support its portfolio of schools over the past three years; however, ACNW has made a strategic decision to hire and restructure its staffing organization to emphasize key areas of its strategic plan.

In addition to their core staff, ACNW also contracts with external evaluators. Of six contractors listed by ACNW, all have charter school experience. Each also brings experience in at least one area of management, finance, facilities, or law. For example, one contractor is currently a Senior Vice-President for a corporation that provides technology solutions and also teaches a graduate-level course for school-based administrators on the use of assessments. ACNW's Charter School Committee – a subcommittee of the Board of Directors – includes at least one member with charter school experience. ACNW also contracts with three different attorneys who provide legal counsel on an as-needed basis.

Finally, a review of professional licenses showed that the Director of Charter School Authorizing, the Performance and Accountability Manager, three of the most utilized external contractors, and a Board member have all been credentialed for at least the last 12 months.

**Key Evidence:**

- Summary of Experience and Credentials in Key Areas
- Sample Legal Counsel Agreement
- ACNW Résumés
- ACNW Licenses
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**A.5 - To what degree does the authorizer build the knowledge and skill base of its authorizing leadership and staff through professional development? Is professional development aligned with its operations, vision and goals for overseeing its portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 3: Commendable

**Finding:** The authorizer builds the knowledge and skill base of its authorizing leadership and staff through professional development that is aligned with its operations, vision and goals for overseeing its portfolio of charter schools. ACNW's staff participate regularly in professional development, including mission-aligned conferences, workshops and trainings in Minnesota and on a national basis. Additionally, staff engage in job-embedded professional development. For example, staff have attended conferences ranging from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers Annual Leadership Conference to the Community Energy Forum to the Minnesota Charter School Law Conference. ACNW staff stated in the narrative and authorizer interview that professional development is differentiated and customized to meet the needs of the leadership and staff. For example, the Environmental Educational Evaluator attended a conference entitled, Change Over Time: Investigate Climate Change Impact in the Midwest. Staff also set and evaluate their annual professional development goals aligned with the strategic plan. For example, one staff member explained that during her six-month review, she identified that she was seeking more training on finance in order to better support the schools with which she works. As a result, ACNW sent her to a training provided by Clifton Larson Allen – a professional services firm that specifically supports public accounting capabilities. A review of the ACNW Employee Evaluation Form shows that goal-setting for employees is aligned with areas of growth. In the narrative, the authorizer also explained that staff engage in networking through state and national charter school task forces and work groups.

In the narrative and interview, the authorizer stated that ACNW leadership and staff engage in job-embedded professional development through staff meetings, internal staff trainings, Board and committee meetings, ongoing consultations with schools, and on-the-job training. During the interview,

staff explained that during staff meetings, the Director of Charter School Authorizing shares a wealth of knowledge; it is also a forum during which staff can ask questions. Additionally, staff stated that much of their training has been done through on-the-job activities. For example, newer staff described attending School Board meetings with ACNW's Director, during which they recorded observations individually and then compared them afterward. Other staff members reported that preparation for MAPES review provided a comprehensive training around ACNW's operations, vision and goals.

ACNW evaluates professional development. ACNW staff described that, before attending trainings and conferences, they will identify outcomes related to the sessions they plan to attend. A review of staff meeting minutes showed that during staff meetings, they debrief on the value of the training or conference and the alignment with predetermined goals. However, there is no clear evidence that, within the last 12 months, ACNW has measured the outcomes of the professional development for its leadership and staff.

**Key Evidence:**

- Narrative Template A.5
- ACNW Staff Development Chart
- ACNW Employee Evaluation Form, p. 3
- ACNW Staff Meeting Minutes, August 25, 2014
- ACNW Strategic Plan Minutes, November 3, 2014
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015

**A.6 - To what degree is the authorizer's actual resource allocation commensurate with its stated budget, needs and responsibilities of authorizing the portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 3: Commendable

**Finding:** The authorizer's actual resource allocation is commensurate with its stated budget, needs and responsibilities of authorizing the portfolio of charter schools. The resource allocations for authorizing in the FY2012-FY2015 budget are consistent with resources committed in the AAA and sufficient to fulfill authorizing responsibilities. According to the narrative, ACNW authorizing expenditures have increased substantially over the past five years, from \$250K in FY2012 to more than a projected \$538K in FY2016. This is an increase of more than 100%. A review of the budget shows that total revenues are significantly higher than projected revenues. Expenses and fund balances over their five years have been greater than anticipated in their AAA as well. For example, in FY2015, ACNW projected that their expenses would be nearly 2% greater than revenues. In reality, the authorizer stayed within their projection; their actual expenses were below their anticipated percentage of expenses over revenues. ACNW still retains \$100K as a fund balance at the close of FY 2015.

According to the narrative, staffing levels have increased to "ensure sufficient staffing to meet the additional authorizing requirements, increased portfolio needs and responsibilities, and to implement nationally-recognized best practices for charter school authorizing." Review of ACNW Charter School Division Staffing History shows that in FY2012, ACNW had 33 operational schools and one pre-operational school. In FY2012, to support the portfolio of schools, ACNW dedicated 2.8 FTEs plus consultants to support their authorizing work: one FTE Charter School Lead Coordinator (position was renamed to Director of Charter School Authorizing), one FTE Charter School Assistant Coordinator, a .8 FTE Administrative Assistant, and five Contracted Evaluators. In FY2016, ACNW has expanded its portfolio to include 34 operational schools – including two transfer schools – and shows 4.1 FTE, plus

consultants. They have an FTE Director of Charter School Authorizing, an FTE Performance and Accountability Manager, an FTE Information and Communications Coordinator, a .5 FTE Environmental Evaluator, a .6 FTE Strategic Initiatives Fellow, and three Contracted Evaluators. The percent of spending that is attributed to staff is less than projected in the AAA; however, ACNW is spending more on external contractors and professional development than projected in the AAA. In the interview, the authorizer confirmed that they are investing their resources to achieve the outcomes laid out in the AAA and charter school manual. Specifically, ACNW is devoting its resources to the development of their existing staff, who, as a result, are in a better position to fulfill their authorizing responsibilities. In school director interviews, participants stated that ACNW has the resources it needs to support the schools within its portfolio. As one respondent summarized, “If you look at the variety of assessments that they provide for us – they assess finances, academics and governance – it shows that they have the success to support us as charter schools in Minnesota.”

The ACNW Charter School Authorizing Path Forward document states that ACNW CSD will develop a balanced budget and strive to maintain a fund balance of 10-20%.

ACNW’s resources allocation is devoted to achieve nationally-recognized quality standards for authorizing as determined by NACSA. For example, a review of the budget confirms that ACNW determines the financial needs of the authorizing office and devotes sufficient financial resources to fulfill its authorizing responsibilities in accordance with national standard commensurate to the scale of the charter school portfolio. This was verified by school directors. ACNW also structures its funding in a manner that avoids conflicts of interest, inducements, incentives, or disincentives that might compromise its judgment in charter approval and accountability decision making. For example, in FY2013, the authorizer did not renew the contract of a school that paid more than \$20K in authorizing fees and that threatened (and ultimately took) legal action against ACNW. Additionally, in FY2015, the authorizer did not approve two new schools that would have collectively brought in more than \$30K in authorizing fees, since their new school proposals did not meet ACNW’s criteria for new school approval. ACNW deploys funds effectively and efficiently with the public’s interests in mind. The authorizer is committed to improving the overall performance of schools, while also increasing the environmental literacy of students attending the schools in its portfolio; resource allocation is tied to ensure that this mission and vision are realized. Finally, according to the narrative, NACSA determined that ACNW effectively allocates resources to achieve quality authorizing standards and has the capacity to provide mentorship and a quality learning experience for a NACSA Fellow during FY2016. However, because the authorizer has not received formal recognition that they have attained these national standards, they meet the rating of Commendable for this measure.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.5 Narrative Template p. 1
- ACNW Charter School Division Staffing History
- ACNW CSD Budget FY12-FY16
- ACNW Charter School Authorizing Path Forward, February 3, 2014, p. 2
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**A.7 - To what degree does the authorizer implement a clear policy to address conflicts of interest in all decision making processes concerning the portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 3: Commendable

**Finding:** The authorizer consistently implements a clear policy to address conflicts of interest in all decision-making processes concerning the portfolio of charter schools. ACNW has a clear conflict of interest policy that describes the separation between the authorizer (including staff and paid contractors) and schools applying to, or within, its portfolio presently. The conflict of interest policy has been instituted since at least December 2010. Additionally, ACNW required all external evaluators to submit an External Review Conflict of Interest Statement. This is consistent with the authorizer’s AAA, which has the policy in its chartering manual. Additionally, within the ACNW CSD Contract for Services, there is a section that is dedicated to conflict of interest. Specifically, the contract states, “To ensure all proposals and schools are fairly reevaluated, ACNW requests that its reviewers identify any actual or perceived conflicts of interest.” The contract then includes four descriptions of what conflicts of interest might look like for external evaluators when reviewing applications for new schools, including: familial or close personal ties to the school; any direct affiliation with a school; any financial or other interest in the school; and, any assistance in the development of application materials.

While a key component of ACNW authorization is the agreement to implement Environmental Education at the school level, ACNW maintains clarity around keeping ACNW’s environmental programming separate from the CSD in order to avoid conflict of interest. Article II, Section 2.2 of the contract template states, “ACNW shall have no authority or control over operational, administrative, or financial responsibility for the School.” In the narrative, the authorizer describes fidelity to this section. A central component of ACNW’s vision is to ensure that schools are implementing environment education. In order to help support this endeavor, ACNW offers Environmental Education grants of up to \$500 for schools to take part in academic and environmental programming at a residential environmental learning center (RELC). The larger ACNW organization presently operates an RELC. In the narrative, the authorizer states that ACNW grants may be applied to any RELC, including agencies outside of ACNW. For example, in January 2015, Northern Lights Community School applied for, and received, a grant from ACNW to take students to Wolf Ridge Environment Center.

The narrative and supporting documents provide several examples of conflict of interest policy and procedures implemented with external contractors. For example, in one case, the external contractor had long-standing relationships with two schools within the ACNW portfolio. As a result, this consultant has not served in any role for ACNW “in terms of evaluation, oversight, or decision making with respect to these schools.” In two other examples, the school asked external consultants to provide specific services. Because of the conflict of interest, either the consultant did not engage in the work for the school or the consultant did not engage in the review of the new school proposal for that cycle.

In the Charter School Leadership Survey, all respondents indicated that they had not experienced any conflict of interest in their work with ACNW. About half indicated that the authorizer has communicated the conflict of interest policy with them through a variety of outlets – yearly contract reviews, in-person conversations, the signing of a conflict of interest agreement annually, and through other forms and processes. Some respondents stated that ACNW has not been clear about the conflict of interest policy; one respondent added, “There may be some ‘blurring of the lines’ between their roles as consultants for ACNW and other enterprises in which they are involved.” Specifically, at least one external consultant works as a reviewer for ACNW, while also providing school-based professional development, raising questions about conflict of interest. A review of an email exchange between

a school director and the Director of Charter School Authorizing highlighted the lack of clarity around the appropriateness of the consultant’s work as an ACNW reviewer while he is also providing specific services to schools. For example, the school director writes, “[The consultant] has been part of the evaluation team from ACNW for us. He always mentions to me that my teachers need more classroom management. I have gotten quite a few emails from him regarding workshops he is putting on.” In response, the Director of Charter School Authorizing states, “[The consultant] or other contracted consultants do not engage in decision making (though their work could certainly inform that decision making). Our conflicts of interest policy is designed to ensure no conflicts around decision making, such as renewal, closure, expansions, new schools, or transfer school. It is also designed to protect school autonomy.” ACNW has a clear conflict of interest policy in which it states, “Persons involved in any contracted or employment capacity with any actual or perceived conflict of interest shall disclose the same.” However, the authorizer’s policy does not directly address perceived conflicts of interest by a school; therefore, the authorizer’s response is aligned to ACNW’s policy. Because school representatives were not able to consistently verify the authorizer’s conflict of interest policy, the rating is determined as Commendable.

**Key Evidence:**

- ACNW CSD Conflict of Interest Policy as of 12/13/10
- External Evaluator Conflict of Interest Statement
- ACNW CSD Contract for Services p. 3
- NLCS\_EE Mission Match Funds Request 01.22.2015
- NLCS\_EE Mission Match Approval 01.26.2015
- ACNW Email Exchange Between Becky Meyer and David Greenberg, August 5, 2015
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions O and P
- A.7 Narrative Template, pp. 1-2

**A.8 - To what degree does the authorizer preserve and support the essential autonomies of the portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer preserves and supports the essential autonomies of the portfolio of charter schools. In the Charter School Authorizing Manual (AAA), under the Authorizer Duties and Expectations of Schools, ACNW states that it will “be responsible not for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding the schools they authorize accountable for their performance.” Article II of the Current Contract Template lays out the relationship between the school and ACNW. The five sections included in this article outline the essential autonomies of the schools within ACNW’s portfolio. For example, Section 2.2 clearly states the independent status of the school. It also explains that ACNW has no authority or control over operation, administrative or financial responsibility of the school, except those stated in the contract that comply with state statutes. Section 2.3 of the ACNW Charter Contract further states the separation of financial obligations of ACNW and its authorized schools. Section 2.4 of the ACNW Charter Contract clearly states that neither ACNW nor a school has authority to bind the other party to a third-party contract or agreement.

Through its contracting, the authorizer meets nationally-recognized principles and standards – specifically, NACSA’s three Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing that are considered core to quality authorizing. For example, as stated above, outlined in Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 of the school contract, the authorizer addresses independent status of the school, the separation of financial

responsibility and the lack of authority for either party to bind the other into a third-party agreement. Additionally within the ACNW Charter School Authorizing Program Manual, Section 15.6 states that ACNW may not renew or terminate a contract for “[f]ailure to meet the requirements for pupil performance (goals) contained in paragraph 6 of this Contract,” addressing the NACSA standards that authorizers will focus on holding schools accountable for outcomes, rather than processes. In accordance with NACSA, the authorizer states that it is careful not to require schools to take a specific action unless it is a legal compliance issue or a matter covered in the school’s contract.

During the interview, the authorizer stated that ACNW holds schools accountable to their contract and offers assistance to help them achieve their performance goals, but that it is not mandated. For example, the authorizer explained that the expectation around implementing Environmental Education at schools could be perceived as an infringement on autonomy, but that ACNW has been very clear about its expectations – specifically, this is part of being authorized by ACNW. Goals for Environmental Education are embedded in the authorizing contract, but ACNW is clear not to dictate inputs; rather, it evaluates outcomes as measured by goals in the contract. ACNW offers program assistance to schools through their Environmental Education Evaluator to support growth in environmental literacy. During the school director interview, some participants stated that they questioned whether the Environmental Education expectation is a challenge to their autonomy; others stated that the rights and responsibilities laid out in the contract are directly tied to the statutes. As one participant summarized, “They don’t push us beyond what is required by statute, unless it is something that is part of our mission.” In the Charter School Leadership Survey and school director interviews, although some participants stated discontent around the expectations for Environmental Education, the majority stated that they have not experienced any situations where they felt the authorizer overstepped its responsibility to preserve and support school autonomy.

**Key Evidence:**

- Charter School Authorizing Manual (AAA), pp. 15, 61
- Current Contract Template, Article II, Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions R and S

**A.9 - To what degree does the authorizer self-evaluate its internal ability (capacity, infrastructure and practices) to oversee the portfolio of charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 3: Commendable

**Finding:** The authorizer regularly self-evaluates its internal ability to oversee the portfolio of schools. In February 2014, the CSD staff and ACNW Board members engaged in an extensive review of the mission, vision, infrastructure, and authorizing practices of ACNW. This included reviewing data from surveys to the staff, Board members and charter schools. Additionally, CSD analyzed the financial impact of authorizing on the larger ACNW organization. A part of this review involved assessing the organization’s commitment to authorizing charter schools. In 2014, the CSD staff created a document entitled Path Forward that outlined critical adjustments planned as a result of self-evaluation. The Path Forward includes guidance in the areas of: mission match, Environmental Education, charter contract and renewal, support, CDS staff structure, new charters, and the budget. For example, one outcome has been a renewed commitment to the environmental component of ACNW and requiring all schools to demonstrate environmental literacy development of its students. In order to support this, the

organization created the .5 FTE Environmental Literacy Coordinator position. ACNW's current practices reflect many of the changes identified in this plan.

The authorizer implements continuous improvement plans and documents its progress towards each goal. A review of the FY2015 and FY2016-FY2018 Strategic Plans show a number of outcome statements with clear measures. For example, Outcome IV of the FY2016-2018 Strategic Plan states, "ACNW authorized schools will increase the environmental literacy of their students, faculty, staff, and school community." The authorizer lists the measure of this outcome as increased percentage of meets or exceeds standard on ACNW Environmental Education Performance Evaluations of schools, coupled with strong Academic Performance Evaluations. ACNW also created a Strategic Work Plan that aligns strategic activities with each outcome statement, including a timeline and success indicators. For example, one of seven strategic activities related to the outcomes described above is to pilot and formalize an Environmental Education site visit protocol. The authorizing staff also meet regularly to discuss their progress in relation to the Outcomes stated in the Strategic Plan. For example, a review of the Strategic Plan Meeting minutes from September 2014 shows that the CSD staff discussed their progress in relation to some of the strategic areas.

The authorizer addresses any needs for improvement when not meeting its mission, organizational goals or strategic plan. In April 2014, the Director of Charter School Authorizing sent a letter to MDE to notify them of the unexpected closure of a school in the ACNW portfolio (Metro Tech Career Academy), due to the school's inability to meet its financial obligations. In the letter, the director outlines a comprehensive explanation for the school's closure and then includes a detailed self-reflection mapping out how ACNW might have avoided the situation. The letter states, "ACNW missed more than one opportunity to take stronger action, requiring specific outcomes from the school that could have led to a different result." The director then included four actions that ACNW could have taken, such as not approving the school or requiring a financial improvement plan, and reduced the contract term; issuing a Notice of Probationary Status as an intervention, rather than relying on external monitoring; instituting a Charter Review in 2013; and, engaging in discussions with the school earlier in Spring 2013 regarding the feasibility of opening in the Fall 2013. During the interview, the authorizer explained that as a result of this unanticipated school closure, ACNW has now implemented a more robust transfer process for schools, including clearer contractual expectations around financial health.

ACNW has been recognized for quality authorizing practices by NACSA. For example, NACSA invited ACNW to host a NACSA Innovation in Education Fellow, and asked the Director of Charter School Authorizing to serve as a coach in the NACSA Leaders Program. All of these point to NACSA's recognition of the authorizer's effective practices. However, it is not clear that ACNW is regularly evaluating its work against national standards for quality authorizing. In the FY2015 Strategic Plan, Outcome Statement VI states: "ACNW will be recognized as a leader in the Minnesota authorizer / charter community," but does not include measures aligned with this outcome. In the FY2016-FY2018 Strategic Plan, Outcome Statement VII says: "[ACNW will] strengthen the overall quality educational opportunities in Minnesota by increasing the quality school choice options." One of two measures for this outcome is: "ACNW's portfolio received recognition from other organizations, both in [Minnesota] and nationally." Yet the Strategic Plan itself, including aligned strategies, outcome and measures, do not reflect evaluation against nationally-recognized standards for quality authorizing.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.9 Narrative Template
- ACNW Charter School Authorizing Path Forward, February 3, 2014
- ACNW CSD FY15 Strategic Plan, June 30, 2014
- ACNW CSD FY16-FY18 Strategic Plan, June 7, 2015
- ACNW Strategic Plan Minutes, September 2, 2014
- ACNW Strategic Work Plan, July 1, 2015
- ACNW Task Planner, July 1, 2015
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- MTCA ACNW letter to MDE re: closure, April 28, 2014

**A.10 - To what degree does the authorizer disseminate best authorizing practices and/or assist other authorizers in high-quality authorizing?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer regularly disseminates best authorizing practices and assists other authorizers in high-quality authorizing. Best practices are regularly shared with authorizers. ACNW is very involved in the Minnesota Association of Charter School Authorizing; the Director of Charter School Authorizing currently served as the association’s acting interim chair for the first half of FY2015 and continues to serve on MACSA’s Executive Committee. This organization serves as forum in which authorizers share best practices on a monthly basis. In his role as interim chair, ACNW’s director helped to organize and host the first MACSA conference in August 2015. A review of the Conference Information brochure states that the conference “...will focus on issues most important to authorizers and charter schools, as well as providing an opportunity for participants to engage in the experiential learning opportunities offered at the Audubon Center.” ACNW’s director is also involved with NACSA. At the 2014 NACSA Leaders Conference, ACNW’s director served as a presenter for a session entitled, School Closure: Overseeing an Orderly Wind-Down. At the most recent NACSA Leadership Conference in October 2015, he participated in a session about the new authorizer evaluation system (MAPES) being implemented in Minnesota.

Within the last 12 months, ACNW has been sought out by other authorizers and, in response, has offered support and guidance. For example, a Minnesota-based authorizer reached out to ACNW to seek technical assistance on the use of Epicenter. One of two exchanges with this authorizer centered around sharing ACNW’s Calendar Requirements. ACNW’s Information and Communications Coordinator responded promptly and shared the calendar requirements with the other authorizer. In another example, a different Minnesota-based authorizer reached out to ACNW to request the language from their contract pertaining to the engagement of management organizations. ACNW’s director responded promptly with an attachment of ACNW’s provisions for contracting with a charter management organization, as well as the language from their contract with schools around Other Permitted Activities.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.10 Narrative Template
- MACSA Executive Committee Minutes, April 24, 2015
- MACSA Conference Information, August 20, 2014
- NACSA Leadership Conference 2014: <http://www.qualitycharters.org/events/2014-leadership-conference/breakout-sessions/wednesday-2.html#overseeing>

- Schultz email re: Epicenter Calendar of Requirements, August 3, 2015
- ACNW VOA emails re: CMO, March 9, 2015
- Observed at NACSA Leadership Conference, October 21, 2015

### **A.11 - To what degree does the authorizer comply with reporting, submissions and deadlines set forth in Minnesota Statute?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has been 100% in compliance with reporting, submissions and deadlines set forth in the Minnesota Statute for at least the last four years. According to the documentation provided by MDE, ACNW has submitted its income and expenditures report on, or before, the due date for FY2012 through FY2015. All of the reports have been in statutory compliance. Additionally, ACNW submitted its Authorizer Annual Report on January 15, 2015, the day it was due; MDE confirmed its statutory compliance. Finally, at least one member of the ACNW staff participated in the required annual report training on November 7, 2014.

**Key Evidence:**

- A.11 Narrative Template
- 15.10-09 ACNW Measures A.11 and B.3 Data

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES B: AUTHORIZER PROCESSES AND DECISION MAKING

### Authorizer Process and Decision Making

**B.1 - To what degree does the authorizer have clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate new charter school proposals? To what degree did the authorizer's decisions and resulting actions align to its stated approval and process standards and promote the growth of high-quality charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate new charter school proposals. Decisions and resulting actions align to its stated approval and process standards and promote the growth of high-quality charter schools. ACNW's application process is comprehensive, including clear application questions and guidance. These are outlined in ACNW's New Charter School Proposal Criteria and Process document. Additionally, the process includes fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria. ACNW's approved 2014 New Charter School Proposal Guide includes clear expectations in twelve sections, including Vision and Mission, Education Program and Financial Management. The guide also includes clear review steps that include the submission of a letter of intent, review of the proposal and an applicant interview prior to a final decision. The ACNW Board Charter School Committee conducts an extensive review of the information provided by founding teams and makes recommendations to the full ACNW Board, which makes the final decision on whether to approve or deny an application. While no participants shared information about having gone through the new school application process during the school director interview, surveyed school leaders noted that application review process was rigorous. They added that the review was "...comprehensive, and included multiple checklists to keep [schools] on track during the process." According to the New Charter School Proposal Criteria and Process, these proposal requirements may be modified to conform to changes in statute, to reflect current best practices in charter school authorizing or to meet other ACNW needs. According to ACNW's updated Charter School Manual (AAA), "To be considered for approval, a proposal must meet requirements in all areas."

The authorizer's decisions and resulting actions are consistent across the portfolio. ACNW has reviewed three proposals for new schools in the five-year term and recommended one for approval. Specifically, according to ACNW's New School Decisions document, Vermillion Country School's proposal resulted in their meeting all of the review criteria, whereas Pete Seeger Renaissance Charter School and Ober Charter School had sections of the reviewed proposal that did not meet the review standard.

The authorizer's decisions and resulting actions align with AAA. For example, a review of the Proposal Review for The Pete Seeger Renaissance Charter School application (denied in 2014) states, "The school's mission and vision is not clear and succinct; nor has a compelling need for the school's existence been established. Suggested criteria that will be used to evaluate school success are not directly aligned with the school's mission." In the ensuing Determination Letter and Comments sent to the school, ACNW highlighted strengths of the proposal (how it aligned to ACNW criteria) and weaknesses. For example, one weakness that ACNW cites is: "Measures to determine the success of the school are modest and in need of clarification and specificity. Environmental Education plan is based on activities and not on learner outcomes and accomplishment of goals."

ACNW's narrative indicated, "The Audubon Center of the North Woods new school proposal process is designed to promote high-quality charter schools and has resulted in the attainment of nationally-recognized standards for authorizing." The authorizer also reports alignment of ACNW's practices to NACSA's four Standards in the section of Application Process and Decision Making. These include: 1) Proposal Information, Questions, and Guidance; 2) Fair, Transparent, Quality-Focused Procedures; 3) Rigorous Approval Criteria; and 4) Rigorous Decision Making.

**Key Evidence:**

- B.1 Narrative Template
- ACNW New Charter School Proposal Process and Criteria
- Charter School Leadership Survey, question V
- ACNW Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, p. 20
- ACNW New School Decisions FY11-FY15
- PSRCS Determination Letter and Comments, March 10, 2015, p. 3
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**B.2 - To what degree does the authorizer have clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate proposals of existing charter school expansion requests and other interim changes? To what degree do the authorizer's decisions and resulting actions regarding charter school expansion and other interim changes align to its stated approval and process standards and promote the growth of high quality charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate proposals of existing charter school expansion requests and other interim changes. The authorizer's decisions and resulting actions regarding charter school expansion and other interim changes align to its stated approval and process standards and promote the growth of high quality charter schools. ACNW's application processes are comprehensive, including clear application questions and guidance. The process includes fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria. In the Charter School Manual, ACNW outlines key steps that existing charter schools must follow to transfer authorization to ACNW. The process is similar to the process for new charter schools. Schools must submit a Notice of Intent to Apply that ACNW initially reviews. Schools that meet the initial requirements for possible transfer are then invited to submit a full application. ACNW's Charter School Review Team, using the ACNW Change of Authorizer Review Criteria that is enclosed in the Change of Authorizer Application Guide, then evaluates the proposal. Reviewers evaluate the following elements: Vision and Mission; Need and Enrollment; Purpose; Goals, Student Performance Expectations and Evaluation Plan; Educational Programming; Governance, Management, and Administration; Financial Management; Operations; and, Marketing and Outreach. A qualifying school will then receive a site visit and "...other due diligence to examine the school's past successes and challenges." The ACNW Board Charter School Committee then evaluates the information and makes a recommendation to the full ACNW Board, which makes the final decision on whether to approve or deny the application. According to the Charter School Manual, ACNW reserves the right to reject any and all proposals for any reason.

ACNW also outlines clear expectations in their Ready to Open Expectations and Process document. A review of the Vermillion Country School Ready-To-Open Checklist, taken directly from the AAA, shows

that schools are required to track their status in relation to twelve different areas, including (but not limited to) the Learning Program, Student Achievement and Accountability; Governance (composition of the Board, foundational documents, policy, operations); Budget and Financial; Facility; Student Recruitment and Outreach; Leadership and, Staffing and Management. In the narrative, the authorizer wrote: “[Vermillion Country School] was approved in December 2011 with a plan to open in September 2012, but because of uncertainty regarding possible access to Federal CSP Grant funds and facilities issues, the School Board delayed opening until September 2013.” In the Charter School Leadership Survey, a respondent stated, “Audubon had a checklist that was very comprehensive. By the time we had finished all the items on the list, we were at the ready to open stage.” The Ready to Open form included in the updated AAA (approved January 2015) aligns with expectations identified within the 2010 version and the form used in 2013 for Vermillion.

The ACNW AAA includes the process, criteria and application for expansion. This was verified externally by school leaders who stated in both the Charter School Leadership Survey and the interview that the authorizer also communicates expectations through the annual leadership retreat, via email correspondence and during site visits. As one participant explained, “Once all materials were submitted, the authorizer reviewed the request. When a decision was made, their recommendation was sent to MDE for final approval.” Another participant summarized that ACNW has “...a very clear set of procedures for expansion.” Additionally, ACNW’s decisions and resulting actions are consistent across the portfolio. For example, ACNW’s first review of the East Range Academy of Technology and Science grade expansion resulted in a denial, due to deficient longitudinal academic data. The school could not show that it had “...compelling evidence of academic achievement and growth as required in the approved expansion expectations.” During the school director interview, participants stated that the process was very clear-cut and similar to the process for renewal. One participant explained that being a new school, ACNW has communicated that it must evident three years of success in their current model before they can apply for expansion.

ACNW’s narrative states, “Audubon Center of the North Woods has clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate proposals of existing charter schools for expansions or transfer of authorizers, as well as to evaluate readiness to open for new schools. The approval criteria and process aligns to our AAA and meets NACSA’s standards.” The authorizer also reports alignment of ACNW’s practices to NACSA’s four Standards in the section of Application Process and Decision Making. These include: 1) Proposal Information, Questions, and Guidance; 2) Fair, Transparent, Quality-Focused Procedures; 3) Rigorous Approval Criteria; and 4) Rigorous Decision Making.

**Key Evidence:**

- B.2 Narrative Template, pp. 1, 3
- ACNW Change of Authorizer Application Guide, pp. 15-31
- ACNW Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, p. 21
- VCS Ready to Open, July 3, 2013
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions Y and AD
- ACNW Expansion FY13-FY16
- ERATS Expansion Request Summary, February 4, 2014
- ERATS MDE Letter of Approval and Review Rubric.
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES B: AUTHORIZER PROCESSES AND DECISION MAKING

### Authorizer Performance Contracting

#### B.3 - To what degree does the authorizer execute contracts that clearly define material terms and rights and responsibilities of the school and the authorizer?

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer executes contracts that clearly define material terms and rights and responsibilities of the school and authorizer. Contracts in the authorizer’s portfolio align with AAA and meet statutory requirements. According to renewal contract compliance data submitted by MDE, four of eleven contracts submitted by ACNW for FY2015 initially had compliance deficiencies. The authorizer provided notices from MDE regarding their review of submitted contracts. In these notices, MDE indicated whether statutorily required components are present in the contracts. For example, two schools (Best Academy and Harvest Preparatory School) listed their enrollment policy as a first-come-first serve-basis, rather than lottery. In both instances, that authorizer ensured that the contract was amended to make it compliant. The authorizer presented evidence that they resolved all deficiencies identified by MDE, with the exception of Laura Jeffrey Academy. As noted in the narrative and authorizer interview, MDE indicated that ACNW’s renewal contract with Laura Jeffery Academy was not in compliance with state law. ACNW submitted an amended version of their contract to MDE on August 28, 2015; the amended language appears to verify the school’s compliant focus and clarify their mission. This was confirmed by MDE on November 3, 2015.

ACNW’s contracts clearly state the rights and responsibilities of the school and, when applicable, the authorizer executes contract amendments for material changes to current school plans. A review of the contract template provided by ACNW shows that the authorizer clearly defines the relationship between the authorizer and the school. Specifically, Section 2.2 of the contract template states, “The School is not and shall not be deemed to be a division or part of ACNW nor an agent of ACNW.” In Section 3, the contract states that the authorizer’s role is “...to oversee the School’s academic, financial, operational, environmental education and student performance, including the School’s compliance with this Contract and Applicable Law. ACNW shall monitor and evaluate School performance using various criteria, processes and procedures set forth in general in Article VI and Exhibit P.” In addition, the contract identifies the legal status of the school, among other terms. A review of the East Range Academy of Technology and Science Renewal Contract, Articles II and III indicates that it clearly outlines the relationship between the school and ACNW, as well as the role of ACNW. The authorizer has clearly defined the role of the school and the authorizer, and has executed contract amendments for material changes to current school plans for at least the last three years. The material terms, rights and responsibilities are clarified in sample contracts provided by the authorizer. Review of ACNW’s previous contracts include similar definitions. In cases where contracts have been amended, ACNW submits a contract amendment to the school.

Finally, 100% of school leaders responding to the Charter School Leadership Survey agree (13) or strongly agree (17) with the statement, “The contract has clear material terms and rights and responsibilities of the school and the authorizer.” One school director commented, “The contract between ACNW and ACS has clearly defined sections that define the role of the school and the authorizer.” During the school director interview, participants could communicate the process that ACNW uses to amend a contract. Additionally, they agreed that ACNW abides by the rights and responsibilities laid out in the statutes.

**Key Evidence:**

- 14.07-03 Renewal Contract between ACNW and ERATS (pp. 3-4)
- 12.06.29 Charter School Contract between ACNW and Lighthouse Academy Nation (LAN) (pp. 5-14)
- 15.09-22 FY 2015 Renewal Contract Compliance Data
- Charter School Contract Amendment between ACNW and Pillager Area Charter School (13.10.14).
- 14.07-03 ERATS Renewal Contract, Article II and III (pp. 3-4)
- ACNW Current Contract Template
- ACNW Previous Contract Template
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**B.4 - To what degree does the authorizer execute contracts with clear, measureable and attainable performance standards?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer executes contracts with clear, measurable and attainable performance standards. Contracts in the authorizer’s portfolio align with their AAA and meet statutory requirements. ACNW contracts define clear measurable and attainable academic, financial and organizational performance standards, as well as consequences for meeting or not meeting them. In the contract template, Section 11.1(a)1 states, “Improving all pupil learning and all student achievement is the most important factor ACNW will consider in determining Contract renewal, which determination shall be based substantially on the School’s attainment of its academic and non-academic goals identified in Exhibit G.” This aligns to *Minnesota Statute §124E.10 Subd. 1*. For example, in attachments 6 and 7 of ACNW’s contract with Cannon River STEM School, the authorizer outlines performance goals in the areas of Academics (proficiency, growth, other, and related), Environmental, Governance, Finance, and Operations that the school must meet.

Respondents to the Charter School Leadership Survey indicated that while there are some standard goals, others may be negotiated. The majority (90%) of respondents agree (12) or strongly agree (18) that the contract has clear, measurable and attainable performance standards. As one respondent wrote, “We have always known ahead of time what we were going to be evaluated on and how it would be evaluated.” However, three respondents (10%) disagree. For example, one leader commented, “The environmental education standard does not have clear measurable performance standards. (There is no rubric established for EE.)” During the school director interviews, participants reported that the contracting process has become better defined. For example, one participant stated, “[The Director of Charter School Authorizing] walked into a lot of contracts that did not have clear goals. All of the schools now have good goals. New schools are getting solid goals.”

ACNW currently executes contracts that align with nationally-recognized quality performance standards. ACNW standards are aligned with the NACSA CORE Performance Framework and Guidance. For example, ACNW’s frameworks include reference to state and federal accountability targets and measures. They also measure student growth over time and student achievement. For example, ACNW’s contractual expectations for Academic Arts Charter School include that performance data will be used to evaluate schools, including results on state assessments, school level assessment, mission-based data, post-secondary performance data, and comparisons to district and statewide performance.

As stated above, in the Charter School Leadership Survey, the majority of school representatives (90%) agree (12) or strongly agree (18) that the contract has clear, measurable and attainable performance standards. The authorizer program staff described the contracting process clearly as it related to performance standards; their answers were verified by school directors during interviews. Finally, a review of contracts reflects that the authorizer has met level 2 specifications for at least the last three years.

**Key Evidence:**

- Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, Section 6, pp. 54-55
- Charter School Leadership Survey, questions AO and AP
- AAHS\_Contract-Complete\_FY16-FY18, p. 44
- CRSS Performance Goals, June 24, 2012, Appendix 6 & 7
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES B: AUTHORIZER PROCESSES AND DECISION MAKING

### Authorizer Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

#### B.5 - To what degree does the authorizer monitor and oversee the charter schools in the areas of academics, operations and finances according to the processes outlined in the contract and approved authorizer application?

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer monitors and oversees the charter schools in the areas of academics, operations and finances according to the processes outlined in the contract and approved authorizer application. In the Charter School Manual, ACNW includes an oversight plan for operating schools. This includes a detailed explanation of its Academic, Financial and Operations Performance Evaluations. To monitor academic performance, ACNW states that it will use "...all data available, including published state level assessment data, as well as school level assessment data provided by the schools." ACNW reviews the school's financial audit, Board meeting minutes, monthly financial reports, school policies, state reports, and other relevant documents to evaluate the school's financial health and viability. In addition to reviewing Board meeting minutes, school policies and state reports, ACNW also monitors compliance with Epicenter tasks and deadlines to assess the operational standing of the school.

During the interview, the authorizer stated that ACNW also visits every school at least once a year. These visits include school tours, classroom visits, and interviews with students, teachers, school leaders, Board members, the Environmental Education Coordinator, and administrative staff; the visits are guided by a protocol with interview questions and observation guides. According to the narrative, ACNW reserves sole discretion to determine the frequency and scope of site visits.

During interviews, school leaders reported that they have received clear communications from ACNW in the monthly Authorizer Update sent to all schools and during the annual Leaders Retreat. In addition, all but one of the respondents to the Charter School Leadership Survey indicated that they agree (11) or strongly agree (21) that ACNW monitors and oversees the school's academic, financial and operational performance as outlined in the charter contract. They noted that ACNW follows oversight with written evaluation and specific feedback that helps "...improve the school's operational capacity." During the interview, school leaders expressed that oversight has been consistent to increasing over time. They mentioned that the use of the compliance tool Epicenter has increased their reporting responsibilities; however, this has led to clearer reporting expectations and ultimately stronger oversight by ACNW. In the narrative, the authorizer provides evidence of schools identified by MDE as "high quality charter schools," as well as a number that have achieved Reward or Celebration Eligible Status.

Review of their AAA from 2010 indicates similar oversight methods, with the exception of the required number of visits. (In 2010, the required number was two visits; currently, the required number is "as determined.") Additionally, ACNW has modified the number of Board meetings attended. In 2010, the requirement was two Board meetings; currently it is at least one, with a formal review of every Board meeting's materials.

**Key Evidence:**

- B.5 Narrative Template, p. 1
- ACNW Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, pp. 23-28
- ACNW Charter School Authorizing Manual 2010-2011 FINAL, p. 30
- ACNW Site Visit Observation Template

- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

## **B.6 - To what degree does the authorizer have clear and comprehensive standards and processes to address complaints, intervention and/or corrective action?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer has clear and comprehensive standards and processes to address complaints, intervention and corrective action. In its Charter School Program Guide, ACNW outlines its procedures to address interventions and corrective action. These include clear criteria for what constitutes an issue and what the response should be. The range of possible interventions is tiered over five levels: Level One is Notice of Concern; Level Two is Notice of Deficiency; Level Three is Notice of Probationary Status; Level Four is Charter Review; and, Level Five is Charter Revocation. Review of interventions show clear articulation of concerns and expected next steps that align with the AAA. A review of the approved charter manual from 2010 and the updated AAA approved in January 2015 include similar intervention schedules.

The ACNW Interventions FY13-FY16 document identifies 14 instances of interventions by ACNW with schools they authorize; the names of interventions in the list align with the intervention schedule. The document lists the intervention issued to each school, the date of issuance, the reason for the intervention, the resolution, and the date of resolution. For example, Harvest Preparatory School received a Level 2 – Notice of Deficiency on August 23, 2012. The reasoning cited was concern regarding the unclear relationship between the school and related parties that might lead to a conflict of interest. The Notice of Deficiency Resolution indicates a subsequent investigation and includes bulleted responses by the school and school’s Board to resolve the stated concerns. Ultimately, the matter was resolved on May 21, 2013. The process aligns with causes and results expected in ACNW’s Notice of Deficiency as outlined in ACNW’s Charter School Manual. Of the school leaders responding to the Charter School Leadership Survey, eight indicate that they have experienced interventions with ACNW. Those participants state that they have a clear understanding of ACNW’s intervention policy, timelines and steps associated to resolve the concerns; none identified problems with the process.

ACNW has a clear policy to evaluate and address complaints. A review of the ACNW Complaints FY2013-FY2016 documents identifies 17 complaints lodged against ACNW-authorized schools over the last three years. This document captures the school name, date of the complaint, complainant affiliation, nature of the complaint allegations, and response by ACNW. Complaints range from concerns regarding teacher hiring practices to intimidation by the school director, and allegation of violations of law, ethics, and treatment of children. During the school director interview, one participant described a complaint from several years ago regarding a former director. ACNW discussed the severity of the complaint with the School Board Chair, as well as next steps. ACNW then proceeded with an investigation and findings. The School Board then used the findings to resolve the issue. ACNW actions appear to be in alignment with its authorizer role. The process that ACNW follows to evaluate and address complaints aligns with the authorizer’s document entitled, Policy and Process for Addressing School Issues and/or Complaints.

According to the narrative, ACNW’s standards and process align to NACSA Principles and Standards intervention expectations. For example, ACNW’s Exhibit Q: Range of Possible Interventions is included in the charter contract of all its schools. NACSA notes that a quality authorizer, “Establishes and makes

known to schools at the outset an intervention policy that states the general conditions that may trigger intervention and the types of actions and consequences that may ensue.”

**Key Evidence:**

- B.6 Narrative Template
- ACNW Interventions FY13-FY16
- ACNW Complaints FY2013-FY2016
- Policy and Process for Addressing School Issues and/or Complaints
- ACNW Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, p. 31
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- NACSA Principles and Standards 2012 Edition, pp. 18-19
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**B.7 - To what degree does the authorizer support its portfolio of charter schools through intentional assistance and development offerings?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 4: Exemplary

**Finding:** The authorizer supports its portfolio of charter schools through intentional assistance and development offerings. ACNW regularly offers support and technical assistance based on demonstrated need and designed to prevent problems. For example, ACNW provides guidance to schools in their portfolio around the creation of the annual report. They also email two different newsletters to school directors, Board Chairs and other key staff on a monthly basis – the Authorizer Update and the Environmental Education Update. ACNW also hosts an annual Leaders Retreat for school representatives, including school directors and Board members. A review of the Leaders Retreat agenda from November 2014 shows sessions on Environmental Education, Data Analysis, Board Governance, and Financial Oversight. Sessions are led by ACNW staff, school leaders and outside experts. During the interview, the authorizer reported that they seek to differentiate the sessions in order to make them relevant to school representatives who attend the Leaders Retreat.

According to the narrative, support and technical assistance offerings are based on need. For example, ACNW learned through site visits and discussions with school leaders that some schools were not effectively using the Home Language Questionnaires (HLQ) to guide student placement. As a result, ACNW included information in their Authorizer Update designed to prevent problems for schools struggling to comply with this expectation. The authorizer also stated that the Environmental Education Coordinator works directly with schools to support them as they implement Environmental Education programs. Additionally, ACNW organized a workshop in August 2015 centered on Environmental Education to support schools as they develop and/or refine the programs at their schools. The workshop was intended for instructional staff and school-based Environmental Education Coordinators.

Throughout the evaluation process, school leaders reported that they are allowed to determine whether to take advantage of supports offered by ACNW. For example, during the school leaders’ interview, when asked if they were obligated to conduct their required environmental learning at the ACNW Center, participants indicated that ACNW offers every school \$500 to support their efforts in this area; schools are able to spend that money at the nature center of their choosing.

Support and technical assistance is designed to promote excellence. In 2014, ACNW made a conscious decision to hold schools accountable for the Environmental Education expectations in their contract. In order to support these schools, ACNW hired a .5 FTE Environmental Education Coordinator

who provides technical support to both individual schools and the portfolio; she holds them accountable for student outputs. During the interview, the authorizer stated, “[ACNW] requires a student learning aspect. It’s not about what they teach teachers; I care about what the students are learning.”

Finally, in the Charter School Leadership Survey, one school director indicated, “When we need help, they are there.”

**Key Evidence:**

- B.7 Narrative Template
- ACNW Annual Report Guidance FY14
- ACNW Annual Report Guidance FY15
- ACNW Annual Report Webinar, August 13, 2014
- ACNW EE Workshop Schedule, August 3, 2015
- ACNW Leaders Retreat Agenda FINAL, November 10, 2014
- ACNW Leaders Retreat Agenda DRAFT 3 FY16
- Charter School Leadership Survey, question N
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

**B.8 - To what degree does the authorizer plan and promote, within its portfolio, the model replication and dissemination of best practices of high-performing charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** Level 3: Commendable

**Finding:** In its portfolio, the authorizer plans and promotes model replication and dissemination of best practices of high-performing charter schools. However, to date, the authorizer has not yet replicated any schools in its portfolio. There is a clear plan for dissemination of best practices and models have been identified. ACNW’s strategic plans in FY2014 and in FY2016 aim to disseminate best practices and replicate successful models. The first outcome listed in the FY2016-FY2018 Strategic Plan includes four components: “Strengthen the quality of ACNW’s charter school portfolio by: a) adding high quality new schools; b) adding high quality existing schools (transfers); c) improving performance of current schools; and d) closing schools that are not meeting expectations.” The Strategic Plan includes seven outcomes aligned with the authorizing of a high quality portfolio. However, to date, ACNW has not approved schools for replication. According to the narrative and the authorizer interview, both Harvest Preparatory School and Best Academy have demonstrated academic performance to be identified as High-Quality Charter Schools by MDE; however, organizational challenges have kept ACNW from moving to approve replication. In the interview, ACNW staff stated that in order to replicate, the schools would need to demonstrate that they are achieving Environmental Education goals, and that their governance and relationship with their charter management organization are sound.

In school director interviews, participants stated that ACNW has begun conversations to replicate high quality programs. Specifically, one school director indicated that the school has begun conversations with ACNW about replicating K-5. The school director indicated that they would consider replication once their student achievement increases.

ACNW provides many forms of support to schools in their portfolio including guidance for annual report creation, an annual Leaders Retreat and newsletters e-mailed monthly to school leaders, Board Chairs and other key staff of ACNW-authorized schools. In interviews, authorizers and school directors

indicated that these forums allowed ACNW to disseminate information around identified models and best practices. However, to date, these identified models have not been replicated.

**Key Evidence:**

- B.8 Narrative Template, p. 2
- ACNW\_CSD FY16-FY18 Strategic Plan\_06.07.2015).
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES B: AUTHORIZER PROCESSES AND DECISION MAKING

### Authorizer Renewal and Decision Making

#### **B.9 - To what degree does the authorizer have clear and comprehensive standards and processes to make high stakes renewal and termination decisions? To what degree do the authorizer's renewal and termination decisions align to its stated renewal standards and processes and promote the growth of high-quality charter schools?**

**Performance Level Rating:** 1: Approaching Satisfactory

**Finding:** The authorizer does not have consistently clear and comprehensive standards and processes to make high stake renewal decisions and termination decisions that align to its stated renewal standards and process that promote the growth of high-quality charter schools. ACNW's AAA has rigorous standards and processes designed to use comprehensive academic, financial, operational, and student performance data to make renewal decisions and terminate charters, when necessary, to protect student and public interests. However, ACNW has not presented evidence that they have clear and transparent criteria for making merit-based renewal decisions. In the Charter School Manual, ACNW outlines its renewal or termination criteria and process. ACNW states, "A school will be eligible for reauthorization only if the school has improved all pupil learning and all student achievement and has met the Environmental Education performance expectations, notwithstanding superior performance in financial, operations, governance, and legal compliance factors." ACNW also states that a contract may be terminated or not renewed for the following reasons: 1) failure to meet the requirement for pupil performance contained in the contract; 2) failure to meet generally accepted standards of fiscal management; and 3) violations of law.

In the narrative, the authorizer explained that schools "...meeting the standards in the academic areas are eligible for longer term renewals, notwithstanding poor financial, operational or environmental education performance. Schools that do not meet academic performance expectations are candidates for non-renewal." ACNW includes the Reauthorization Performance Evaluation Framework as Appendix 6 of the Charter School Manual. Evaluation for renewal includes performance in the following areas: academic, financial, operations, and environmental education. The framework includes indicators for each area, on which schools are given a rating of exceeds standard, meets standard, approaches standard, or does not meet standard. Each indicator contains criteria that are aligned with each of the four rating levels.

In the Charter School Leadership Survey, respondents verified the reauthorization process outlined by the authorizer. For example, one respondent described the authorizer's process to determine contract renewal and contract term as "...a comprehensive look at academic, operational, governance and finance, based on rating scale provided previously. Also, they visited our program, met with staff, students, parents, School Board members, and admin [sic] staff." Another respondent wrote: "The renewal process consisted of an application and several exhibits. Once the application was filled out, a Board meeting evaluation was conducted and feedback was given. A school site visit was conducted with many observations and interviews of Board members, staff, teachers, students, and parents. Feedback was given on the site visit and adjustments were made. The draft contract goals were then negotiated and finalized. Once the contract was finalized and approved by the ACNW Board, the contract was delivered to be approved by the [school's] Board."

During the school director interview, some participants stated that the renewal process has become more clearly defined over the past three years. Yet, when asked, participants could not clearly describe how the authorizer determined their own renewal contract terms. As one participant stated, “I have no idea how the terms of the contract are identified.” ACNW did not present documents that explained how the authorizer determines the length of renewal contract terms. It is not clear that ACNW makes merit-based decisions; none of the documentation, including the Charter School Manual, include criteria that justify a five-, four- or three-year contract. For this reason, the authorizer is rated as Approaching Satisfactory.

**Key Evidence:**

- ACNW Charter School Manual Updated December 2014, pp. 32-33 and Appendix 6
- Charter School Leadership Survey, question BD
- Authorizer Interview - October 21, 2015
- School Director Interview - October 22 & 23, 2015