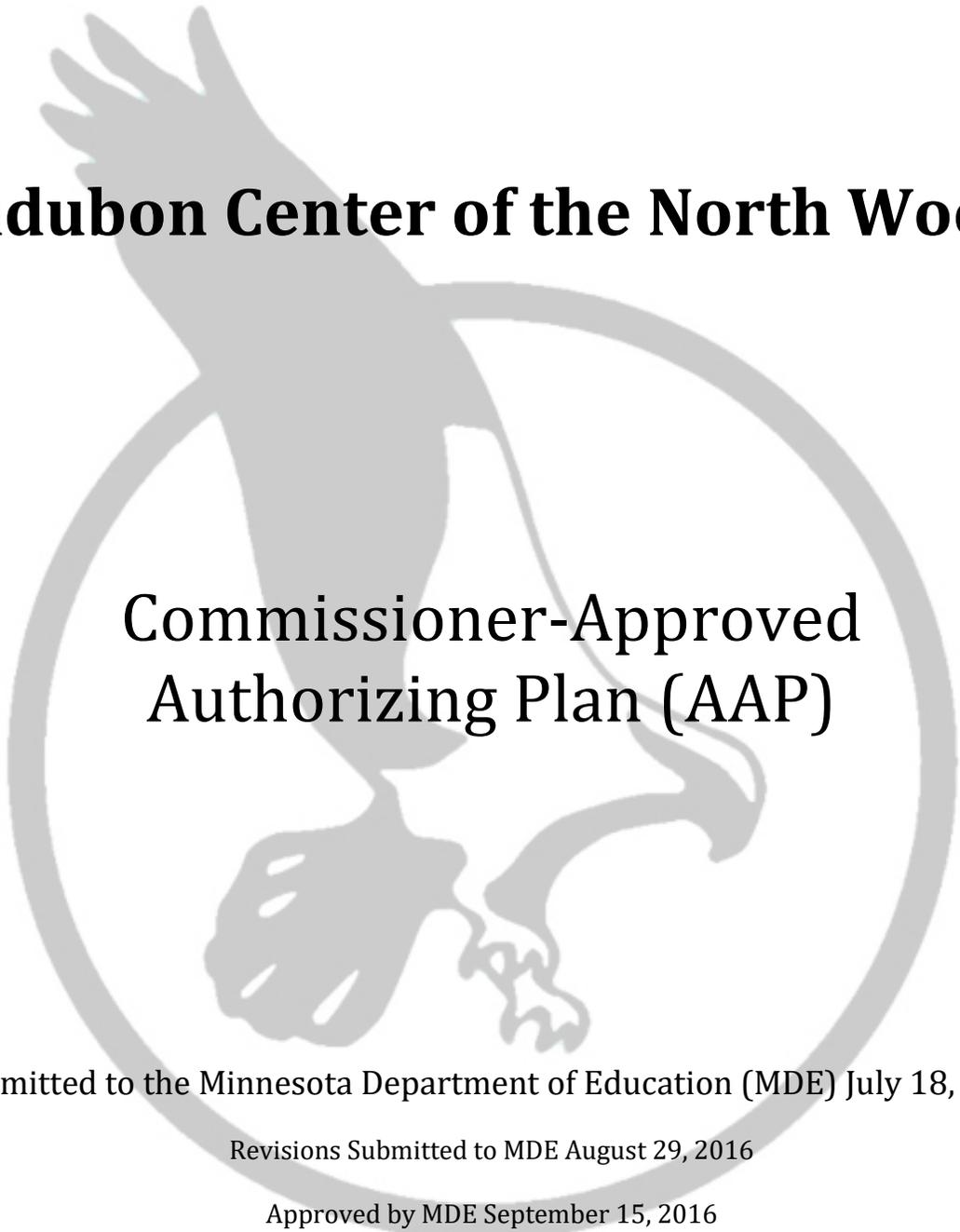


# **Audubon Center of the North Woods**



## **Commissioner-Approved Authorizing Plan (AAP)**

Submitted to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) July 18, 2016

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Updated December 30, 2019



# Audubon Center of the North Woods

*Experience Your Environment*

## Five-Year Authorizing Plan

### Introduction

The Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW) is a non-profit, residential environmental learning center nestled on the shores of Grindstone Lake near Sandstone, Minnesota. The Center offers a great variety of environmental learning experiences for people of all ages, with programming in natural history and science, team building, adventure programming, and outdoor/environmental education. The mission of ACNW is to instill a connection and commitment to the environment in people of all communities through experiential learning. The vision of ACNW is a healthy planet where all people live in balance with the Earth.

ACNW began in 1968 when the current property was bequeathed to the National Audubon Society by Dr. Marguerite Schwyzer. The land was then transferred to the Audubon Center of the North Woods, a separate private, 501(c) non-profit organization. Since that time, the Audubon Center has served as a residential and day-use education facility for small groups of international students, college students, adults, and school groups.

In 2003, ACNW became a sponsor of charter schools in order to further its mission and expand its educational programming. That year, ACNW was granted authority by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to sponsor charter schools under Minnesota statute. In response to statutory change in 2009, ACNW renewed its commitment to charter schools and became an approved charter school authorizer in December 2010. Since that time, ACNW has grown to become the largest authorizer of charter schools in Minnesota by number of schools authorized. ACNW remains committed to authorizing charter schools as an effective vehicle for advancing the organization's mission and vision.

The ACNW Charter School Division (CSD) is located in Minneapolis and conducts oversight and evaluation of all schools authorized by ACNW throughout the state. The CSD is comprised of professionals with charter school authorizing and evaluation expertise. This includes both employees of ACNW and contracted evaluators. The CSD is overseen and monitored by the Charter School Committee (CSC) and the ACNW Board of Directors. Ultimately, it is the ACNW Board of Directors that makes the high-stakes decisions regarding the ongoing authorization of any particular school.

In 2015, ACNW participated in MDE's Minnesota Authorizer Performance Evaluation System (MAPES) and earned an overall score of 3.44 out of 4.00 and an overall performance rating of Satisfactory. As such, ACNW is eligible to submit its authorizing plan for the next five years to replace its current approved authorizer application. The following is ACNW's five-year authorizing plan; it is directly aligned to the performance measures in MAPES and is divided into two parts: Part A – Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure, and Part B – Authorizer Processes and Decision

Making. The primary purpose of Part A is to demonstrate ACNW's capacity and commitment to further the purposes of Minnesota's Charter School Law, Minnesota Statutes Chapter 124E. The primary purpose of Part B is to describe ACNW's standards, practices, and processes for determining high-stakes decisions regarding schools' academic, operational, financial, and environmental education performance.

***Statement of Public Domain***

*ACNW places this document in the public domain for the charter school community. The charter school community is free to adopt and utilize this document provided ACNW is acknowledged.*



# Part A: Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure

**Measure A.1 – Authorizer Mission:** *The authorizer has a clear and compelling mission for charter school authorizing.*

## **Essential Elements:**

- The mission is stated and fully aligns with Minnesota charter school law.
- The response includes a description of how the process of chartering schools is a way for the organization to carry out its mission.

## **Narrative:**

The authorizing mission of ACNW is to ensure quality academic and environmental literacy outcomes for Minnesota students through effective charter school authorizing. This mission is distinct from and aligned to the organization’s overall mission to instill a connection and commitment to the environment in people of all communities through experiential learning.

ACNW’s authorizing mission fully aligns with Minnesota charter school law and its requirements of authorizers. Additionally, ACNW’s mission is aligned to the primary purpose of the charter school law which is to improve all pupil learning and all student achievement (by ensuring quality academic outcomes for students). The authorizing mission also aligns to the first additional purpose, which is to increase learning opportunities for all pupils (by ensuring environmental literacy outcomes for students). ACNW is unique as an authorizer in that we use the charter contract to require schools to engage students in experiential environmental education activities designed to increase students’ environmental literacy (i.e., “a connection and commitment to the environment”). ACNW monitors and evaluates the environmental education performance of schools as a “fourth pillar” of school performance alongside academic, financial, and operational performance, and ultimately makes high-stakes decisions based on performance in all four areas.

**Measure A.2 – Authorizer Vision and Organizational Goals:** *The authorizer has a comprehensive vision for charter school authorizing with clear organizational goals and time frames for achievement that are aligned with the purposes of Minnesota law.*

## **Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer’s vision addresses, with specificity, the desired characteristics of the schools it will charter.
- The authorizer’s vision includes organization-specific purposes, if applicable.
- The authorizer’s organizational goals align with chartering vision and statutory purpose(s) per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.01, Subdivision 1.
- The organizational goals are measurable.

## **Narrative:**

The authorizing vision of ACNW 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 is distinct from and aligned to the organization’s overall vision of a healthy planet where all people

live in balance with the Earth. For ACNW, a high performing charter school demonstrates strong performance in the areas of academics, finance, operations, and environmental education as outlined in ACNW's Performance Evaluation Frameworks. ACNW's authorizing vision is aligned to Minnesota charter school law, as the primary purpose is to improve all pupil learning and all student achievement. The authorizing vision also aligns to the first additional purpose, which is to increase learning opportunities for all pupils. As an authorizer, we require schools to engage students in environmental education learning activities designed to increase students' environmental literacy.

ACNW's authorizing vision is aligned to the CSD's primary goal and associated outcomes:

Primary Goal – Strengthen the quality of ACNW's charter school portfolio. This will be accomplished by:

1. Authorizing high quality new schools.
2. Authorizing high quality/high performing existing schools (i.e., transfer schools).
3. Improved performance of current authorized schools in ACNW's four performance areas: academic, environmental education, financial, and operations.
4. Closing schools that are not meeting contractual or statutory expectations.

ACNW's progress on this goal will be measured annually by the following:

1. Increased percentage of performance ratings of Meets or Exceeds Standards on ACNW's Academic Performance Evaluations of authorized schools. *(2015 baseline – 40.0%)*
2. Increased percentage of performance ratings of Meets or Exceeds Standards or Well-Developed or Approaching Well-Developed on ACNW's Environmental Education Performance Evaluations of authorized schools. *(2015 baseline – 73.8%)*
3. Increased percentage of performance ratings of Meets Standards on ACNW's Financial Performance Evaluations of authorized schools. *(2015 baseline – 77.5%)*
4. Increased percentage of performance ratings of Meets Standards on ACNW's Operations Performance Evaluations of authorized schools. *(2015 baseline – 80.2%)*
5. Increased number of schools recognized as high quality and/or high performing.
  - a. Primary Measure: Authorized schools are recognized as Reward or Celebration schools, and/or High-Quality Charter Schools (HQCS) by MDE. *(2015 baseline – 1 Reward, 0 Celebration, 4 High Quality Charter Schools)*
  - b. Secondary Measure: Authorized schools are recognized as Celebration Eligible schools by MDE and/or not designated HQCS by MDE but were eligible to submit supplemental data for review in the HQCS appeals process. *(2015 baseline – 5 Celebration Eligible, 2 Non-HQCS eligible to submit supplemental data for appeal)*
  - c. Tertiary Measure: Authorized schools are recognized by other reputable organizations as high quality, high performing, and/or successfully fulfilling the primary and/or additional purposes of Minnesota's charter school law. *(2015 baseline – No data collected)*
6. Decreased number of schools identified as Focus, Priority, or Continuous Improvement schools by MDE. *(2015 baseline –3 Focus, 2 Priority, 7 Continuous Improvement)*

**Measure A.3 – Authorizer Structure of Operations and Measure A.4 – Authorizer Staff**

**Expertise:** *The authorizer has a clear structure of duties and responsibilities and sufficient resources to effectively oversee its portfolio of charter schools. The authorizer has appropriate experience, expertise and skills to sufficiently oversee the portfolio of charter schools.*

**Definitions:**

- “**Expertise**” is defined as having knowledge, education, training, etc. in the areas of charter schools, curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance and law.
- “**Experience**” is defined as length of time working in the areas of charter schools, curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance and law.
- “**Skills**” is defined as effective application of experience and expertise in the areas of charter schools, curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance and law.

**Essential Elements:**

- Description of the capacity of the organization to serve as an authorizer, including the positions (e.g. employees, contractors, volunteers; both paid and unpaid positions) who will perform the authorizing duties and ratio of positions (FTE) to portfolio size.
- The authorizer describes a clear structure of duties and responsibilities, including required expertise, experience and skills in curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance and law in charter schools, at a level adequate to meet the needs of the portfolio.
- The authorizer describes how the organization will manage and safeguard information and records related to authorizing.
- An organizational chart that shows clear lines of reporting and authority/decision-making and, if applicable, showing projected organizational changes due to proposed expansion over the next five-year term.

**Narrative:****Structure of Duties & Responsibilities**

ACNW has a clear structure of duties and responsibilities to ensure effective oversight of its portfolio of schools. The ACNW Charter School Authorization Organizational Chart on page 7 identifies the key structure of the organization as it relates to charter school authorizing.

The ACNW Board of Directors is the party ultimately responsible for all ACNW authorizing decisions. The ACNW board oversees and engages in high-stakes decisions including new school proposals, contract renewal decisions, transfer schools, and expansions. The board also approves the organization’s strategic plan and budget. The full board meets approximately six times per year, reviews Charter School Committee (CSC) reports at each board meeting, addresses action items as needed, and holds one meeting primarily dedicated to charter school authorizing annually, which includes training related to charter schools and authorizing.

The board uses a committee structure, including a Charter School Committee which is made up of four to seven members including at least three board members. This committee conducts reviews of authorizing activities including new school proposals, transfers, contract renewals, and expansions and makes recommendations to the full board for final decisions. The committee meets approximately nine times per year and remains apprised of all authorizing activities of the organization through reports by the Director of Charter School Authorizing. The CSC also engages in training activities related to charter schools and authorizing.

The Director of Charter School Authorizing manages ACNW’s Charter School Division, all day-to-day authorizing activities, CSD staff, and contracted evaluators. This position reports to the ACNW Executive Director who in turn reports to the ACNW Board of Directors.

The CSD is currently comprised of the following positions:

- **Director of Charter School Authorizing (1.0 FTE)**  
The Director of Charter School Authorizing manages and oversees the CSD team to conduct oversight and evaluation of authorized schools. The Director of Charter School Authorizing is responsible for ensuring that the CSD implements ACNW's charter school authorizing responsibilities effectively in order to advance the mission and vision of the CSD. The Director ensures that the CSD implements its Commissioner-Approved Authorizing Plan with fidelity and consistency in order to strengthen the quality of ACNW's portfolio of charter schools.
- **Associate Director of Charter School Authorizing (1.0 FTE)**  
The primary role of the Associate Director of Charter School Authorizing is to lead key evaluation areas, including academics and environmental education, as well as the new school start-up ready-to-open process. This position also takes a lead role on implementing key elements of the CSD strategic plan, which is designed to increase the quality of ACNW's charter school portfolio.
- **Charter School Authorizing Specialist (1.0 FTE)**  
The primary role of the Charter School Authorizing Specialist is to work in collaboration with the CSD team to conduct oversight and evaluation of authorized schools. This position will lead key elements of school performance evaluation and oversight, particularly in the area of school operations and governance performance as well as ongoing school improvement.
- **Data and Communications Coordinator (1.0 FTE)**  
The primary role of the Data and Communications Coordinator is to gather, organize, and format charter school performance data to facilitate effective charter school performance evaluations. In addition, this position synthesizes portfolio-wide performance data for internal goal tracking and reporting, and supports organization-wide efficiency towards meeting strategic plan outcomes and other work outcomes.
- **Finance Analyst (0.3 FTE)**  
The primary role of the Finance Analyst is to support execution of the financial performance evaluations, routine financial monitoring, and contracting processes.
- **Contracted Evaluators (FTE varies from approximately 0.25 to 1.25 and based on need)**  
The CSD has consistently contracted with external experts to ensure sufficient staffing levels, expertise, experience, and skills to meet quality authorizing needs and the needs of ACNW's portfolio. These evaluators work under the direction of the Director of Charter School Authorizing to review new school proposals, transfer school applications, charter school renewal applications, and expansion applications and participate in ongoing oversight including site visits, board meeting observations, and monthly board and financial reviews. The number of contracted evaluators and the number of hours or level of engagement of evaluators depends on CSD needs (see "Expertise, Experience, & Skills" section below).
- **GreenCorps Member (1.0 FTE)**  
The GreenCorps member provides environmental education programming and waste reduction support to ACNW authorized schools in support of the school's contractual goals (Exhibit H).

In FY17 and beyond, ACNW anticipates an FTE to school ratio of approximately 1:8. This ratio is sufficient to meet the needs of the portfolio. Any future increases in portfolio size will result in increased FTE resources to maintain a comparable ratio.

### **Expertise, Experience, & Skills**

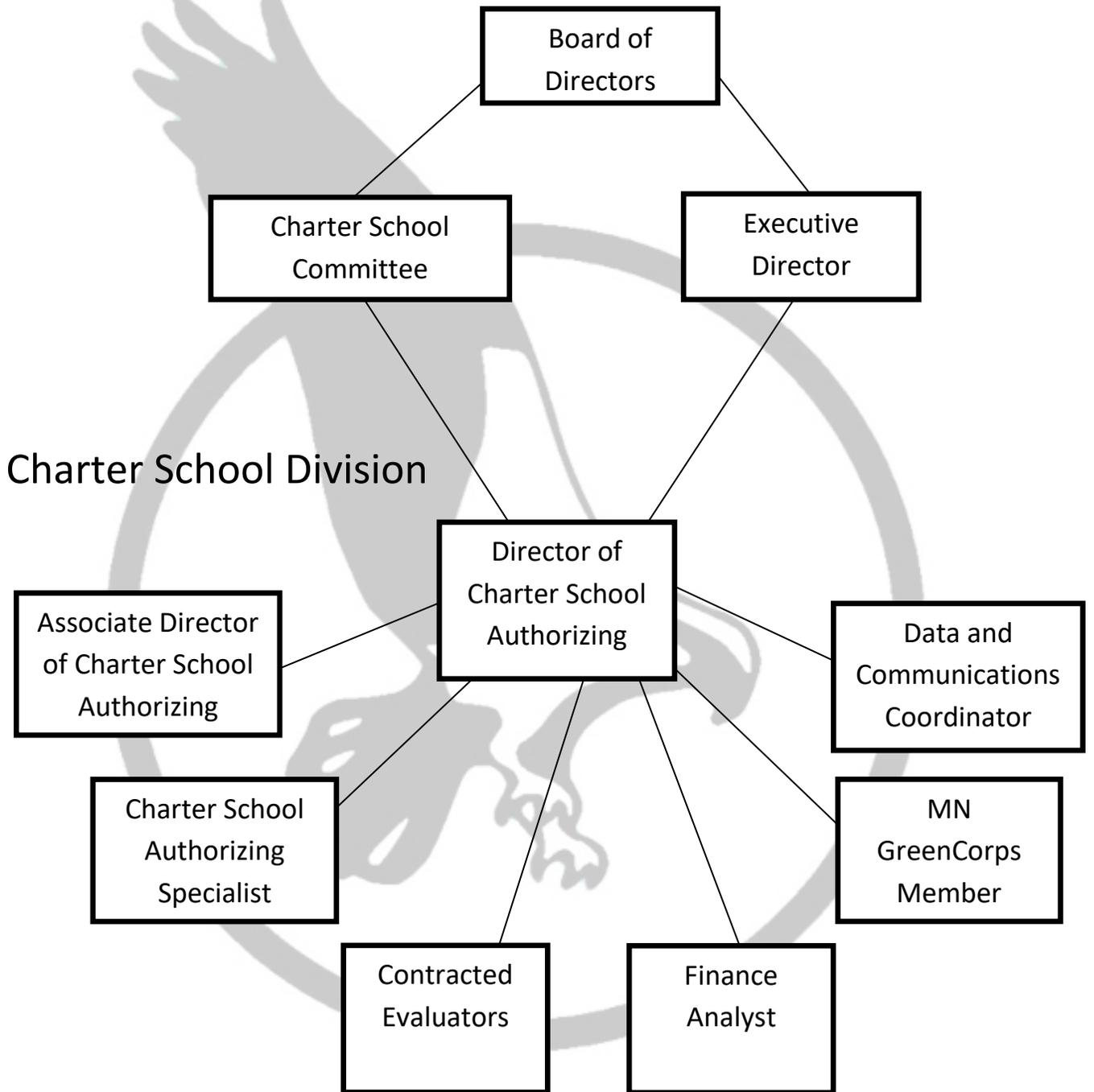
ACNW's staff, consultants, and board members have extensive and diverse expertise, experience, and skills in seven key areas: charter schools, curriculum, instruction, management, facilities, finance, and law. ACNW contracts with external consultants to supplement the experience, expertise, and skills of staff members; CSD staff also engage in professional development to increase the breadth and the depth of their expertise and skills. Staff and contracted evaluators are further supported by external legal counsel for additional expertise in specific matters, which is available as needed for any issues that arise.

Collectively, the CSD's current staff and external consultants possess the expertise, experience, and skills identified in the chart below:

<b>Key Areas</b>	<b>Expertise, Experience, and Skills possessed by:</b>
Charter Schools	4 staff; 3 external consultants
Curriculum	3 staff; 3 external consultants
Instruction	3 staff; 3 external consultants
Management	4 staff; 2 external consultants
Facilities	3 staff; 1 external consultant
Finance	3 staff; 1 external consultant
Law	2 staff; 1 external consultant

*Note: The chart above is current as of June 2016 and is subject to change. Regardless of individual FTE changes, ACNW will maintain expertise, experience, and skills in each category and will retain FTEs necessary to do so.*

# ACNW Charter School Authorization Organizational Chart



## **Manage & Safeguard Data**

ACNW has systems in place to manage and safeguard school and student information, and records relating to authorizing. This is accomplished through three primary means:

First, ACNW uses Dropbox for Business for cloud storage of digital files. The CSD has moved away from paper files – files are maintained digitally, or scanned to become digital. (As appropriate, paper documents are shredded.) ACNW staff has developed an electronic folder structure to support effective management of authorizing, including all administrative files and all school files. Dropbox for Business is secure. Access to Dropbox is limited to CSD staff and contracted evaluators on an as needed basis, and data is backed up continuously. See attachment “Dropbox\_Security Whitepaper\_2019” for more on Dropbox’s security features.

Second, consistent with ACNW’s data sharing agreement with MDE for de-identified student level achievement data, ACNW follows protocols to ensure security and protection of that data according to the terms of the Data Sharing Agreement. See attachment “ACNW\_MDE Authorizer Data Sharing Agreement\_Executed 05.12.2015.”

Third, ACNW uses Epicenter, a software program developed by the National Charter Schools Institute (NCSI) for charter school and authorizer document compliance and cloud-based storage. See attachments “NCSI\_Epicenter Features and Functionality” for a description of this program and “NCSI\_Datacenter Security Summary\_08.05.2015” for the security protocols in place to protect data uploaded to and stored in Epicenter.

### **Attachments Referenced:**

- Dropbox\_Security Whitepaper\_2019
- ACNW\_MDE Authorizer Data Sharing Agreement\_Executed 05.12.2015
- NCSI\_Epicenter Features and Functionality
- NCSI\_Datacenter Security Summary\_08.05.2015

## **Measure A.5 – Authorizer Capacity and Skill Development of Leadership and Authorizing**

**Staff:** *The authorizer has a plan to build the knowledge and skill base of its authorizing leadership and staff through professional development. The authorizer has a plan to provide professional development aligned with its operations, vision and goals for overseeing its portfolio of charter schools.*

### **Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes a plan to offer professional development to authorizing leadership and staff.
- The authorizer describes the frequency and nature of potential professional development as well as personnel expected to attend.
- The authorizer describes how the professional development aligns with its operations, vision and goals for the portfolio of charter schools.

### **Narrative:**

ACNW is committed to and provides ongoing professional development to authorizing leadership and staff that aligns to our operations, vision, and goals for our portfolio of schools. This is accomplished by:

1. **Sending staff to specific mission- and vision-aligned conferences, workshops, and trainings in Minnesota and nationally.** Examples of potential trainings include: the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) Leadership Conference, the Minnesota Charter School Conference, and the Minnesota Assessment Conference. In addition to participating in such professional development, ACNW staff members engage in pre-event planning and post-event reflection. Specifically, we collaboratively review session descriptions and discuss which are the most appropriate sessions for each staff person to attend in order to increase the breadth and depth of each staff member's expertise and skills. Moreover, we engage in post-event reflection discussions to highlight our learnings and take-aways.
2. **Engaging staff in job-embedded professional development.** This happens through staff meetings, internal staff trainings, ongoing consultations, and on-the-job training. ACNW staff and consultants leverage one another's expertise to develop the knowledge and skills of all staff members. Contracted evaluators and staff meet approximately quarterly to review site visit documents, governance evaluation tools, and performance frameworks to deepen our collective understanding and make improvements to our operations as appropriate. New staff and contracted evaluators accompany experienced staff or contractors on school site visits, board meeting observations, or other meetings to provide on-the-job training.
3. **Setting and evaluating annual professional development goals aligned to ACNW's operations, vision, and goals as part of the staff evaluation process.** Through the annual employee performance evaluation process, ACNW staff members engage in professional development goal setting, planning, and reflection. This process ensures that professional development is proactive, measured, and evaluated. Professional development is differentiated, customized to meet the needs of authorizing leadership and staff, and aligned to ACNW's operations, vision, and goals. For example, the Environmental Education Evaluator regularly attends environmentally-focused professional development such as the Minnesota Green Schools Coalition Climate and Energy training, while other staff more engaged with academic oversight and data attend trainings like the Minnesota Assessment Conference. National conferences, such as the NACSA Leadership Conference, are important professional development opportunities for all staff members to attend, not only to develop each individual's particular areas of need, but also to make and continue to deepen connections with authorizers within Minnesota and across the nation. CSD staff members are expected to participate annually in at least one national or international professional development opportunity (such as the NACSA Leadership Conference or site visits to schools and authorizers outside of Minnesota) and at least one Minnesota PD opportunity (such as the MN Charter School Conference or the MN Assessment Conference). Staff will also participate in job-embedded professional development and other PD described in this section.
4. **Networking with authorizing colleagues in Minnesota and nationally.** ACNW staff and contractors actively engage with other authorizers in Minnesota and across the country to deepen knowledge and skills. This happens through ongoing participation in Minnesota Association of Charter School Authorizers (MACSA) meetings, consultations with other Minnesota and national authorizers, and working with other Minnesota authorizers on projects. ACNW contracted evaluators have active direct experience working with other authorizers and charter schools in Minnesota and share their learning with ACNW staff and leadership.
5. **Engaging in state and national charter school task forces, work groups, and other initiatives.** ACNW intends to keep abreast of and participate in other opportunities that impact the charter and authorizing sectors in Minnesota and nationally. In the past, CSD

staff members have participated in such initiatives, including but not limited to CSP grant reviews, the MN Teacher Equity Steering Committee, and MDE work groups related to charter schools and authorizing.

6. **Training for ACNW Board and Charter School Committee.** The CSD staff provides ongoing training for ACNW board members at Charter School Committee meetings and board meetings. See section “Measure A.3 – Authorizer Structure of Operations and Measure A.4 – Authorizer Staff Expertise” above for more information on the ACNW Board of Directors and the Charter School Committee.

**Measure A.6 – Authorizer Operational Budget for Authorizing the Portfolio of Charter**

**Schools:** *The authorizer has a plan to allocate resources commensurate with its stated budget, needs and responsibilities of authorizing the portfolio of charter schools.*

**Essential Elements:**

- Anticipated five-year budget (SYFY 16-SYFY 21) outlining the following:
  - Anticipated revenue sources such as fees collected annually from schools and additional funds from outside sources.
  - Anticipated expenditures such as staff, travel, consultants and office costs.
  - Anticipated authorizer staff increases in relation to portfolio growth.
- The budget projects the number and size of schools in the portfolio.

**Narrative:**

ACNW’s FY16-FY21 budget is included as an attachment. (See attachment “ACNW\_FY16-FY21 AAP Budget\_07.01.2016.”) The budget is a five-year projection and necessarily requires flexibility.

Revenues assume an increase of the general formula (and therefore authorizer fees) of 1% per year; however, we understand that actual increases require legislative action. Revenues also assume modest enrollment increases that would in turn increase the overall revenue from authorizer fees. Additionally, only other revenues that have been secured are included, though ACNW may pursue additional funds through grants or other means to support authorizing activities.

ACNW is not able to predict with 100% certainty what expenses such as staffing costs, legal fees, the price of stamps, etc. will be in five years, though numbers presented in the budget are based on sound historical data and assumptions moving forward. Overall, ACNW believes that this five-year budget reflects reasonable income and expenditure projections.

Changes in the size of our portfolio are expected to be modest with up to two new or transfer schools per year as well as up to two closures or transfers out per year. The number of authorized schools may deviate from the numbers indicated in the budget, in which case revenues and expenditures (included staffing) would be adjusted as needed.

ACNW has set a cap of up to 45 schools for this five-year plan. This includes sufficient flexibility should the charter school landscape change significantly, such as the departure of a large authorizer or multiple authorizers from the field. ACNW will not exceed the number of schools cap without submitting a revision of this section of our AAP to MDE.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_FY16-FY21 AAP Budget\_07.01.2016

**Measure A.7 – Authorizer Operational Conflicts of Interest:** *The authorizer implements a clear policy to address conflicts of interest in all decision-making processes concerning the portfolio of charter schools.*

**Essential Elements:**

- Clear policy to address conflicts of interest in all decision-making processes concerning the portfolio of charter schools.
- The authorizer describes how the policy will be implemented (forms, process, etc.) in order to avoid conflicts of interest that might affect the authorizer’s capacity to make objective, merit- based application and renewal decisions, including avoiding decisions and interventions that hold the authorizer accountable for the school’s performance.

**Narrative:**

ACNW’s conflict of interest policy is included as an attachment (“ACNW\_CSD Conflict of Interest Policy\_05.25.2016”). This policy clearly articulates that ACNW functions “only to monitor and oversee authorized schools, to assure compliance with law, and to support the establishment and success of innovative public charter schools. Therefore, ACNW shall not enter into the following types of contracts with any schools it authorizes: “Financial management, Administration, Accounting or auditing services, Lease of space.” Moreover, the policy states: “Any individual with a conflict of interest is prohibited from participating in any aspect of charter school oversight or engage in any deliberation or decision-making involving an authorized charter school or a charter school applicant in which the individual has a conflict of interest.” All individuals involved in any aspect of charter school oversight and decision-making, including CSD staff, contracted evaluators, ACNW’s Executive Director, members of the CSC, and ACNW’s Board of Directors (see ACNW’s Charter School Authorization Organizational Chart on page 7), are required to sign the policy document and disclose any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest when first hired/contracted/seated and annually thereafter, and also upon any change of their personal status or the status of ACNW’s portfolio (i.e., receipt of a new or transfer school notice of intent to apply for ACNW authorization).

Additionally, to further ensure that contracted evaluators have no real or perceived conflict of interests that can impact high stakes decisions, ACNW has all reviewers of any new, transfer, and/or renewal school applications sign a conflict of interest statement. Additionally, ACNW evaluators are precluded from soliciting work from ACNW authorized schools as per their signed evaluator agreement. If an ACNW authorized school should approach an ACNW evaluator, the evaluator must notify the Director of Charter School Authorizing and an appropriate course of action is then determined to ensure no conflicts of interest. See attachment “ACNW\_Evaluator Agreement.”

ACNW is a residential environmental learning center (RELC). ACNW authorized schools may choose to take students to the RELC as part of their academic and environmental education programming. In fact, some ACNW authorized schools have been taking their students to ACNW for many years, including years prior to being authorized by ACNW. Additionally, some schools that used to attend ACNW have stopped doing so, and other schools have never taken students to ACNW. Participation at any level is at the school’s sole discretion and has no bearing whatsoever on ACNW’s authorizing oversight or evaluation of a school. Per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 2, and through this authorizing plan, ACNW is disclosing to the commissioner of MDE that any ACNW authorized school may potentially contract or purchase services from ACNW in its role as an RELC. Any such contract or purchase of service will be completely separate from the charter contract. Furthermore, ACNW authorized schools are required to document the open bidding process used in

selecting ACNW for RELC related services. The granting or renewal of a charter school by ACNW is not contingent on the charter school being required to contract, purchase services, or lease (as indicated in the conflict of interest policy) from ACNW.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_CSD Conflict of Interest Policy\_05.25.2016
- ACNW\_Evaluator Agreement

**Measure A.8 – Ensuring Autonomy of the Schools in the Portfolio:** *The authorizer implements a policy to preserve and support the essential autonomies of the portfolio of charter schools.*

**Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes a clear policy to ensure school autonomy.
- The authorizer describes processes and procedures for implementing and executing school autonomy.
- The authorizer describes a focus on holding schools accountable for outcomes rather than on processes.

**Narrative:**

ACNW demonstrates its processes and procedures for implementing and executing school autonomy through 1) the charter contract, and 2) policies on charter school autonomy and conflicts of interest.

**Charter Contract**

The charter contract used by ACNW is designed to preserve the essential autonomies of schools in our portfolio. See attachment “ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017,” specifically:

- Section 2.2 of the charter contract clearly states the independent status of the school and that ACNW has no authority or control over operation, administrative or financial responsibility of the school except those stated in the contract which comply with state statutes.
- Section 2.3 of the charter contract further articulates the separation of financial obligations of ACNW and its authorized schools.
- Section 2.4 of the charter contract clearly states that neither ACNW nor a school has authority to bind the other party to a third party contract or agreement.

Additionally, Section 11.1(a)1 of the charter contract states contract renewal is based primarily on achievement of improved student outcomes (i.e., “improving all pupil learning and all student achievement”) rather than on the school’s processes. Exhibit P of the charter contract reiterates this point. (See attachment “ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_09.15.2017.”)

**Policies**

ACNW’s policy on charter school autonomy is titled “Policy on Authorizer Role and School Autonomy.” (See attachment “ACNW\_Authorizer Role and School Autonomy Policy\_05.25.2016.”) Our processes and procedures are aligned to this policy, which stipulates that “ACNW must engage in responsible oversight of charter schools by ensuring that authorized schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled while being held accountable to statutory and contractual expectations.” The policy further states that ACNW as the authorizer is not responsible “for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding authorized schools accountable for their performance.”

ACNW's Conflict of Interest Policy is also relevant to school autonomy. See attachment "ACNW\_CSD Conflict of Interest Policy\_05.25.2016" and section "Measure A.7 – Authorizer Operational Conflicts of Interest" above. This policy clearly articulates that ACNW functions "only to monitor and oversee authorized schools, to assure compliance with law, and to support the establishment and success of innovative public charter schools. Therefore, ACNW shall not enter into the following types of contracts with any schools it authorizes: Financial management, Administration, Accounting or auditing services, Lease of space."

### **Processes and Procedures**

ACNW holds schools accountable for outcomes rather than processes. This is evident in ACNW's charter contract (see above), performance evaluation frameworks, and process for charter renewal. For a more in-depth discussion of ACNW's performance standards, holding schools accountable to outcomes, and making merit-based renewal decisions, see sections "Measure B.4 – Performance Standards" and "Measure B.9 – Charter School Renewal or Termination Decisions" in Part B below.

ACNW's evaluation and feedback processes provide another example of protecting school autonomy. Outcome-based performance evaluations, annual report evaluations, and board of directors' feedback all include both required and recommended actions as appropriate. Required actions stem from school performance deficiencies that relate directly to contractual expectations or statutory requirements. Recommendations reflect best practice but do not obligate a school to any particular course of action. These are clearly indicated as recommendations and not requirements.

Any technical assistance offered by ACNW to authorized schools is completely voluntary and not required. ACNW's approach to providing technical support to schools is further outlined in "Measure B.7 – Charter School Support, Development and Technical Assistance." As also described in that section, occasionally ACNW receives requests from schools for support that could potentially infringe upon their autonomy. ACNW thoughtfully considers our role as authorizer when preparing a response to these requests, and takes the opportunity to clarify the school-authorizer relationship.

### **Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017 (pp. 3, 7, 18)
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_09.15.2017 (pp. 38, 43 [Exhibit P pp. 2, 7])
- ACNW\_Authorizer Role and School Autonomy Policy\_05.25.2016
- ACNW\_CSD Conflict of Interest Policy\_05.25.2016

**Measure A.9 – Authorizer Self-Evaluation of Capacity, Infrastructure and Practices:** *The authorizer plans to self-evaluate its internal ability (capacity, infrastructure and practices) to oversee the portfolio of charter schools.*

### **Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes a plan to regularly review its internal ability to oversee the portfolio of charter schools.
- The authorizer describes the organization's process to implement continuous improvement plans which will result in more effective authorizing practices.

**Narrative:**

ACNW regularly evaluates its internal ability to oversee its portfolio of schools. We intentionally work to build capacity, infrastructure, and oversight practices through multiple means. At the staff level, we engage in ongoing and planned self-evaluation of our internal capacity and practices to oversee our portfolio of charter schools. Staff meets approximately monthly to reflect on progress on our strategic plan. These meetings also provide an impetus to identify new tools or strategies for conducting quality oversight. Through regular reviews of our mission- and vision-driven strategic plan, we routinely review our internal practices against our ability to oversee ACNW's portfolio of charter schools. ACNW tracks progress on meeting outcomes and tasks in our strategic plan through a monitoring tool that is reviewed and updated at each strategic plan meeting. If we determine we are not on track to meet outcomes or complete tasks in the strategic plan, we engage in a process of continuous improvement in which we: 1) identify the issue/deficiency, 2) identify the actions/strategies to resolve the issue/deficiency with corresponding deadlines, 3) identify the individual(s) responsible for carrying out the continuous improvement actions/strategies, 4) track progress of implementation at future meetings, and 5) upon completion, reviewing the impact/effect on the strategic plan/outcomes.

Additionally, as part of our self-evaluation activities, we ensure that we gather feedback from our portfolio of schools. For example, we gather feedback from schools at our annual Leaders Retreat, as well as through periodic surveys on ACNW processes and procedures (such as use of Epicenter and performance evaluation frameworks).

**Measure A.10 – Authorizer High Quality Authorizing Dissemination:** *The authorizer plans to disseminate best authorizing practices and/or assist other authorizers in high quality authorizing.*

**Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes the organization's process to share best practices and/or provide assistance to other authorizers.
- The authorizer describes the organization's intent to engage with other professionals (such as state or national associations) in order to promote high quality authorizing dissemination.

**Narrative:**

ACNW is a leader among authorizers in Minnesota, sharing best practices and assisting other authorizers in high quality authorizing. ACNW engages with other Minnesota authorizers through MACSA (and other channels), as well as other authorizers nationally through NACSA (and other channels), to promote dissemination of high quality authorizing policies and practices. ACNW promotes mutual sharing of effective practices by:

- Participating in MACSA, including participation in MACSA committees.
- Collaborating with other authorizers on specific joint projects.
- Presenting high quality authorizer practices at conferences and workshops.
- Providing technical assistance to other authorizers in response to individual requests.
- Reaching out to other authorizers to offer or request support when warranted.
- Participating in NACSA, including participation in the NACSA Leaders Program.

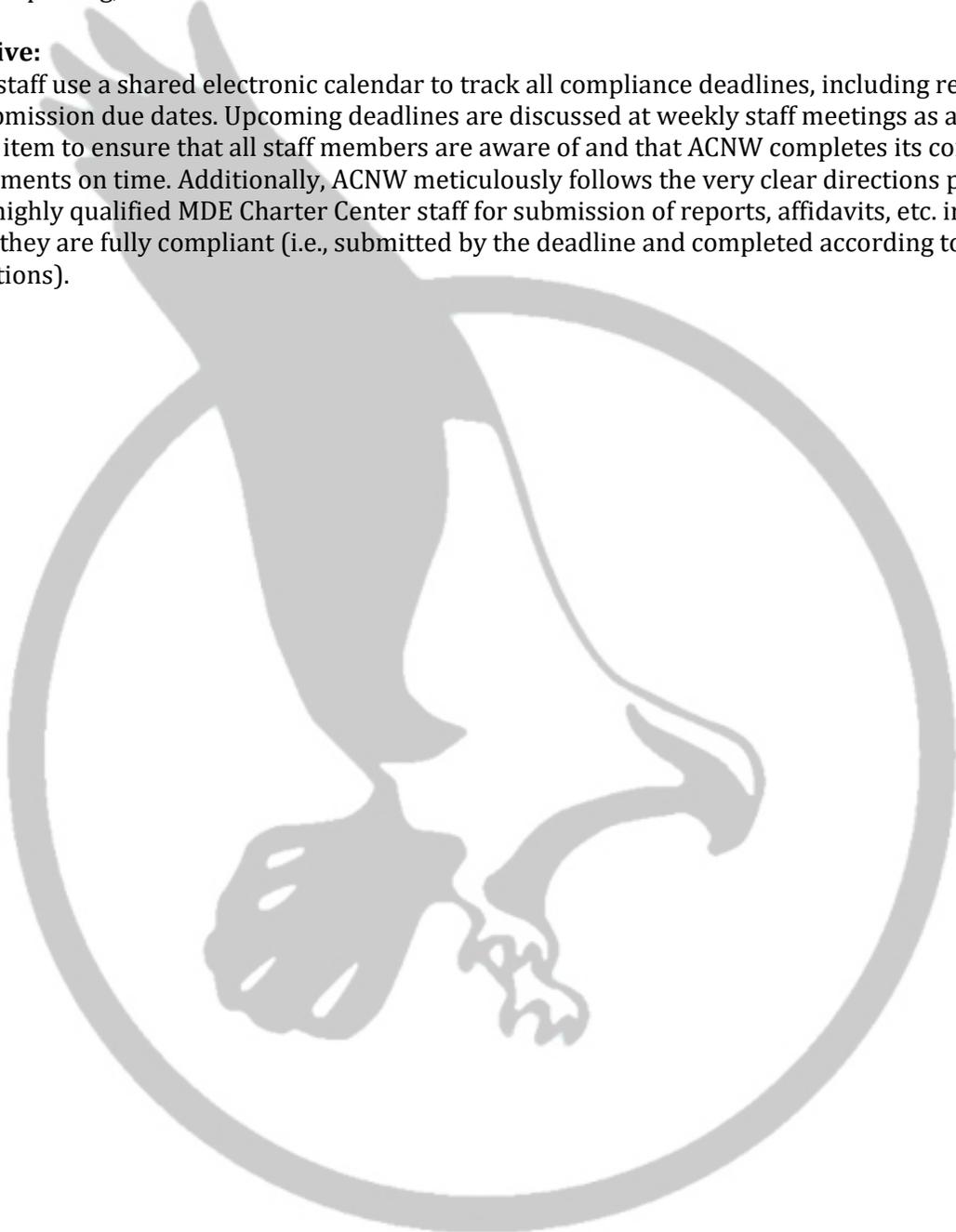
**Measure A.11 – Authorizer Compliance to Responsibilities Stated in Statute:** *The authorizer intends to comply with reporting, submissions and deadlines set forth in Minnesota Statute.*

**Essential Element:**

- The authorizer describes its internal process which will ensure that it will comply with reporting, submissions and deadlines set forth in Minnesota Statute.

**Narrative:**

ACNW staff use a shared electronic calendar to track all compliance deadlines, including reporting and submission due dates. Upcoming deadlines are discussed at weekly staff meetings as a standing agenda item to ensure that all staff members are aware of and that ACNW completes its compliance requirements on time. Additionally, ACNW meticulously follows the very clear directions provided by the highly qualified MDE Charter Center staff for submission of reports, affidavits, etc. in order to ensure they are fully compliant (i.e., submitted by the deadline and completed according to MDE’s instructions).



# Part B: Authorizer Processes and Decision Making

**Measure B.1 – New Charter School Decisions:** *The authorizer has clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate new charter school proposals. The authorizer outlines new charter school decision-making processes that will promote the growth of high quality charter schools.*

## **Essential Elements:**

- Comprehensive new school application instructions, evaluative criteria, procedures, timelines and review process that address all the following elements:
  - Mission/Vision
  - Need/Demand
  - Primary statutory purpose of improving all pupil learning and all student achievement (Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.01, Subdivision 1) and how the school will report the implementation of it to the authorizer.
  - Additional purpose(s) and how the school will report the implementation of said purpose(s) to the authorizer.
  - Program designed for students to meet or exceed the outcome expectations adopted by the commissioner for public school students (Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(15)(b)).
  - Academic plan: description of the school program, specific academic and nonacademic outcomes that students must achieve, educational philosophy and approach, school culture, curriculum and instruction, assessment and services for special populations.
  - Operational plan: governance and management, administration, human resource recruitment and development, student recruitment and enrollment, admission policy, school calendar, parent and community involvement, operational outcomes and compliance with applicable laws and regulations.
  - Financial plan: short and long-term financial projections, budget(s), business management procedures, financial outcomes and facility planning.
- The authorizer’s review process includes clear and transparent procedures and rigorous criteria to evaluate new charter school applications.
- The authorizer describes the timeline of the new school application process consistent with statutory deadlines per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.06.
- The authorizer’s new charter school application criteria are consistent with the authorizer’s performance standards/framework as described in B.4: Performance Standards.

## **Narrative:**

ACNW’s new school application and review process is explained in attachment “ACNW\_New School Application Guide\_Updated 12.18.2019.”

## **Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_New School Application Guide\_Updated 12.18.2019

**Measure B.2 – Interim Accountability Decisions** (i.e. site/grade level expansions, official early learning program(s) recognition, ready to open and change in authorizer): *The authorizer has clear and comprehensive approval criteria and process standards to rigorously evaluate school opening decisions as well as proposals of existing charter school expansion requests and interim changes. The authorizer outlines interim accountability decision-making processes that will promote the growth of high quality charter schools.*

**Essential Element:**

- Comprehensive application instructions, evaluative criteria, procedures, timelines and review processes, including academic, operational and financial conditions upon which the authorizer approves or denies the following:
  - Site/grade level expansion per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.06, Subdivision 5.
  - Official early learning program(s) recognition per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.06, Subdivision 3(a) and Minnesota Statutes, sections 121A.16 to 121A.19.
  - Change in authorizer requests per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 5.
  - Ready to Open per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.06, Subdivision 3(g).

**Narrative:**

**Site/Grade Level Expansions (including Official Early Learning Program Recognition)**

ACNW’s application and review process for site and grade level expansions is explained in attachment “ACNW\_Expansion Application Guide\_Updated 03.25.2019.”

**Enrollment Cap Expansion**

ACNW’s application and review process for requests to increase the contractual enrollment cap is explained in attachment “ACNW\_Student Number Increase Application Guidance\_04.23.2019.”

**Change in Authorizer Requests**

ACNW’s change of authorizer application and review process is explained in attachment “ACNW\_Change of Authorizer Application Guide\_Updated 08.22.2016.”

**Ready to Open**

Once a charter school application is approved, ACNW will monitor the start-up group’s progress as they lay the foundation for the school’s success. ACNW is committed to working with the developers to ensure the creation of a successful school. To this end, ACNW will require developers to create and maintain a start-up task table specific to their school which includes at least the elements in the ACNW Charter School Start-Up Guide and Progress Checklist. (See attachment “ACNW\_Start-Up Guide and Progress Checklist.”)

The start-up period for a new charter school is typically quite challenging. The founders may encounter unforeseen difficulties in any of the areas noted in the start-up task list. ACNW will monitor authorized schools’ start-up efforts to ensure the school is ready before it opens. In order to gain ACNW’s final approval for opening, a new charter school must meet certain conditions for opening set forth in the ACNW Charter School Ready-to-Open Checklist. (See attachment “ACNW\_Ready-to-Open Checklist.”)

As the school gets closer to its opening date, the founders will use the checklist in consultation with ACNW. If the start-up school’s board is unable to meet one or more of the conditions, it will submit a plan detailing how the condition will be accomplished by June 1. In the event the conditions are not met by the deadline, ACNW may, at its own discretion, decide to postpone the opening of the

school by one year. The developing school may also decide on its own to delay a year to have more time to open successfully.

### **Expansion Ready to Open**

Once a charter school expansion (site, grade level, or early learning program) is approved, ACNW will monitor the school's implementation plan described in its application. The period prior to implementing an expansion or replication is critical in laying the foundation for future school success. As such, ACNW has established a series of benchmarks and required actions to ensure key pieces are in place prior to opening. These indicators are aligned with ACNW's environmental education, financial, and operations performance frameworks for operating schools.

As the expansion or replication gets closer to its opening date, the school will use its checklist in consultation with ACNW to help determine readiness to open. If the school is unable to meet one or more of the required conditions, it will submit a plan detailing how the condition will be accomplished by July 1. The planning year culminates in a final Ready-to-Open (RTO) meeting approximately 12 weeks prior to the start of the expansion or replication's first operational year (and typically no later than June 1).

The RTO meeting will allow the school to demonstrate work that has been done and will also serve as a checkpoint to ensure that the RTO benchmarks have been met. In the event that the school is unable to satisfy the RTO benchmarks, the school must provide a plan to fulfill the RTO requirements in a timely fashion or postpone the expansion or replication by one year.

### **Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Expansion Application Guide\_Updated 03.25.2019
- ACNW\_Change of Authorizer Application Guide\_Updated 08.22.2016
- ACNW\_Start-Up Guide and Progress Checklist
- ACNW\_Ready-to-Open Checklist
- ACNW\_Expansion & Replication Ready-to-Open Calendar\_Revised 03.05.2019
- ACNW\_Expansion & Replication Ready-to-Open Guide\_Revised 03.05.2019
- ACNW\_Student Number Increase Application Guidance\_04.23.2019

**Measure B.3 – Contract Term, Negotiation and Execution:** *The authorizer has contracts that clearly define material terms and rights and responsibilities of the school and the authorizer.*

### **Essential Elements:**

- Sample charter contract that meets all following elements:
  - All current statutory requirements per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10.
  - Clearly state the rights and responsibilities of the school and the authorizer.
- The authorizer describes a plan to establish contract outcomes/goals that are strategic, specific, measurable and time-bound.
- The authorizer describes its process for how its new contract(s) will be completed within 45 business days of the commissioner's approval of the authorizer's affidavit and the authorizer will submit to the commissioner a copy of the signed contract within 10 business days of its execution.
- The authorizer describes how its existing contract(s) will be fully executed no later than the first date of the renewal period.

- The authorizer describes how the contract will be amended for material contract changes when applicable.

**Narrative:**

ACNW’s charter contract template is attached. (See attachments “ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017” and “ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_09.15.2017.”) The charter contract meets all statutory requirements. The relationship between ACNW as the authorizer and authorized schools is clearly defined in Article II of the charter contract, including the voluntary nature of this relationship. Section 2.2 specifically states that, except as provided in the contract, ACNW has no authority or control over operational, administrative, or financial responsibility of the school. Additionally, Article III identifies the primary role of ACNW as oversight of the school's academic, financial, operational, environmental education, and student performance. School obligations are set forth primarily in Articles VI, VII, and VIII.

ACNW’s contracting process is explained in attachment “ACNW\_Contracting Process\_07.06.2016,” which includes a timeline to ensure that existing contracts are fully executed no later than the first date of the renewal period.

*Note: The timeline in the contracting process guide is updated annually and will remain consistent with ACNW and statutory deadlines.*

ACNW’s goal-setting requirements are provided in attachment “ACNW\_Guide to Developing Contractual Goals\_06.02.2016,” which specifically states that a school’s contractual outcomes “need to be written in SMART goal format” (i.e., outcomes are Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Ambitious and Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound).

ACNW uses the process outlined in section “Measure A.11 – Authorizer Compliance to Responsibilities Stated in Statute” to ensure new charter contracts are completed within 45 business days of the commissioner’s approval of the new school affidavit and that signed copies of the contracts are submitted to the commissioner within 10 business days of execution.

When warranted, ACNW executes contract amendments for material changes in current school plans. Article IX of the charter contract outlines contractual requirements for amendments, specifically that all amendments must be in writing and signed by the contract parties (ACNW and the school’s board). Material changes that would warrant a contract amendment include but are not limited to: revised performance outcomes between ACNW and school, grade level expansions approved by MDE, and contract term extensions (not to exceed five operational years per contract). ACNW provides MDE with a copy of contracts with material amendments within ten business days of execution of the amendment.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017 (and specifically pp. 3-15)
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019
- ACNW\_Contracting Process\_07.06.2016
- ACNW\_Guide to Developing Contractual Goals\_06.02.2016

**Measure B.4 – Performance Standards:** *The authorizer has a performance framework under which it executes contracts with clear, measurable and attainable performance standards.*

### **Essential Elements:**

- Performance framework addressing all the following elements:
  - States the primary purpose of the charter schools in its portfolio is to improve all pupil learning and all student achievement and identifies additional purposes per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.01, Subdivision 1, Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivisions 1(a)(1) and 1(a)(2).
  - The performance framework defines clear, measurable and attainable academic, operational and financial performance standards for all schools in its portfolio per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10.
  - The performance framework is designed to achieve outcomes that meet or exceed expectations adopted by the commissioner for public school students per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(15)(b).
    - Commissioner's outcomes for public school students are the five goals of World's Best Workforce:
      - All children are ready for school.
      - All third-graders can read at grade level.
      - All racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed.
      - All students are ready for career and college.
      - All students graduate from high school.

### **Narrative:**

#### **Performance Frameworks**

ACNW's four up-to-date performance frameworks (Academic, Environmental Education, Financial, and Operations Performance) are provided in ACNW's Renewal Performance Framework document, which states fulfillment of the primary purpose of charter schools is "the most important factor ACNW will consider in determining charter school renewal." (See attachment "ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019.") These performance standards are set forth in Exhibit P of the charter contract, which also reiterates the importance of the primary purpose in renewal decisions. (See attachment "ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019.") Schools' fulfillment of additional statutory purposes is evaluated in Operations Performance Measure 1.1 – Mission & Vision.

#### **Environmental Education**

Per Minnesota's statutory requirements for authorizing, ACNW evaluates authorized schools' academic, operational, and financial performance. ACNW is unique as an authorizer in that we also evaluate the environmental education performance of authorized schools via the Environmental Education (EE) Performance Framework. The EE Performance Framework was created in FY14 and has gone through two distinct iterations (one in FY15 and one in FY16) since its inception. (The EE Performance Framework included in the Renewal Performance Evaluation represents its current iteration. The previous two iterations of the EE Performance Framework are included in the AAP as separate attachments: "ACNW\_FY15 EE Performance Evaluation-FINAL\_05.11.2015" and "ACNW\_FY14 EE Performance Evaluation-FINAL\_03.21.2014.") EE performance outcomes and expectations set in Exhibit H (Environmental Education Goals) of authorized schools' charter contracts are aligned to the most up-to-date iteration of the EE Performance Framework at the time of contracting. As such, EE-related indicator areas and performance standards in older charter contracts may not be aligned to the current EE Performance Framework. In such cases, ACNW will evaluate a school's EE performance according to the iteration of the performance framework that is

aligned to the indicator areas and performance standards included in Exhibit H of the school's charter contract.

### **World's Best Workforce**

ACNW and authorized schools agree to academic goals and performance measures that are part of the charter contract through Exhibit G. Most academic performance measures in these contracts are aligned to a WBWF goal area. A small number of contractual measures are not directly related to WBWF goal areas but are aligned to performance in the ACNW indicator areas of mission-fulfillment and attendance. Each measure is weighted to indicate its overall significance in fulfilling the primary purpose of improving all pupil learning and all student achievement. These weighted percentages are agreed upon by ACNW and the school and are included in Exhibit G. The school earns a rating on each measure based on the school's performance over the term of the contract. Each performance rating is assigned a point value.

ACNW conducts an Academic Performance Evaluation annually and a final Academic Performance Evaluation as part of the Renewal Evaluation to determine progress on overall student achievement at the school as evidenced by the school's attainment of the contractual goals in the charter contract. Because the WBWF goal areas are aligned to the ACNW indicator areas, this serves as an annual analysis of the school's progress toward its WBWF goals.

### **Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019 (Exhibit P, pp. 38-45)
- ACNW\_FY15 EE Performance Evaluation-FINAL\_05.11.2015
- ACNW\_FY14 EE Performance Evaluation-FINAL\_03.21.2014

### **Measure B.5 – Authorizer's Processes for Ongoing Oversight of the Portfolio Charter Schools:**

*The authorizer has processes to monitor and oversee the schools in its portfolio in the areas of academic, operational and financial performance.*

### **Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes the criteria, processes and procedures it will use to monitor and evaluate the fiscal, operational and academic performance of the schools in its portfolio per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(7).
- The authorizer describes required academic, financial and operational reporting by the schools to the authorizer.
- The authorizer describes an oversight plan that clearly establishes the criteria, processes and procedures that the authorizer will use to evaluate performance and monitor compliance, ensure school autonomy and protect student rights.
- The authorizer describes how its ongoing oversight informs its standards and processes for intervention, termination and renewal decisions of the portfolio of charter schools (i.e. performance measures B.6 and B.9).

### **Narrative:**

A school's operating requirements, including its required reporting to ACNW, is provided in Article VI of the charter contract. (See attachment "ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017.") ACNW's ongoing evaluation criteria, processes, and procedures (including how this ongoing oversight informs our standards and processes for renewal decisions) are provided in

Exhibit P of the charter contract. Based on ACNW's ongoing oversight and evaluation, a school may be placed on formal intervention as indicated in Exhibit P and as fully described in Exhibit Q of the charter contract. (See attachment "ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019.") Performance Indicator 4 of the Operations Performance Framework directly addresses student rights and includes measures related to admissions and enrollment, and due process and privacy of students. In addition, Operations Performance Measures 1.4 and 1.5 focus on protecting the rights of students with disabilities and English learners. (See attachment "ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019.") See section "Measure A.8 – Ensuring Autonomy of the Schools in the Portfolio" above for ACNW's processes and procedures related to school autonomy.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017 (pp. 5-11)
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019 (Exhibit P, pp. 38-45, Exhibit Q, p. 46)
- ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019 (pp. 42-43, 49)

**Measure B.6 – Authorizer's Standards and Processes for Interventions, Corrective Action and Response to Complaints:** *The authorizer has clear and comprehensive standards and processes to address complaints, interventions and/or corrective action.*

**Essential Elements:**

- The authorizer describes standards, procedures and processes to address and resolve complaints, including forms if applicable.
- The authorizer describes standards, procedures and processes for intervention and a plan for implementing corrective action.
- The authorizer describes how its standards and processes for intervention, corrective action and response to complaints align with its ongoing oversight of the portfolio of charter schools (i.e. performance measure B.5).

**Narrative:**

ACNW's standards, procedures, and processes for addressing and resolving complaints are provided in attachment "ACNW\_Grievance Policy\_05.25.2016." ACNW's standards, procedures, and processes for implementing interventions and corrective actions are provided in Section 6.7(c) and Exhibit Q of the charter contract. (See attachments "ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017" and "ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019.") Based on ACNW's ongoing oversight and evaluation, a school may be placed on formal intervention or corrective action as indicated in Exhibit P and as fully described in Exhibit Q of the charter contract. In response to a complaint, ACNW may engage in additional oversight activities as warranted, such as a focused site visit.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Grievance Policy\_05.25.2016
- ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017 (pp. 7-8)
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019 (Exhibit P, pp. 38-45, Exhibit Q, p. 46)

**Measure B.7 – Charter School Support, Development and Technical Assistance:** *The authorizer has an established process to support its portfolio of charter schools through intentional assistance and development offerings.*

**Essential Element:**

- The authorizer describes its plan to provide support and technical assistance and in a manner to preserve school autonomy.

**Narrative:**

ACNW provides proactive support and technical assistance that is based on demonstrated need and designed to promote excellent performance of, prevent problems in, and protect the autonomy of the schools in our portfolio. In efforts to protect schools' autonomy, technical assistance offered by ACNW to authorized schools is completely voluntary and not required. ACNW's approach to preserving school autonomy is further described in section "Measure A.8 – Ensuring Autonomy of the Schools in the Portfolio" above.

ACNW engages in the following strategic support and technical assistance activities:

**Resources & Strategic Support**

- ACNW publishes and disseminates via e-mail an "Authorizer Update" newsletter on a monthly basis. In this newsletter we highlight upcoming important dates, provide timely information regarding ACNW policies and practices, share information on quality practices being implemented at other schools, and provide links to relevant resources. This e-mail is sent to school leaders, board members, and others who have signed up to be on the listserv. Similar to the Authorizer Update, ACNW also sends a monthly Environmental Education Update to schools with resources, ideas, and upcoming professional development opportunities. Archives of these updates are available on our website at <http://auduboncharterschools.org/authorizer-and-ee-update-archive/>.
- ACNW's website includes an entire section devoted to resources for schools at <http://auduboncharterschools.org/resources-for-schools/>. These resources include ACNW related process documents such as Site and Grade-Level Expansion applications, as well as samples of our evaluation frameworks. This section also includes links to useful websites for charter schools, non-profit organizations, and environmental education resources. Furthermore, this section provides information on upcoming trainings and events that may be of interest to schools. Finally, this section includes a growing collection of strategic support resources that are proactive, responsive to needs, and promote excellence.
- The development of a quality annual report is important for charter schools as this is a key document for communicating the school's story to stakeholders and the general public and to provide key data to ACNW. ACNW creates guidelines for the development of the Annual Report/World's Best Workforce Report that will ensure the report meets statutory requirements and facilitates the creation of a high quality report. Schools are not required to use this template.

**Compliance & Contractual Expectations**

- Epicenter is a tool that serves as a key resource for ACNW authorized schools, empowering ACNW and its authorized schools to manage compliance and accountability while serving as a cloud based storage for important documents. Specifically, Epicenter provides schools with a calendar of compliance tasks for both MDE and ACNW to support school's administrative efficiency. We continually review how we use Epicenter to ensure that it meets our needs while maintaining school autonomy. Schools have the opportunity to add

items that are useful to them and remove items that are not (assuming they are not required by ACNW).

- ACNW regularly engages with schools to provide ongoing feedback in a variety of compliance-related areas. For example, ACNW staff and evaluators regularly attend board meetings to observe, followed by feedback to the school to highlight strengths and point out compliance issues. ACNW presents at board meetings regarding school expectations; for example, staff present at the boards of schools in renewal to communicate expectations and describe the renewal process. ACNW staff and evaluators review monthly board minutes and financial reports, which are compiled in semi-annual board review documents.
- ACNW conducts evaluations on each school in our portfolio in the areas of academic, environmental education, finance, and operations performance. When possible, feedback from evaluation activities is presented to the schools' boards during a regular meeting to ensure their understanding of the criteria and the school's performance in relation to those criteria. We believe this provides critical technical assistance to guide schools' ongoing improvement efforts. Additionally, as school performance dictates, ACNW issues interventions. These interventions are designed to provide specific feedback to schools on areas of performance that are of concern along with key requirements to address those concerns. While ACNW does not provide direct assistance to support schools in addressing concerns, we strongly believe that through these interventions and the specific requirements we outline for schools to address, we are providing schools with needed guidance to improve their performance.

### **Professional Development**

- ACNW hosts an annual Leaders Retreat. The annual Leaders Retreat is a professional development opportunity ACNW offers to school leaders, board chairs, and other key staff of ACNW authorized schools. Participation by each school at this retreat is required with the goal of having the school leader and board chair in attendance. Breakout sessions are led by school leaders, ACNW staff and evaluators, and other external experts and focus on improving capacity in the areas academics, finance, governance, and environmental education. Sessions are designed both in response to demonstrated needs of schools and proactively to address emerging issues. Overall, the conference is designed to promote excellence by connecting school leadership with people, information, and resources that can be tapped into to strengthen school performance.
- ACNW also hosts Environmental Education Workshops for teachers and leaders from ACNW authorized schools. This professional development opportunity is designed to build teacher confidence and capacity in relation to implementation and measurement of environmental education outcomes, as well as providing ideas on how to integrate EE in content areas other than science.

**Measure B.8 – High Quality Charter School Replication and Dissemination of Best School Practices:** *The authorizer has an established process to promote, within its portfolio, the model replication and dissemination of best practices of high performing charter schools.*

**Essential Element:**

- The authorizer describes a clear plan for successful model replication and dissemination of best practices.

**Narrative:**

ACNW disseminates best practices of high performing charter schools to school leaders, board members, and other key staff at ACNW authorized schools. ACNW's plan includes the following strategies:

- **Authorizer Updates and Environmental Education (EE) Updates** include information and resources on best school practices and highlights on specific successes of ACNW authorized schools. An archive of Authorizer Updates and EE Updates are available on our website at <http://auduboncharterschools.org/authorizer-and-ee-update-archive/>.
- The annual **ACNW Leaders Retreat** brings together school leaders, teachers, and board members from ACNW authorized schools to learn about and share best practices. Sessions included a mixture of school leaders, ACNW staff or evaluators, and hired experts sharing their best practices.
- ACNW provides exemplars of best school practices to all schools via **Epicenter**. Such exemplars include but are not limited to sample policies, templates, and guidance documents.
- **Promoting school networking and sharing.** ACNW provides all school leaders and board chairs with easy access to colleagues to support the dissemination of best practices among schools. Each month in the Authorizer Update and at other times via emails or phone communications, the following link is provided to school leaders: [School leaders and board chairs contact list](#).
- ACNW hosts an **Environmental Education Workshop** for teachers and leaders from ACNW authorized schools. The workshop is designed to disseminate best school practices for environmental and experiential education.
- **Encouraging high quality charter schools to expand, replicate, and document best practices** by providing voluntary technical assistance, such as review of grant applications to pursue such activities prior to submission by schools.

**Measure B.9 – Charter School Renewal or Termination Decisions:** *The authorizer has clear and comprehensive standards and processes to make high stakes renewal and termination decisions. The authorizer outlines charter school renewal and termination decision standards and processes that will promote the growth of high quality charter schools.*

**Essential Elements:**

- Comprehensive evaluative standards, procedures, timelines and review processes to evaluate a school's academic, operational and financial performance for high-stakes renewal and termination decisions consistent with Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivisions 1(a)(7), 1(a)(8), 1(a)(13), 1(a)(14) and Subdivision 3(a) and includes the following:
  - Standards and process to evaluate the school's performance in meeting or exceeding outcomes adopted by the commissioner for public school students (Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(15)(b).

- Standards and process to issue a formal written performance evaluation of the school's contract outcomes to determine eligibility for contract renewal per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(8).
- The authorizer describes clear standards for consequences for meeting or not meeting performance standards.
- School closure plan and describes the authorizer's role in the orderly closure of a school in the event of revocation, non-renewal or voluntary relinquishment of the charter per Minnesota Statutes, section 124E.10, Subdivision 1(a)(15), Subdivision 4 and Subdivision 6.

**Narrative:**

ACNW's renewal standards and processes are set forth in Section 11.1(a) and Exhibit P of the charter contract. (See attachments "ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017" and "ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019.") Exhibit P summarizes the renewal process:

*During the final year of an authorized school's active contract, the school is required to submit an application for renewal that summarizes how it fulfilled the terms of its active contract, the strategic direction it plans for the years of a subsequent contract, and potential performance goals for a subsequent contract. ACNW CSD reviews that application, conducts a Renewal Site Visit, completes a Renewal Evaluation Report, and compiles a recommendation to the ACNW Board. Those recommendations are reviewed and accepted or amended by the Charter School Committee (CSC). The CSC's recommendations are then presented to the ACNW Board for adoption or amendment.*

The ACNW renewal evaluation team, which consists of two to four staff and contracted evaluators, reviews the application and all available information and data, and conducts a renewal site visit. While site visits and evaluations are conducted annually, ACNW conducts a more in-depth site visit in the renewal year, informed by and building on previous years' evaluations and site visits. ACNW has protocols for site visits which include classroom observations, interviews of key stakeholders, board meeting observations, and facilities assessment.

Key documents related to charter school renewal include:

- A timeline and detailed description of the renewal process is provided in attachment "ACNW\_Renewal Process\_07.06.2016."
- The renewal application and guide is included as attachment "ACNW\_Renewal Application Guide\_Updated 07.20.2017."
- The Renewal Performance Evaluation Framework is used to complete the Renewal Evaluation Report with a recommendation for the ACNW Board of Directors. (See attachment "ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019.") This comprehensive Renewal Performance Evaluation includes the evaluation of the school's performance in meeting its World's Best Workforce outcomes (as explained above in section "Measure B.4 – Performance Standards"). The Renewal Evaluation Report becomes Exhibit O of a subsequent charter contract, should one be offered.

*Note: The timeline in the renewal process guide is updated annually and will remain consistent with ACNW and statutory deadlines.*

Grounds and procedures for charter revocation/termination and nonrenewal are provided in Article X of the charter contract. ACNW's school closure process and plan is included as Exhibit M of the charter contract.

**Attachments Referenced:**

- ACNW\_Contract Template-FINAL\_Updated 03.15.2017 (pp. 15-19)
- ACNW\_All Contract Exhibits\_Updated 12.30.2019 (Exhibit M, pp.25-33, Exhibit P, pp. 38-45)
- ACNW\_Renewal Process\_07.06.2016
- ACNW\_Renewal Application Guide\_Updated 07.20.2017
- ACNW\_Renewal Eval Complete Framework\_Updated 12.30.2019

