INSIGHT FROM
MontessoriPublic.org
BRINGING MONTESSORI INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION IN PRINT AND ONLINE • EXCERPTED FROM: **FALL 2026 (VOL. 11, #1)**

Charters, authorizers, and Montessori

Helping authorizers understand Montessori, one slide deck at a time

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Charter school authorizers do more than authorize charter schools. Authorizers have long-term monitoring and support relationships with the schools they oversee.

Charter schools, as publicly funded, tuition-free schools that typically operate independently from local school districts, are held accountable for their performance by their authorizer, whether that be a state or local education agency, a university, or an independent board. Of the 600 public Montessori schools in the U.S., over a third are charter schools. Authorizers need tools to know if the school is delivering for families the model it was chartered to deliver.

Charter authorizers have a host of tools and measures available to assess academic outcomes, financial stability, and organizational effectiveness. But an authorizer doesn't grant a charter to a generic school—they grant a charter to specific school with a specific mission and approach, and authorizers don't always have tools to measure the model-specific qualities for which the school has been chartered: Is this charter school a good IB school, a good Project-Based school, a good Montessori school?

NCMPS and NACSA

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) has been building a relationship with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) over the last four years to help them answer exactly these questions.

Jay Whalen, Director of Authorizer and School Quality at NACSA told us, "I have evaluated many new school applications and heard plenty about models like Montessori, Opportunity Schools, Early College, and others. I've also visited several of them. But when I reviewed these applications, at times I felt out of my depth in evaluating if they had a quality assessment plan, adequate staffing equations, or realistic budget assumptions that fit their specific model. While it's impossible to be an expert in every aspect of every model, dedicated and tailored learning can help authorizers have enough knowledge to evaluate different educational approaches and ask the right model-specific questions."

This kind of high-leverage work — work that ultimately leads to more Montessori for more children — is exactly why NCMPS exists. But the partnership between NCMPS and NACSA needed time, and trust, to flourish. The collaboration began in 2022 when NCMPS Executive Director Sara Suchman presented at NACSA's annual conference. Suchman's presentation was called "What Do I Look For When Authorizing and Supporting Montessori Charter Schools?"

The talk was well-received, and two years later NACSA reached back out to NCMPS with an invitation to present at "Third Thursday," NACSA's standing monthly webinar series. My presentation, "Montessori Matters: Charter Authorizers Toolkit for Mission-Aligned Oversight" began with a broad overview of public Montessori, took a deep dive into the essentials of the model, and then cross-referenced those essentials with existing NACSA resources.

The following year I was back at NACSA's conference, this time delivering an oversight-oriented presentation that utilized mock school rubrics to give authorizers a chance to practice advising Montessori schools.

In September 2026, NACSA collaborated with NCMPS on a three-part webinar series for authorizers, with the intention of delivering the "dedicated and tailored learning," mentioned by Jay Whalen.

September's webinar series was titled "Authorizing Montessori Schools." I presented at the first webinar, "Montessori Basics," exploring the key design elements that make Montessori schools unique. The next two sessions featured perspectives from Montessori school leaders and charter authorizers with Montessori schools currently in their portfolios.

The webinars are part of a larger series that will eventually cover a variety of models handled by authorizers, including Credit Recovery and Opportunity Schools, Career Technical Education schools, and Early College schools.

It says something about the nature of the relationship between NACSA and NCMPS, developed over years, that out of all the school models authorizers might find in their portfolios, Montessori was the first to be explored in this series.

"NACSA's collaboration with NCMPS is so critical in this project, because while NACSA's expertise lies in authorizing, NCMPS brings expertise in the development and operation of public Montessori schools," said David Greenberg, NACSA's Vice President

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of Authorizer Learning and Development. "Together we can help authorizers better understand this educational model so that they can better respond to families' demand for more Montessori charter schools."

Why it matters

About 15 new public Montessori schools have opened every year for the last 35 years. On average, roughly half of them have been charter schools. If an authorizer doesn't have a charter Montessori school in their portfolio now, they probably will soon.

This expected growth is a result of educators and parents becoming more informed on educational options, Montessori included. Ensuring that authorizers have the resources they need to ask the right questions when reviewing a Montessori charter school application and implementation plan is crucial to ensuring that prospective schools don't fail before they begin and current schools are supported to thrive.

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