



**Executive Summary**

All Arkansas students should have access to high-quality educational choice opportunities, and the state’s public charter schools are a key piece of the puzzle. Arkansas aims to align state policy and processes to national best practices in order to recruit, retain, and expand the best charter operators in America. Specifically, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) commits to:

- **Streamline charter application processes:** Create a more transparent charter approval and renewal process.
- **Improve charter policies:** Work with the State Board of Education to revise charter policy to codify a more transparent application process, tie charter renewal and expansion decisions to performance criteria, and remove barriers for high-quality, out-of-state charter operators to open in Arkansas.

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**Overview of LEARNNS Executive Order**

On January 11th, 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders published the Executive Order to prioritize Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, and School Safety (LEARNNS) in Arkansas. Included in this Executive Order is a call for the Secretary of the Department of Education to empower parents by coordinating, alongside the State Board of Education, policies that streamline processes to continue, expand, and replicate effective charter schools.

This report overviews commitments and recommendations for the State Board of Education as Arkansas considers how to improve its charter schools and networks.

**Background and Current State: Arkansas’s Charter School Sector**

The Arkansas Department of Education’s (ADE) Charter Authorizing Panel is Arkansas’s designated public charter authorizer. Arkansas currently has 102 charter schools enrolling 41,399 students, just 8.7% of the total students in the state. Eight percent of Arkansas’s public schools are charters, fewer than [national leaders](#) like Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. Among the 77 charters receiving a letter grade in 2018-19, 28 (36.4%) were [D- or F-rated](#).

Process	Arkansas Current State	NACSA Best Practice
Applying for a New Charter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 40 open-ended questions organized into the following sections: Mission/Vision,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Application organized by academic, financial, and organizational</li> </ul>



Process	Arkansas Current State	NACSA Best Practice
	<p>Curriculum, Student Services, and School Governance and Operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not differentiated by prior academic performance for charter organizations operating outside of Arkansas</li> <li>● Flexible cap on the number of charters (removed by the LEARNNS Act)</li> </ul>	<p>performance with clear, measurable standards and targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Charter school operators with exceptional records of high performance to follow a streamlined process</li> <li>● No limit on the number of charters</li> </ul>
<p>Charter Renewal and Expansion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Form and timeline prescribed by Arkansas’s charter school office</li> <li>● Renewal terms of up to 20 years</li> <li>● Renewal decisions based on student achievement on state tests and compliance with accountability provisions written into each charter</li> <li>● No standards in policy for expansion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Renewal and expansion decisions are tied to academic, financial, and organizational performance with clear, measurable standards and targets</li> <li>● Charter school operators with exceptional records of high performance to follow a streamlined process</li> </ul>
<p>Funding and Facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Inadequate autonomy and inequitable funding,” ranking 33rd out of 45 states</li> <li>● Not enough adequate facilities to meet demand</li> <li>● LEARNNS Act expands facilities and transportation funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Equitable access to capital funding and facilities, including facilities funding, access to public space, and access to financing tools</li> <li>● Per pupil funds flow to the school in a timely fashion and in the same amount as district schools</li> </ul>

*Applying for a New Charter*

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) publishes guiding [Principles and Standards](#), which emphasize the importance of academic, financial, and organizational performance standards and targets. Per NACSA, strong applications “define clear, measurable, and attainable academic, financial, and organizational performance standards and targets that the school must meet.”

The current application process could do more to streamline the experience, allowing for high quality out-of-state operators to expand into Arkansas. For example, Arkansas’s initial open [enrollment application](#) for charters contains 40 open-ended questions organized into the following sections—Mission/Vision, Curriculum, Student Services, and School Governance and Operations. The application is also not differentiated by prior academic performance for charter organizations operating outside of Arkansas.

[Current Arkansas law](#) establishes a flexible cap on the number of open-enrollment charters in the state, which limits the pace of growth. However, the LEARNNS Act recently approved removes this cap.

*Charter Renewal and Expansion*

Currently, all Arkansas charters seeking [renewal](#) must apply using a form and timeline prescribed by the state’s charter school office, which allows operators to apply for renewal terms of up to 20 years. Charter operators may also submit contract amendments to serve additional students and/or open new campuses. Charter [renewal decisions](#) rest on student achievement on state tests and compliance with the accountability provisions written into each charter. State

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law [requires](#) each charter contract to specify criteria for revoking a charter's authorization, but the standards for revocation should be the same across all Arkansas charter contracts.

[According to NACSA](#), strong state policy allows charter school operators with exceptional records of high performance to follow a streamlined process for renewal or expansion. In Arkansas, high-performing charter schools go through the same process as any other charter school to continue to operate and to expand to serve additional students. The state's processes for renewal and expansion decisions do not take into account the current [academic, financial, or operational performance](#) of the applicant's existing charter schools.

### *Funding and Facilities*

According to a [report](#) from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), Arkansas's charter law "provides inadequate autonomy and inequitable funding" for charters and ranks 33rd out of 45 states. Despite [recent efforts](#), Arkansas [struggles](#) to provide sufficient facilities for its charter schools. In addition to removing the charter cap, the LEARNS Act seeks to address these issues by providing for an additional facilities fund.

### **Commitments**

Across the charter application, renewal, and expansion process, the State Board and ADE have an opportunity to clarify the criteria that define high quality charters and make it easier for those charters to open, expand, and grow in Arkansas. At the same time, the Board and ADE also need to clarify the criteria that define low quality charters and ensure those schools either improve or close.

Arkansas's doors are open for the country's best charter operators. The state is committed to paving the way for strong operators to thrive in Arkansas and to closing low-performing operators who cannot improve. To accomplish these objectives, ADE commits to:

- **Streamline charter application processes:** Create more transparent charter approval and renewal processes through streamlined applications and a standard performance agreement that codifies expectations.
- **Improve charter policies:** Work with the State Board of Education to revise charter policy to codify the more transparent charter application process, tie charter renewal and expansion decisions to performance criteria, and remove barriers for high quality out-of-state charter operators to open in Arkansas.

Specifically, this will include the following:

- Require a comprehensive charter application process with transparent procedures and rigorous criteria that consists of questions in the following areas aligned with national best practices: executive summary, education program design and capacity, organizational plan and capacity, and financial plan and capacity.
- Simplify the charter renewal and expansion process by tying decisions to specific academic, organizational, and financial performance criteria.
  - Charter schools meeting high academic, organizational, and financial standards should be automatically renewed. Such schools may also be permitted to open and operate additional campuses without submitting a formal amendment request.
  - Any charter school earning an "F" letter grade should not be eligible for renewal.



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- Lower barriers for strong charter operators that do not currently work in Arkansas to expand into the state via an accelerated application and approval process.

### Conclusion

All Arkansas students should have access to high quality educational opportunities, and the state's charter schools are a key piece of the puzzle. The Arkansas Department of Education, in partnership with the State Board of Education, is committed to opening the door to the nation's best charter operators while providing greater transparency for parents and educators alike. Arkansas will ensure all charters in the state are held to a high bar for success.



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### Appendices

#### *Appendix A: Resources*

- [NACSA Principles and Standards For Quality Charter School Authorizing, 2023 Edition](#)
- Sample charter school performance agreements
  - [Louisiana](#)
  - [Tennessee](#)
- Sample proven provider standards
  - [Massachusetts](#)

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### Appendix B: Model Charter Application Sections

The current application includes three areas: curriculum, student services, and school governance and operations. A revised application could include the following sections aligned to [NACSA's national model](#):

Application Section	Examples
Academic Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <i>Instructional materials and strategies</i></li><li>● <i>Assessment</i></li><li>● <i>Diverse learner strategy and supports</i></li><li>● <i>Behavior management</i></li><li>● <i>Parent and community engagement</i></li><li>● <i>Academic goals</i></li><li>● <i>Potential waivers</i></li></ul>
Organizational Plan and Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <i>Staffing</i></li><li>● <i>Leadership team</i></li><li>● <i>Professional development</i></li><li>● <i>Charter board governance</i></li><li>● <i>Organization goals</i></li><li>● <i>Potential waivers</i></li></ul>
Financial Plan and Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <i>Operations</i></li><li>● <i>Enrollment</i></li><li>● <i>Food and Nutrition</i></li><li>● <i>Transportation</i></li><li>● <i>Facility needs</i></li><li>● <i>Financial plans and goals</i></li></ul>

These three sections are relevant across **all** parts of charter management and evaluation, including:

- Charter school application process and rubric
- Extension application, if required and rubric
- Renewal standards and rubric
- Yearly state monitoring expectations

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### Appendix C: Sample Academic Renewal Requirements

The [Louisiana Charter School Performance Compact](#) establishes minimum academic requirements for renewal and ties renewal terms to state accountability letter grades. It also allows for additional years to be added to a school’s renewal term based on organizational and financial performance.

Extension/Renewal Type	Minimum Academic Requirements
Extension or 1st Renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“D” or higher letter grade in most recent year of contract term</li> </ul>
Extension or 1st Renewal, Turnaround Schools Only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“D” or higher letter grade in most recent year of contract term OR</li> <li>“F” letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term with a growth score equivalent to an “A”</li> </ul>
2nd or Subsequent Renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“C” or higher letter grade OR</li> <li>“D” letter grade in most recent year of contract term and “C” letter grades for more than half of the letter grades earned during the charter term and the final letter grade earned for the charter’s prior term OR</li> <li>“D” letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term and growth scores equivalent to an A for more than half of the growth scores earned during the charter’s current contract term and the final growth score earned for the charter’s prior term</li> </ul>

Current Letter Grade	Minimum Term Length	Potential Additional Years Based on Organizational and Financial Performance	
A	6 years	“Meets All” and/or “Meets Most” expectations all years	≤ 2 years
		“Meets All Expectations” all years	≤ 4 years
B	5 years	“Meets All” and/or “Meets Most” expectations all years	≤ 1 year
		“Meets All Expectations” all years	≤ 2 years
C	4 years	No additional years	
D, F, or no letter grade	3 years	No additional years	