

CARS Handbook



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The original version of the CSI Performance Frameworks were developed by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) in collaboration with the Colorado Charter School Institute and with the input of CSI school leaders. The following Performance Framework represents an extension of the preliminary annual evaluation tools developed by CSI and are in accordance with the CSI Board-approved strategic plan. The original CSI Performance Framework was updated again in 2017 by adapting and utilizing existing materials from [NACSA's Core Performance Framework and Guidance](#), allowed by their attribution license, and with the input of authorizers across the nation and CSI school leaders.

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Overview of the CSI Annual Review of Schools (CARS)

The CSI Annual Review of Schools (CARS) is the system used to annually evaluate and accredit schools based on Academic, Financial, and Organizational Performance Frameworks.

Purpose of CARS

CARS was developed to fulfill statutory requirements and to align with best practice.

CSI is required to annually accredit its schools per *C.R.S. 22-11-307(1)* but can choose include measures that are “more rigorous in expectations” than the State’s system for districts (*C.R.S. 22-11-307(2)*). In line with this, CARS builds upon the evaluation lens utilized by the State—which evaluates academic achievement, academic growth, and postsecondary and workforce readiness—by including additional measures related to academic, financial, and organizational performance to provide a more comprehensive and robust evaluation that includes strong indicators of charter viability and sustainability.

Additionally, annual performance reporting is an essential authorizing practice for effective oversight, communication with charter schools, and public accountability and transparency. It lets a school know how it’s doing, provides information to help a school develop and improve, provides the school the opportunity to regularly check its record with the authorizer, and provides public transparency.

CARS will accomplish three primary objectives:

1. Add to the **body of evidence** that is used to make authorization decisions
2. Determine the school **accreditation rating** that is primarily used to inform authorization pathways
3. Determine the **level of support/intervention** to provide to the school

First, authorization decisions are based on the prior performance of the school and the CARS Report is the primary driver of high-stakes decision-making around charter renewal and development (e.g. expansion or replication). The CARS Report will include a majority of the body of evidence used to make authorization decisions; however, most authorization decisions will also include new or supplemental evidence around school performance that has not already been captured in the CARS Report or through other school submissions.

Second, a subset of the measures identified in the CSI Performance Frameworks are used to determine a school’s accreditation rating. The base accreditation rating is determined by academic performance on a subset of measures within the Academic Framework. If a subset of measures on the Finance or Organizational Framework are not met, the accreditation rating may be lowered.

The school accreditation rating informs authorization pathways a school follows, where schools with higher accreditation ratings have a greater likelihood of streamlined renewal, expansion, and replication processes than those with lower accreditation ratings.

Finally, performance on CARS will help to determine the level of support and intervention provided to each school. In line with the premise of the charter bargain, CSI strives to provide increased autonomy in exchange for increased accountability and tiers school supports based on school performance. Higher performing schools are held to standard, minimum requirements and receive greater autonomy while lower performing schools may have additional requirements to help ensure compliance or to more closely monitor performance.

Overview of the Performance Framework

The CSI Performance Framework provides the basis for the CSI Annual Review of Schools (CARS). The Performance Framework explicitly defines the measures by which CSI holds schools accountable with regards to academic, financial, and organizational performance.

Charter school authorizers are responsible for maintaining high standards for school performance, upholding school autonomy, and protecting student and public interests. Using a performance contract as both a guide and a tool, a quality authorizer maintains high standards and manages charter school performance—not by dictating inputs or controlling processes—but by setting expectations and holding schools accountable for results. A quality authorizer engages in responsible and effective performance management by ensuring that schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled and the public accountability for which they are responsible.

Charter school authorizing begins with a bargain for performance. Authorizers agree to entrust a charter school's governing board with public dollars and public school students and to give it broad autonomy over how it achieves agreed-upon goals. In return, the school's board commits to achieving specified results, managing public funds responsibly, complying with its legal obligations, and providing a quality education to the students in its care.

In order for this bargain of autonomy in exchange for accountability to work, it is essential that authorizers establish, maintain, and enforce high performance standards for all schools in their portfolios. This includes not only holding schools accountable for the academic performance of all of their students, which should always be the primary measure of quality, but also holding schools accountable for financial and organizational performance. The critical first step in effective performance management is to set and communicate clear and rigorous expectations for performance. Schools need clearly defined standards so that they know what is expected of them, and authorizers need them to manage performance effectively by holding schools accountable for outcomes without attempting to control inputs.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers' (NACSA's) Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing (2015) emphasizes that a quality authorizer establishes standards for school performance that are clear, quantifiable, rigorous, and attainable. NACSA also recommends that authorizers develop and formally adopt a Performance Framework that includes academic, financial, and organizational performance measures for use by schools and authorizers to establish expectations, guide practice, assess progress, and inform decision making over the course of the charter term and at renewal or revocation. In addition, many states have enacted policies that mandate that authorizers develop and use Performance Frameworks, and additional states are considering similar policies.

The three areas of performance covered by the framework—academic, financial, and organizational— correspond directly with the three components of a strong charter school application, the three key areas of responsibility outlined in strong state charter laws and strong charter school contracts, and are the three areas on which a charter school's performance should be evaluated.

In each of these three areas, the frameworks ask a fundamental question: how did the school perform last year?

The answers to each of these three questions are essential to a comprehensive evaluation of charter school performance.

Academic Performance Framework

The Academic Performance Framework includes measures that help to answer the question, “How did the school perform academically last year?”

The Academic Performance Framework includes three primary indicators: Academic Achievement, Academic Growth, and Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness, which align with the state’s accountability system. CSI utilizes the same measures included in the state’s accountability system along with additional measures within these indicators to evaluate charter school viability and sustainability.

1. Academic Achievement
a. How are students achieving on state assessments?
b. How are students achieving on state assessments over time?
c. How are students achieving on state assessments in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?
d. Have students demonstrated readiness for the next grade level/course, and, ultimately, are they on track for college and careers?
e. How are students achieving in comparison to similar schools statewide?
2. Academic Growth
a. Are students making sufficient growth on state assessments?
b. Are students making sufficient growth on state assessments over time?
c. How are students growing on state assessments in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?
d. How is student growth distributed across growth levels?
e. How are students growing in comparison to similar schools statewide?
3. Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness
a. How are students achieving on state assessments for postsecondary readiness?
b. Are students graduating high school?
c. Are students dropping out of high school?
d. Are high school graduates adequately prepared for post-secondary academic success?
e. What is the school’s post-completion success rate?

Financial Performance Framework

The Financial Performance Framework includes a set of measures that help to answer the question, “How did the school perform financially last year?”

Whereas the state accountability system is based on academic performance alone, CSI aligns with best practice in charter school authorizing and evaluates financial performance as well.

The Financial Performance Framework includes two primary indicators: Near-Term and Sustainability. These are the same indicators included in sample framework developed by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). The majority of the measures included within these indicators are included in NACSA’s sample financial framework or the financial framework of one or more charter school authorizers in the nation.

1. Near Term
a. Has the school met the statutory TABOR emergency reserve requirement?
b. What is the school's current ratio?
c. What is the school's days of cash on hand?
d. Is the school in default with any financial covenants they have with loan agreements?
e. What is the school's funded pupil count variance?
2. Sustainability
a. What is the school’s aggregate 3-year total margin?
b. What is the school’s net asset position?
c. What is the school’s debt?
d. What is the school’s cash flow?

Organizational Performance Framework

The Organizational Performance Framework includes a set of measures that help to answer the question, “How did the school perform organizationally last year?”

Whereas the state accountability system is based on academic performance alone, CSI aligns with best practice in charter school authorizing and evaluates organizational performance as well.

The Organizational Performance Framework is designed to evaluate schools against existing requirements in law, rules, regulations, policies, and charter contracts, not to create new requirements for schools. While schools would be accountable for compliance with most existing requirements even without the Organizational Framework, the framework allows the authorizer to transparently communicate the primary areas for compliance through one document. It is designed to treat all charter schools as though they are the same only in terms of meeting minimum legal and ethical requirements. This enables charter schools to retain the flexibility and autonomy to be different in the ways that matter most for a school’s mission, vision, and educational program.

Of the three frameworks, the Organizational Framework abuts most closely against school autonomy. The central premise of charter school autonomy is that the authorizer will articulate the expected outcomes, and the school will have maximum flexibility to determine the best way to achieve those outcomes. In other words, the authorizer articulates the ends and the school decides the means of getting there. Whereas the Academic and Financial Frameworks focus almost exclusively on results, the Organizational Framework inevitably mandates process. Whether it is meeting requirements for minimum instructional days and minutes or ensuring that the facility meets applicable health and safety codes, the Organizational Framework is the place where the school becomes externally accountable for how it operates.

The Organization Performance Framework includes the following indicators: Education Program; Diversity, Equity of Access, and Inclusion; Governance and Financial Management; School Operations and Environment; Additional Obligations. Additionally, in alignment with the CSI mission to serve at-risk students, the Organizational Framework includes an indicator that specifically focuses on how schools serve students classified as at-risk.

The majority of the measures included within these buckets are the same measures included in NACSA’s sample organizational framework or the organizational framework of one or more charter school authorizers in the nation.

1. Education Program
a. Is the school complying with applicable education requirements?
2. Diversity, Equity of Access, and Inclusion
a. Is the school protecting the rights of all students?
3. Governance and Financial Management
a. Is the school complying with governance requirements?
b. Is the school satisfying financial reporting and compliance requirements?
4. School Operations and Environment
a. Is the school complying with health and safety requirements?
b. Is the school complying with facilities and transportation requirements?
c. Is the school complying with employee credentialing and background check requirements?
5. Additional Obligations
a. Is the school complying with all other obligations?

Overview of School Accreditation

Pursuant to the Colorado Revised Statutes and rules applicable to Colorado school districts and authorizers, CSI is responsible for accrediting its schools in a manner that emphasizes attainment on the four statewide performance indicators, and may, at CSI's discretion, include additional accreditation indicators and measures. Therefore, the measures and metrics in the CSI Performance Frameworks build on the State's evaluation framework and includes additional measures of academic performance and measures of financial and organizational performance.

CSI prioritizes academic performance in determining accreditation ratings. Specifically, a base accreditation rating is determined by academic performance on a subset of measures within the Academic Framework. Then, if a subset of measures on the Finance or Organizational Framework are missed, the accreditation rating is lowered.



The state's accountability system includes the following plan types, from lowest to highest: Turnaround, Priority Improvement, Improvement, and Performance. CSI adheres to these ratings but adds an additional rating within the Performance band: Performance with Distinction. This rating is given by CSI to schools that are in the top 25% of schools in the state for academic performance that are also performing well financially and organizationally.



Accreditation Contracts

Upon issuance of accreditation ratings, each school enters into an accreditation contract with CSI as required by state law. The accreditation contract describes the school's CARS accreditation rating, the school's performance plan type, assures compliance with the provisions of Title 22 and other applicable laws, and describes the consequences for noncompliance and Priority Improvement and Turnaround accreditation plan types.

The accreditation contract is distinct from the charter contract, and may change from year-to-year or more frequently depending on the school's plan type and individual circumstances. In accordance with the CSI Accreditation Policy, CSI schools accredited with a rating of Improvement, Priority Improvement, or Turnaround must re-execute the accreditation contract annually. For schools accredited Distinction or Performance, the accreditation contract will renew automatically, except all schools, regardless of plan type, will re-execute the accreditation contract upon renewal.

Accreditation Measures

CSI utilizes a subset of measures on the CSI Performance Frameworks to determine a school's annual accreditation rating. This subset of measures is listed below.

Academic Measures

How are students achieving on state assessments?

How are students achieving on state assessments over time?

How are students achieving on state assessments in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

Are students making sufficient growth on state assessments?

Are students making sufficient growth on state assessments over time?

How are students growing on state assessments in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

How are students achieving on state assessments for postsecondary readiness?

Are students graduating high school?

Are students dropping out?

What is the school's post-completion success rate?

How are students achieving on state assessments for postsecondary readiness over time?

How is the graduation rate changing over time?

How are students achieving on state assessments for postsecondary readiness in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

What is the graduation rate in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

What is the dropout rate in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

What is the matriculation rate in comparison to other schools in their geographic home district or schools that students might otherwise attend?

Financial Measures

Has the School met the statutorily required TABOR emergency reserve?

Organizational Measures

More than 3 Notices of Concern or a Notice of Breach may lower the rating

CARS Timeline

The CARS accreditation rating is based on a school’s academic, organizational, and financial performance in the prior year.

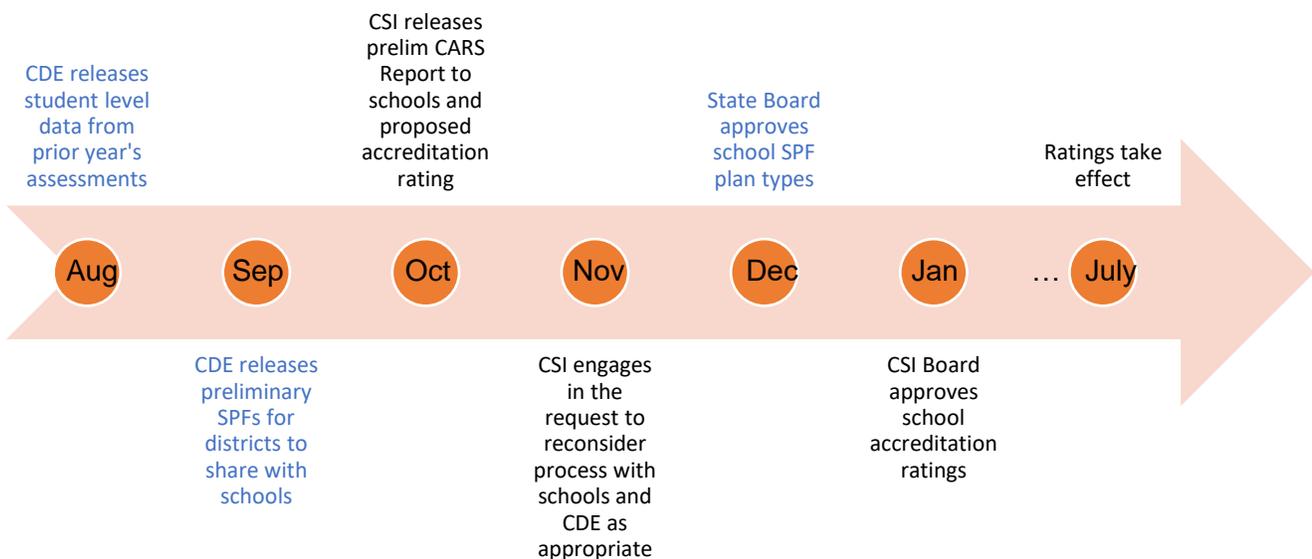
CDE typically releases student assessment results from the prior year in late summer (July/August) then releases the preliminary School Performance Framework (SPF) reports in early fall. The SPF report includes the school’s preliminary plan type.

CSI typically releases the preliminary CARS Report in early fall. The CARS Report includes the school’s preliminary CARS accreditation rating, which is used to determine the authorization pathways and processes for a school as described previously.

CSI and schools may engage in the Request to Reconsider process following the release of the preliminary SPF if performance on the CARS Report or other additional data provided by the school or CSI indicate that a school’s plan type should be changed.

The State Board of Education approves school plan types in their December meeting and the CSI Board approves school accreditation ratings in their January meeting. These ratings take effect July 1 of the coming year.

The following visual provides an overview of the annual timeline for the release of state and CSI ratings of schools.



Tiered Supports and Interventions

The tiered supports and interventions are determined by performance across a subset of measures in a given area—like finance, academic performance, performance of special education students, etc.—with the focus on providing schools additional opportunities, technical assistance, and access to resources to improve performance in the noted areas.

Standard versus Tiered Supports

All schools within the CSI portfolio have access to the standard supports provided by CSI. These supports include resource documents, trainings, and access to additional resources. Schools that are lower performing across one or more areas have access to, and are many times required to, receive additional supports or interventions.

Academic Supports and Interventions

Standard Supports & Interventions

Regardless of performance, all schools receive support, technical assistance, and access to resources provided by CSI staff. Standard supports available to all schools include:

- Interim assessment analysis
- Data interpretation assistance,
- A review of the CARS Report
- Target setting assistance

Tiered Supports & Interventions by Performance

Schools will receive additional supports and interventions based on lower performance in one or more measures within the Academic Performance Framework.

Base Accreditation Rating	Example Supports and Interventions
Distinction/Performance/Improvement	
Improvement (if previously Performance or higher)	Submit interim assessment data to CSI and complete an interim analysis review with CSI.
Priority Improvement	Submit interim assessment data to CSI and complete an interim analysis review with CSI. Complete a UIP review with CSI to ensure target setting aligns with unmet expectations and completion of a quality criteria review. Have external 3 rd party support in the development of the UIP Provide early draft of the UIP for CSI and CDE feedback
Turnaround	

Financial Supports and Interventions

Standard Supports & Interventions

Regardless of performance, all schools receive support, technical assistance, and access to resources provided by CSI staff. Standard supports available to all schools include:

- Financial Transparency Act review and feedback
- Quarterly report review

- Webinar trainings (new schools, year end, statutory changes, etc.)
- Annual audit review and feedback

Tiered Supports & Interventions by Performance

Schools exhibiting risk in near-term indicators would receive Intermediate Support. Examples of this level of support and intervention include the standards supports as well as:

- Submission of bi-monthly financial statements (Oct, Dec, Feb, Apr, June)
- Check-in with CSI up to three times

Schools with a negative unassigned fund balance would receive heightened support and intervention. Examples of this level of support and intervention include the standard supports as well as:

- Submission of monthly financial statements by the 20th of the following month
- Check-in with CSI monthly
- Attendance at a CSI Board Finance Committee meeting

Organizational Supports and Interventions

Standard Supports & Interventions

Regardless of performance, all schools receive support, technical assistance, and access to resources provided by CSI staff. Additionally, all schools are required to comply with the annual organizational submissions as they are standard, minimum requirements. Accordingly, there will not be a reduced burden for schools performing well operationally; rather, they will not experience additional oversight and monitoring requirements that other schools may face in circumstances of noncompliance.

Tiered Supports & Interventions by Performance

Schools will receive additional targeted supports and/or interventions based on performance against each measure. The type of support or intervention will depend on the severity, nature, and circumstances of the area of noncompliance.

Examples of supports include:

- Consultation with CSI staff
- CSI review of policies and procedures
- Attendance at CSI Board meeting
- Required trainings

Examples of interventions include:

- Required submission of a remedial plan
- Intensive monitoring
- Mandatory training
- Site visits from CSI Staff
- CSI staff or board members attend school's board meeting