Evaluation of Minnesota's Charter School Program (CSP) Grant

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Introduction

ICF was tasked by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to provide an objective view, using both formative and summative evaluation, of the fidelity and effectiveness of the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) grant as implemented in Minnesota and demonstrate the extent to which outcomes are achieved for the grant objectives.

This report includes our evaluation of MDE's subgrantee programs (start-up and significant expansion/replication), CSP grant initiatives (board development, school leadership pilot program, charter school authorizer training grant) and the overall impact of the CSP grant on the charter school landscape in Minnesota over the grant term (2017–2022).

Minnesota CSP Grant

In 2017,[1] MDE received a CSP grant from the U.S. Department of Education focused on increasing the quality and sustainability of its charter schools, especially for students who come from disadvantaged or at-risk backgrounds.[2] The CSP grant centered around five main project objectives, which included:[3]

1. Increase the number of high-quality charter schools that serve disadvantaged students and the overall number of students served by charter schools in Minnesota.
2. Support charter schools in achieving the goals of Minnesota's World's Best Workforce (WBWF) legislation.
3. Increase the quality of Minnesota charter schools through authorizer training and evaluation.
4. Increase the sustainability of Minnesota's charter schools.
5. Increase reading and math proficiency and growth in charter school 4th- and 8th-grade students.[4]

To achieve the goal of increasing the number of high-quality charter schools that serve students who are disadvantaged, and the number of students served by charter schools in Minnesota, prospective or eligible charter schools are able to apply for two types of subgrants: the start-up subgrant and the significant expansion/replication subgrant.

The start-up subgrant is focused on opening and developing new charter schools. These subgrants range from $175,000 to $225,000 each year for up to 36 months.[5] The significant expansion/replication subgrant is intended for existing charter schools to either "significantly expand" or "replicate."

- A school may "significantly expand" their reach by increasing enrollment and/or adding one or more grades to the high-quality charter school.
- A school may "replicate" by opening a new charter school, or a new campus of a high-quality charter school, based on the educational model (meaning to replicate the same exact model,

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[1] MDE had previously received a Federal Charter School Program Grant in 2012.
[2] Read about the Federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant on MDE's website.
[3] Read about the Federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant on MDE's website.
[4] Objective 5 was not listed in MDE's CSP grant application, but it was added as a performance measure and MDE submits data to the U.S. Department of Education on this objective.
[5] Read about the CSP Grant Competition on MDE's website.

including grades, at a new primary enrollment site) of an existing high-quality charter school, under an existing charter or an additional charter, if permitted or required by state law.[6]

To address the second goal of supporting charter schools in achieving the goals of WBWF legislation, MDE provides training and technical assistance for school leaders related to the creation of SMART goals and the generation of necessary reports. These goals relate to many aspects of academic progress and encourage the tracking of key performance indicators such as the closing of achievement gaps and increased graduation rates.

Another goal of the CSP grant is to build authorizer capacity.[7] To accomplish this, MDE is allocating up to $2,500 of CSP funding per year to each authorizer for their staff to attend trainings or conferences that increase their knowledge of and capacity for carrying out their roles as an authorizer.

To promote the sustainability of charter schools in Minnesota, MDE has awarded CSP funding to their partners to increase training, knowledge, and practical experiences for current charter school board members and future charter school leaders. More specifically, MDE awarded Novation Education Opportunities a subgrant in 2018 to develop a comprehensive online suite of training modules for charter school board members. MDE also awarded Southwest Minnesota State University a subgrant to establish a Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program for individuals interested in becoming charter school leaders in Minnesota.

Evaluation Questions

Our evaluation was guided by the following four main research questions and additional subquestions to address MDE's overall objectives:

Evaluation Question 1. How does Minnesota support new charter school and replication/expansion subgrantees? (Objective 1)
a. What are subgrantees' perceptions regarding the usefulness of CSP grant funds?
b. What are effective CSP grant administration processes?
c. How does Minnesota support subgrantees through the Charter School Boot Camps?
d. How does Minnesota support subgrantees in achieving WBWF goals? (Objective 2)

Evaluation Question 2. How well is Minnesota supporting charter schools through board development, education leadership pilot programming and other technical assistance (TA) for charter school leaders aimed at increasing sustainability? (Objective 4)

Evaluation Question 3. How do the authorizer training support initiative and MDE-led training build authorizer capacity? (Objective 3)
a. How does the CSP grant impact authorizer knowledge, capacity and practice?
b. What are authorizers' perceptions of how changes in their practices impact the quality of their charter schools?
c. How has the quality of authorizers changed during the CSP grant term?

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[6] Read about the CSP Grant Competition on MDE's website.
[7] Read about the Federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant on MDE's website.

d. How does the CSP grant impact changes in the authorizer landscape in Minnesota?

Evaluation Question 4. How has the charter school landscape in Minnesota changed over the CSP grant period? (Objective 1)
    a. How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones, and outcomes related to increasing high-quality charter schools that serve students who are disadvantaged and the overall number of students served by charter schools in Minnesota? (Objective 1)
    b. How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones, and outcomes related to increasing proficiency of charter school students in English language arts (ELA) and math? (Objective 5)
    c. How has the quality of Minnesota charter schools increased?
    d. To what extent has there been an increase in the sustainability of Minnesota charter schools?

Report Structure

In this report, we begin by providing background and contextual information about the Minnesota charter school and authorizer context. We then discuss our methods for the evaluation and the data that our team used. The rest of the report is divided into four sections, each of which addresses one of the evaluation questions listed above.

Background

Minnesota Charter School Context

Ever since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992, the charter school movement has grown in popularity throughout the country. These schools, which are tuition-free schools governed by a charter that defines academic and nonacademic goals and sets the parameters for their operation, are viable alternatives to traditional district schools within public education systems. There are currently 168 charter schools operating in Minnesota, serving approximately 63,000 students.[8]

Charter School Authorizers

Authorizers in Minnesota can be a school board, education district, institution of higher education, nonprofit organization or single-purpose entity that oversees progress and tracks the performance of charter schools throughout the state. In order to become an authorizer, an eligible organization must submit an application that confirms their eligibility criteria and demonstrates their ability to carry out the mission of charter school authorizing.[9] As of spring 2022, there are 13 approved authorizers across

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[8] This information was found on MDE's Charter Schools web page on 5/2/2022.
[9] For more detail on eligibility, including the application to become an authorizer, *download the Application to Authorize Charter Schools in Minnesota* PDF and Minnesota Statutes 2021, section 124E.05 on the Minnesota Legislature's Office of the Revisor of Statues website.

the state, and they vary in number of years as an authorizer, number of schools authorized, and authorizer type (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Authorizer Background in Minnesota

Authorizer Name	Year Approved as an Authorizer	Number of Operational Schools Authorized (2021)	Authorizer Type
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center	2010 (formerly Audubon Center of the North Woods)	34	Charitable Organization
Innovative Quality Schools	2010	30	Single-Purpose
Novation Education Opportunities	2010	20	Single-Purpose
Pillsbury United Communities	2010	20	Charitable Organization
Volunteers of America – Minnesota	2010	17	Charitable Organization
Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools	2011	15	Single-Purpose
University of St. Thomas	2010	13	College/University
Friends of Education	2010	12	Charitable Organization
Bethel University	2011	3	College/University
Northfield Public School District	2010	2	School District
Student Achievement Minnesota	2010	2	Single-Purpose
Chisago Lakes School District	2010	1	School District
Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing	2019	1	Single-Purpose

Note: Chart taken from MDE *Minnesota Authorizer Performance Evaluation System Round Two Summary Report*. Authorizers are sorted according to number of schools authorized in 2021.

Authorizers in Minnesota are supported by MACSA, which stands for Minnesota Association of Charter School Authorizers. MACSA is a membership organization established in 2017 with a goal to "increase the quality of charter school authorizing in the state of Minnesota by developing and identifying

practices and policies that ensure effective oversight and evaluation of Minnesota charter schools."[10] MACSA contributes to the authorizer landscape in Minnesota by providing authorizers with tools and best practices to maintain high standards within their schools.[11]

According to Minnesota law, the commissioner of education must review authorizer performance at least every five years. These reviews are currently performed using the Minnesota Authorizer Performance Evaluation System (MAPES), through which MDE contracts with a third party to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of authorizer performance based on a series of measures for the roles and expectations of each authorizer.[12] MAPES provides an overall rating based on their performance.

Data Sources

In this section we discuss the data sources used in our evaluation. ICF conducted a review of program documents provided by MDE and collected primary data from subgrantees, authorizers, and other staff through surveys and interviews.

Documents Provided by MDE

ICF reviewed relevant documents provided by MDE to understand context and develop data collection tools. A summary of documents reviewed is included below, grouped by which evaluation question the documents informed.

Evaluation Question 1: Start-up Subgrantees and Expansion/Replication Subgrantees

To understand the full context of the CSP grant and MDE's grant administration processes, ICF reviewed the following documents:

- MDE grant training materials and presentations used in initial onboarding.
- MDE guidance materials, handbooks, budget development guidelines and process manuals distributed to subgrantees.
- Application materials, forms, budget and reimbursement forms and other document templates submitted by subgrantees as a part of the grant administration process.
- Formal letters, communications and email correspondence between MDE and subgrantees as well as between MDE and ICF staff.
- MDE annual reports and public webpages.

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[10] For more, visit the Who We Are page of the Minnesota Association of Charter School Authorizers.
[11] More information about MACSA can be found at MACSA's website.
[12] For more information about MAPES, see MDE's website page on Authorizer Performance.

Evaluation Question 2: Board Development and School Leadership Grantees

To understand the context of these MDE grants, ICF reviewed the following documents:

- Grant applications, including applications for continuation.
- Interim, full-year and final progress reports from grantees, including updates on program goals and participant feedback.
- Email communication materials between MDE and grantees.
- Grantee program documents, including curriculum materials, training modules and participant surveys.
- Grantee marketing and advertising fliers.

Evaluation Question 3: Authorizers

To better understand the context within which authorizers oversee and provide support to charter schools, ICF reviewed the following documents:

- Authorizer training reimbursement requests.
- MDE's Annual Performance Reviews (APRs) to the U.S. Department of Education.
- MDE authorizer conference agendas and presentation materials.
- MACSA session materials.
- MAPES reports.

Evaluation Question 4: Charter School Landscape

To better understand how the charter school landscape has evolved throughout the CSP grant term, ICF reviewed the following documents:

- MDE annual progress reports submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.
- MDE documents related to high-quality charter schools.
- MDE lists of schools opened and closed each school year.

Surveys

Start-Up Subgrantee Survey

All 19 start-up subgrantees[13] completed the start-up subgrantee survey during November 2020 (Figure 2 for number of start-up subgrantees by project period). In the Findings section, unless otherwise stated, results are based on all 19 respondents. Subgrantees were asked to report their attendance for various TA opportunities (Charter School Boot Camps, WBWF TA sessions, and Charter School Leadership Network events). Other survey topics included feedback questions on MDE's CSP grant administration processes (for example, the subgrant application process, onboarding, monitoring, reimbursement), MDE support for subgrantees in achieving goals of WBWF, MDE-provided TA for charter schools, and subgrantee use of CSP funds.

Subgrantees were also asked to respond to several Likert-type items on various scales. They were asked to rate their agreement with statements about CSP grant administration processes[14], to rate the helpfulness or importance of specific resources, trainings, or TA; and to rate their own confidence in completing grant-related tasks.[15]

Figure 2. Number of Subgrantees by Project Period as of SY 2020-2021 (n=19)

Project Period	Number of Subgrantees
Planning	5
Implementation Year 1	6
Implementation Year 2	5
Grant Closed	3

Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Survey

All six expansion/replication subgrantees[16] completed the expansion/replication subgrantee survey between December 2021 and January 2022. At the time of the survey administration, all six subgrantees had closed their grant periods. In the Findings section, unless otherwise stated, results are based on all six respondents. As in the start-up survey, subgrantees were asked to report their attendance for various TA opportunities (WBWF TA sessions and Charter School Leadership Network events). Other

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[13] There were 19 start-up subgrantees at the time the survey was administered (November, 2020).

[14] All items asking for levels of agreement with various statements were presented on a 5-point scale with the response options "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree." Results report the percentage of respondents who agreed (selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree").

[15] Items asking about helpfulness, importance, or confidence were presented on 5-point scales with similar response options (e.g., "Very important," "Important," "Somewhat important," "Slightly important," and "Not at all important").

[16] There were six expansion/replication subgrantees at the time the survey was administered (December 2021).

survey topics included feedback questions on MDE's CSP grant administration processes (for example, the subgrant application process, onboarding, monitoring, reimbursement), MDE support for subgrantees in achieving WBWF goals, MDE-provided TA for charter schools and subgrantee use of CSP funds. Items related to Charter School Bootcamps were removed because although all charter school leaders are welcome to attend, none are required to do so. Items related to the sustainability of the school and the criticalness of the grant were added to build on previous data gathered from start-up subgrantees.

Subgrantees responded to several Likert-type items on various scales. They rated their agreement with statements about CSP grant administration processes;[17] rated the helpfulness or importance of specific resources, trainings, or TA; and rated their own confidence in completing grant-related tasks.[18]

Authorizer Survey

All current charter school authorizers as of November 2020 (n=14), completed a survey in November 2020. The survey focused on understanding authorizers' participation in training and professional development, supported by CSP funds or through opportunities with MDE, and how authorizers perceived that these trainings have affected their knowledge and capacity for working with their schools.[19]

In the Findings section, results are reported for all authorizers unless otherwise noted, for example, where an item may not be applicable to the entire sample.[20] [21] In the figures below (Figures 3a–3d), we provide some background information about the authorizers based on their response (for example, where the school is located, number of schools in their portfolio, years as an authorizer and authorizer organization type).

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[17] All items asking for levels of agreement with various statements were presented on a five-point scale with the response options "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree." Results report the percentage of respondents who agreed (selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree").

[18] Items asking about helpfulness, importance, or confidence were presented on 5-point scales with similar response options (e.g., "Very important," "Important," "Somewhat important," "Slightly important," and "Not at all important").

[19] Options on a knowledge-related survey item had the following answer options: "I did not learn anything new"; "My knowledge has increased in a few ways"; "My knowledge has increased in some areas"; and "My knowledge has increased substantially."

[20] All authorizers responded to a few background questions in the survey to provide a sense of their experience as authorizers and the scope of their school portfolios. After these initial questions, the number of respondents to each survey item varied, depending on which items were applicable. For example, those who had not been approved for training reimbursement did not answer questions about these opportunities and any authorizers who had not participated in MDE annual conferences would not be asked about these sessions either.

[21] This survey was administered in November 2020 and reflects the authorizer landscape at that point in time. Since November 2020, one authorizer has withdrawn.

Figure 3a. Authorizer Background Information Based on Survey Responses – School Location (n=14)

Authorizer Schools Located in 7-County Twin Cities Metropolitan Region	Number of Authorizers
All	4
Most	5
About half	3
None	2

Figure 3b. Authorizer Background Information Based on Survey Responses – Number of Schools (n=14)

Number of Schools	Number of Authorizers
1–3 schools	6
12–17 schools	4
21–35 schools	4

Figure 3c. Authorizer Background Information Based on Survey Responses – Number of Years Their Organization has been an Active Authorizer in Minnesota (n=14)

Years of Authorizing Experience	Number of Authorizers
5 years or less	2
6–14 years	5
15–25 years	7

Figure 3d. Authorizer Background Information Based on Survey Responses – Authorizer Type (n=14)

Authorizer Type	Number of Authorizers
Nonprofit	4
Single-purpose	5
School district	3
Postsecondary institution	2

Among the 14 authorizers that responded to the survey, there was a range of experience with authorizing charter schools: respondents' organizations had served as active authorizers for 1 year up to 25 years, with an average number of 13–14 years as an active authorizer.

Authorizers' school portfolio size fell into a few categories. Six of 14 authorizers had three or fewer active schools in each of their portfolios, while the remaining eight authorizers had anywhere from 12–35 schools in their portfolio.

Four authorizers indicated that all their schools are in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan region, and two responded that none of their schools are in that region. The remaining eight authorizers indicated that either "most" or "about half" of their schools are in the Twin Cities metro region.

Finally, 12 of the 14 authorizers surveyed indicated they are members of MACSA.

Interviews

Start-Up Subgrantees

ICF interviewed 12 start-up subgrantees in January or February 2021 (Figure 4 for the number of start-up subgrantees that participated in interviews by project period). These interviews typically included school leadership (executive director, school director or principal). Over half of the interviews included a member of the subgrantee's financial team, usually a third-party financial service consultant who was involved with helping the subgrantees manage their CSP funds, allowable expenses, budget and reimbursements. Some interviews also included other administrators or school staff such as an operations manager, an outreach coordinator or board chair/member.

During interviews, we asked participants for their feedback about the impact of the CSP grant, how they used the funding during their planning and implementation periods, perceptions of MDE's grant administration processes (for example, application process, onboarding, budget and reimbursement process), and experiences with various MDE-sponsored trainings and events (including Charter Center Boot Camps, WBWF training, and Charter School Leadership Network events). We recorded and transcribed the 60-minute interviews.

Figure 4. Number of Subgrantees Interviewed (n=12)

Project Period	Number of Subgrantees
Planning	2
Implementation Year 1	5
Implementation Year 2	3
Grant Closed	**2**

Expansion/Replication Subgrantees

ICF interviewed all six expansion/replication subgrantees in January or February 2022. These interviews typically included school leadership (executive director, school director or principal) as well as several grant managers.

During interviews, we asked participants for their feedback about the impact of the CSP grant, how they used the funding during their planning and implementation periods, perceptions of MDE's grant administration processes (for example, application process, onboarding, budget and reimbursement process), and experiences with various MDE-sponsored trainings and events (including, WBWF training and Charter School Leadership Network events). We recorded and transcribed the 60-minute interviews.

Authorizers

These interviews focused on the extent to which authorizer staff participated in CSP-funded training opportunities and MDE authorizer conferences as well as authorizer perceptions of the effect of their participation on their knowledge, capacity and practice. Specifically, authorizers were asked to provide feedback on the CSP training reimbursement request process—to the extent they had experience with this. Authorizers were also asked to provide specific examples of how their staff's knowledge had increased, how they had built capacity and what specific practices they may have changed as a direct result of participating in CSP-funded training or MDE authorizer conferences. Finally, authorizers were asked to reflect on how their training participation might ultimately impact the quality and sustainability of schools in their portfolios.

During authorizer interviews, participants were asked to describe their job titles and roles. Most of the interviews included at least one individual who holds a leadership position in the authorizing organization and is involved in overseeing staff and/or school portfolios, including decision-making around new schools and renewals. These individuals had job titles such as director or executive director. Some of these interviewees included members of their team; in some cases, these team members held management or deputy positions (for example, associate director) and in other instances their job titles reflected specific responsibilities for fulfilling authorizer duties. For example, participants in three different interviews included an authorizing specialist primarily focused on evaluating how school boards are governing their schools, a systems analyst who helps develop technology-based systems for streamlining authorizer work and supports pre-operational schools in the portfolio, and an education program specialist responsible for leading school compliance reviews, reporting to MDE, and pulling assessment data from MDE and conducting analysis. Nearly all the authorizers interviewed had small teams; for those with multiple schools this typically translated to the portfolio being divided across staff and/or consultants.

Overall, authorizer interviews provided an opportunity to gain insight on the various ways through which authorizer staff support and work with their schools and the means through which training has helped them be more effective in their work.

Charter School Education and Leadership Training Program Staff

ICF also conducted an interview with five Southwest Minnesota State University program staff in April 2021, including the graduate program director, adjunct professors and the program coordinator. During the interviews, we asked the program staff to describe and provide updates to the pilot program, including how they recruited participants, how they have tracked student progress and to what extent they have been able to accomplish the goals of the program. We also discussed various aspects of training, including the mentorship program, program advisory board, curriculum and end-of-program portfolio. Overall, these interviews provided valuable context for how MDE is using the grant funds to train future charter school leaders and contribute to the overall sustainability of the charter school landscape in Minnesota.

Findings

Evaluation Question 1

How does Minnesota support new charter schools and expansion/replication subgrantees?

In this section of our report, we address each of the following subquestions under Evaluation Question 1:

- What are subgrantees' perceptions regarding the usefulness of CSP grant funds?
- What are effective CSP grant administration processes?
- How does Minnesota support subgrantees through Charter School Boot Camps?
- How does Minnesota support subgrantees in achieving WBWF goals? (Objective 2[22])

We provide a description of MDE support for charter school subgrantees based on our review of MDE documents, as well as subgrantees' perceptions of MDE's support based on survey responses and interviews.

Usefulness of CSP Grant Funds

This section addresses the following subquestion: **What are subgrantees' perceptions regarding the usefulness of CSP grant funds?**

These findings are based on interviews with 12 start-up subgrantees and six expansion/replication subgrantees. In addition, the six expansion/replication subgrantees also responded to survey questions about the criticalness of CSP grant funding.[23] The section provides details about how subgrantees

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[22] MDE reports annually on performance measures related to supporting charter schools in achieving the goals of Minnesota's WBWF legislation. This report includes findings related to subgrantees' perceptions of MDE's support related to WBWF as well as data on Objective 2 provided in MDE's annual report to the U.S. Department of Education.

[23] After analyzing start-up subgrantee interview data, ICF and MDE decided that the expansion/replication survey should be expanded to include some questions about the criticalness of CSP funding.

perceived the criticalness of CSP grant funds to plan and implement their charter schools, along with the perceived helpfulness of using funding for different uses, including paying critical salaries, purchasing classroom materials and training for teachers or staff, furniture and equipment, and classroom technology. The section will also describe subgrantee perspectives on emerging areas related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the perceptions of sustainability of subgrantee charter schools that have completed their grant period.

Criticalness of CSP Funding

Both start-up and expansion/replication subgrantees were asked to report on their use of CSP funds in planning and operating their schools, as well as the perceived helpfulness or impact of these funds. Additionally, subgrantees were asked about the ways in which they primarily used the funding. All subgrantees were asked to share how they used funds for marketing/student recruitment purposes, for financial services contractors or insurance and for technology and recruitment. Many start-up subgrantees revealed that CSP funding was also critical for staff salaries in terms of planning for the opening of the schools. Two additional themes emerged from conversations with start-up grantees related to use of CSP funding, including funding to support student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and how that funding provided an opportunity for schools to focus on the school's mission, program model and/or student learning through strategic purchases/funding decisions.

Overview of Funding

Based on subgrantee interviews, we found that during their planning phases, most subgrantees used CSP funding for:

- Staff salaries, which typically included the executive director or start-up coordinator
- Outreach/marketing and student recruitment
- Technology, furniture, equipment and supplies

Subgrantees also used CSP funding during planning for curriculum development, professional development/coaching of staff and financial or other professional services.

During their implementation phases, most subgrantees continued to use funding for technology, furniture, equipment, supplies and curriculum. Less than half of the grantees reported using CSP funding for staff salaries, outreach/marketing and student recruitment during the implementation phase.

Impact of Funds

Nearly all subgrantees expressed that CSP funding is critical for planning and opening a start-up charter school during the interviews. Furthermore, two-thirds (67%) of expansion/replication subgrantees surveyed indicated that the grant was "critical" or "extremely critical" for operating the schools (Figure 5). The other third of expansion/replication subgrantees indicated that the grant was "somewhat critical" to their efforts.

Figure 5. Expansion and Replication Subgrantees Perceptions on How Critical Grant Funds Were To Their Expansion Or Replication

Criticalness of CSP grant for operating the school	EC, 50%　C, 17%　SC, 33%

0%　20%　40%　60%　80%　100%

■ Extremely Critical (EC)　■ Critical (C)　■ Somewhat Critical (SC)
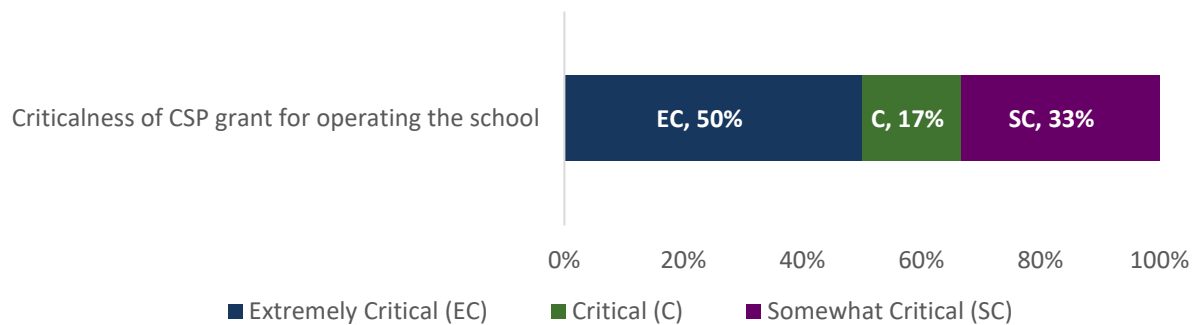
Although start-up subgrantees were not asked this question on their survey, during interviews many of the start-up and expansion/replication subgrantees explained that the CSP grant is so critical that without this funding they would not have been able to open their charter school (Figure 6).

Figure 6. CSP Grant Funds Critical for Charter Start-Up and Expansion/Replication Subgrantees

Theme	Quotes
Start-Up Subgrantees	*We couldn't do anything without having the CSP because we wouldn't have any other significant sources of revenue. So, the CSP allows us to dedicate full-time positions to building the school. Without, we would not be able to do that so we wouldn't have a school.* *I know that it probably would've been nearly impossible to start the school without the CSP funds, starting from scratch and not having those funds to do anything—we wouldn't have a school.* *I mean I think hands-down the charter school program grant was essential and critical funding that enabled the school to launch. The charter really benefited from foundation funding support and that was incredibly helpful, but it was only really possible by leveraging both that foundation support and the government grant funding.*
Expansion/Replication Subgrantees	*I couldn't imagine starting a charter school without it.* *Having that funding source to build up some of the needed, kind of fixed costs that would... have been difficult to fund in the first couple years; [the funding] really helped support the replication of the school.*

Impact by Funding Categories

As noted earlier, expansion/replication subgrantees were asked about the helpfulness of CSP grant funds in different categories during planning and implementation. In their survey responses, the majority of subgrantees indicated that grant funding was helpful in securing necessary resources for their charter start-up, expansion or replication. As shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8, all subgrantees indicated that grant funds were at least somewhat helpful for producing technology, curricular resources, and furniture during both the planning and implementation phases. At least three quarters of subgrantees said that grant funds were at least somewhat helpful during the planning phase for marketing and recruitment (80%), salaries (75%), and education consulting services (75%). At least three quarters of subgrantees also said that grant funds were at least somewhat helpful during the implementation phase for marketing or recruitment (80%) and education consulting services (80%).

Figure 7. Expansion and Replication Subgrantees' Perceptions of the Importance of Grant Funds in Different Categories During Planning Phase

Category		
Technology (software, computers)	EH, 67% · VH, 33%	100%
Curriculum, textbooks, education resources	EH, 67% · VH, 33%	100%
Furniture and other equipment (desks, tables, blackboards)	EH, 67% · SH, 33%	100%
Marketing or recruitment	EH, 40% · VH, 20% · SH, 20%	80%
Salaries	EH, 25% · VH, 50%	75%
Education consulting services (professional development, coaching,…)	VH, 50% · SH, 25%	75%
Other consulting services (financial, audits, insurance, legal services)	EH, 33% · SH, 33%	66%

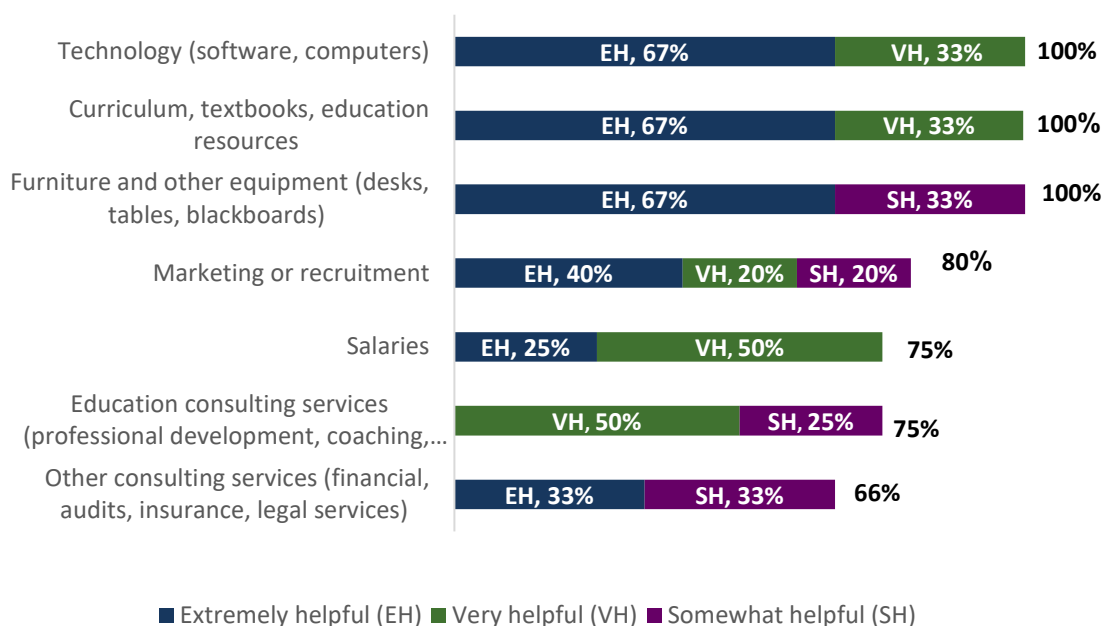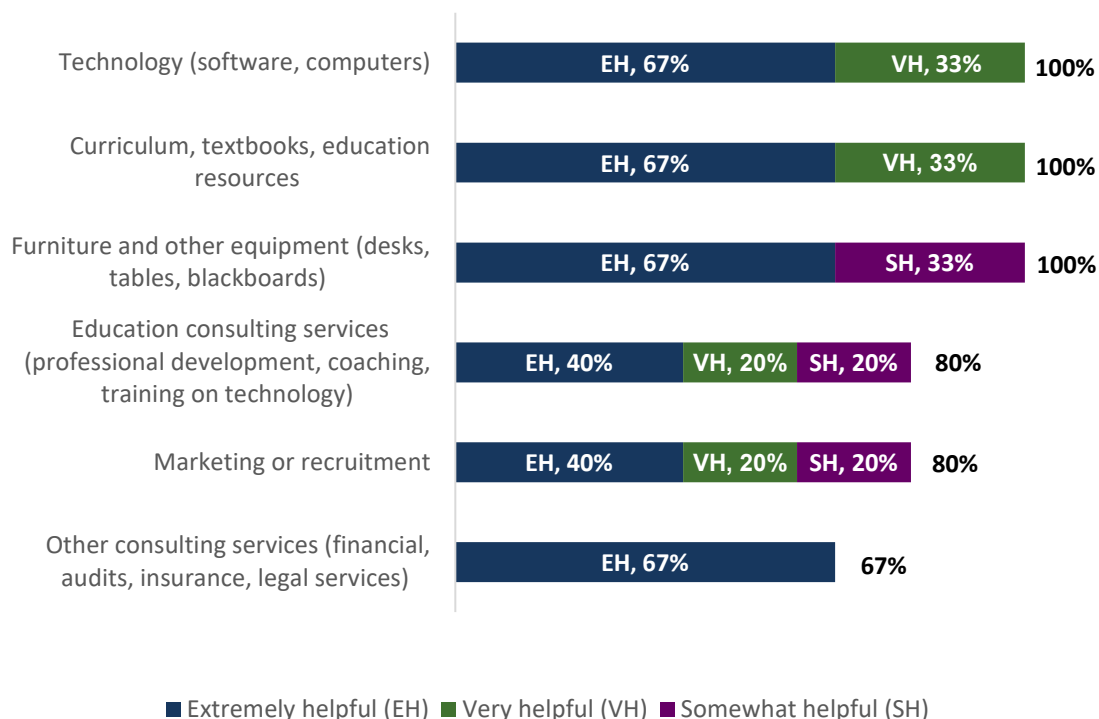■ Extremely helpful (EH) ■ Very helpful (VH) ■ Somewhat helpful (SH)

Figure 8. Expansion and Replication Subgrantees' Perceptions of the Importance of Grant Funds in Different Categories During Implementation Phase

While start-up grantees were not asked these specific questions on the survey, qualitative evidence suggests that funding categories were similar for start-up grantees.

Figures 9 to 14 provide specific examples of funding use for each category, based on interviews with both start-up and expansion/replication subgrantees. They also include information regarding the extent to which subgrantees perceived the CSP grant funds to be critical for the category in question, and example quotes that describe how the subgrantee has used CSP funding and/or the impact of the funding in planning or operating their school.

Figure 9. Usefulness of CSP Grant Funds for Staff Salaries

Topic	Findings
Overview	Most start-up and expansion/replication subgrantees expressed that CSP funding for key staff, often including the director's salary, was critical. The activities supported by CSP funds often included marketing and making curriculum decisions. Several subgrantees noted that directors who are funded by the CSP do "everything."
Use of Funds	• Start-up coordinator/ executive director • Support outreach staff • Operations manager • Support teacher leaders for their planning time • Special education coordinator
Quotes	*[The director does] everything. You know, overseeing it. Making sure everything is running, basically like running the school right now ... So, basically, running the whole school, everything that we did with pre-operational responsibilities. Working with the vendors, working with the legal team, and working with MDE, the CSP grant team, with putting together the marketing. All that. Basically emails, phone calls— everything that needs to be done. – Start-up Subgrantee* *[CSP] paid for their [co-founders'] salary so that way they could continue planning for this school. – Start-up Subgrantee* *[Staff funded by the CSP grant filled many different responsibilities] … You have enrolling the students, you have scheduling the students, you have just the basic framework of the daily operational schedule, along with all of the supports that are involved with that. You have lunches, to organize and get transportation to get organized. And the big one, of course, would be staffing—so you need to staff. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Figure 10. Usefulness of CSP for Curriculum and Staff Training

Topic	Findings
Overview	Many subgrantees noted that using CSP funding for curriculum was critical and/or made a substantial impact. A couple subgrantees said it is expensive to purchase curricula and several noted that CSP funding was particularly helpful with those costs. A couple of expansion/replication subgrantees noted that an impact of delayed CSP funding was needing to purchase second-hand curricula or their second choice for learning materials instead of their preferred curricula. In this way, grant funds were less useful in this area for some grantees because they could not secure their preferred materials before needing to implement a replacement curriculum for the year.
Use of Funds	**Materials** • Online curricula • Textbooks • Resources for teachers • Lesson materials **Service/Staff** • Professional development on curriculum • Hiring education coach • Funding salaries of staff responsible for curriculum and instruction
Quotes	*As we continued to grow, we had additional needs … additional curriculum. So it was very important that we were able to continue to provide students with the materials and resources for their education … we purchased some of the curriculum. … They were mixed, both digital and printed. Great Minds [math] curriculum and … Eureka Math, was both printed and digital as well ... [for] all of that we used the CSP grant. – Start-up Subgrantee* *And just by getting the curriculum. You know you're talking about $50,000, $60,000, $70,000 just to get a curriculum. Forget about anything else … – Start-up Subgrantee* *The correct curriculum was in place. Any sort of workbooks or materials that students would need would be in place. All those things ... yes, all students will need crayons and pencils and scissors and that sort of stuff. But then there's more specific, more targeted work of what sort of instructional materials will they have in front of them and so making sure that was all aligned. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Figure 11. Usefulness of CSP Grant Funds to Increase Marketing and Outreach Efforts[24]

Topic	Findings
Overview	Over half of start-up subgrantees and all expansion/replication subgrantees expressed that using money for marketing and recruitment was valuable for them. A few subgrantees noted that funding is particularly helpful for community outreach and hiring recruiters. One subgrantee noted that without the CSP grant, they would have had to scale back their outreach efforts. A few start-up subgrantees and a couple of expansion/replication subgrantees also noted that the CSP grant is critical because marketing is needed to obtain sufficient enrollment numbers to open and operate the schools. Even established schools emphasized the need to continually update their community on new offerings and expand into new markets to ensure consistent demand for available student slots.
Use of Funds	**Marketing and outreach materials** (for example, fliers, pamphlets and stationery) **Advertisements** (for example, developing a website and social media), billboards/benches, and TV, radio and newspaper ads **Met with community members** for outreach through hosting and attending events or going door-to-door **Hired recruiters**
Quotes	*In the first part of the CSP [planning year] it was very helpful to have a budget that allowed us to create fliers and reach out to the families that we wanted to serve. – Start-up Subgrantee* *For this role, it's crucial for us to have the CSP grant, otherwise we would [be] running into many financial issues. So, it helps us a lot with … recruitment and for hiring [a] start-up coordinator who plans the school from scratch basically. … There is no other funding at that time for hiring somebody, because without the CSP then we don't have the enrollment, we don't have enough numbers, we don't have the general education funds. – Start-up Subgrantee* *As a charter school we have to continually market any programs we do. It's one of the challenges of being a charter school is you're pulling students from the district. Marketing is definitely a huge part of what we need to do, so [we] got some help with that [through CSP]. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *I had to hire recruiters in the community … without the [CSP] funding, that wouldn't be possible. The recruiters would go to community gatherings ... to community centers, YMCAs, where people come together. … They would put out tables in the neighborhoods and go to the buildings and distribute fliers, brochures, school literature in different languages … just to make sure that the communities and the families are exposed to who we are and the new school. So, that was a lot of work and without the CSP that wouldn't be possible. – Start-up Subgrantee*

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[24] Although subgrantees used grant funding for marketing/recruitment/outreach in previous years, the U.S. Department of Education does not consider marketing an allowable expense. As of July 2021, subgrantees were no longer allowed to use the CSP grant funds for marketing/recruitment and outreach.

Figure 12. Usefulness of CSP Grant Funds for Purchasing Equipment and Furniture

Topic	Findings
Overview	Half of the start-up subgrantees and almost all of the expansion/replication subgrantees indicated that CSP funding for equipment and furniture was helpful in opening their school.
Use of Funds	- Furniture (for example, desks, tables, blackboards) - Phone, copier - Personal protective equipment - Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)-related equipment and supplies - Course-specific equipment (for example, kitchen appliances, greenhouse)
Quotes	*We wanted to build a school that would meet the needs of 21st-century learners. And our classroom designs were not going to be the traditional classroom design of student desks and student chairs and whatnot. So, the CSP grant allowed us to create our current classroom setups, which we call the flexible seating classroom setups. … And students are able to walk around freely and choose their seats. It's a very engaging environment with all-new furniture that is research-based, evidence-based to increase student engagement. And that was all possible because of the CSP grant. – Start-up Subgrantee* *[If we had not received CSP funding] our kids would probably be sitting on the floor, no furniture, and our libraries would've been just kind of donated libraries. I mean, honestly, [CSP funding has] really been a lifeline for us. – Start-up Subgrantee* *Since we were a high school, we only had big-kid furniture and adult furniture, so we had to get the seats and tables to furnish elementary classrooms. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Figure 13. Usefulness of CSP to Outfit their Classrooms with Educational Technology

Topic	Findings
Overview	Half of the start-up subgrantees and all of the expansion/replication subgrantees expressed that having funding for technology was especially critical generally, but particularly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on instruction. Two subgrantees said it was the most valuable use of CSP funding.
Use of Funds	- Laptops, Kindle Fires, Chromebooks, iPads and computers - Software - SMART Boards - TVs or projectors - Internet infrastructure
Quotes	*As everybody is aware, COVID impacted education heavily and schools were not allowed to be in-person. The only way of conducting education and instruction was supposed to be online or distanced learning … And having Chromebooks, the SMART Board, the projectors—all of these … and laptops for staff, laptops for students for upper grades, etc., these were our focus, basically. We have to buy these devices otherwise we would not be able to provide proper instruction for students. … But for the majority … of technology I think the CSP grant helped us a lot. Chromebooks, laptops, projectors, SMART Boards..." – Start-up Subgrantee* *We spent a lot of money on technology to help kids have Chromebooks in their classroom. Not necessarily one-to-one, I think that's how it worked out, but that they would have access to technology and SMART Boards too. So quite a chunk of change was spent on that as well. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Figure 14. Usefulness of CSP Grant Funds for Additional Professional Services

Topic	Findings
Overview	A few start-up subgrantees and one expansion/replication subgrantee noted that CSP funding for professional services is valuable, particularly for professional development.
Use of Funds	• Professional development, coaching and curriculum support • Legal fees/Legal services • Website consulting • Student information services consulting • Food/Nutrition consultant
Quotes	*We brought in a ... person that had massive experience in curriculum building and helped us set up to bring the right candidates for the school and allowed us to ... look through the vendors that provided curriculum and aligned it with the vision and mission of the school. So that person came in at the right time to help us kind of put the pieces in place for the success of the school. – Start-up Subgrantee* *So, we were able to [use] CSP funds to make quite a lot of our [professional development] happen, that was really critical to actually successfully implementing our model. – Start-up Subgrantee*

Impact in Emergent Areas

Start-up subgrantees perceived that CSP grant funding positively impacted their schools in two additional areas that were not explicitly asked during the interviews:

- Funding that allows for a focus on the school's mission and/or wider impacts on school community/environment, including teachers, students and families.
- Funding for purchases to support student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because these trends were noted during the start-up subgrantee interviews, additional questions were asked during subsequent interviews regarding the impact of CSP grant funds on the school models of expansion/replication subgrantees (Figure 15). Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 was discussed with expansion/replication subgrantees, but the impacts of the pandemic were not noted as frequently by these subgrantees, possibly due to the fact that the pandemic occurred at the end of all of these subgrantee's grant periods (Figure 16).

Figure 15. Perceived CSP Grant Impacts on School Model and Student Learning

Topic	Findings
Overview	Half of the start-up subgrantees and a couple of the expansion/replication subgrantees shared that CSP grant funding supported their schools' mission and student learning. Subgrantees noted that CSP funds helped with classroom furnishings, curriculum development and implementation, and preparation of the learning environment that supported the subgrantees' unique educational model. Subgrantees also noted that having classrooms set up was important for families touring the school.
Use of Funds	- Classroom furniture, equipment and supplies - Curriculum purchases - Professional development

Topic	Findings
Quotes	*[CSP funding] really allowed teacher leaders to spend the time and effort necessary to create policies and practices, really prepare the environment, using the materials so that classroom spaces were really ready to accept students when doors opened. … I think … the most critical piece is really preparing the environment and giving that time and space to the teacher leaders during that pre-operational period. – Start-up Subgrantee* *We have a really unique school model that teachers aren't generally coming to our school really familiar with it. So, we were able to [use] CSP funds to make quite a lot of our professional development happen, that was really critical to actually successfully implementing our model. … I would say value, in terms of like furthering our mission and vision the most, I would say our professional development was the most valuable [use of CSP funds]. – Start-up Subgrantee* *The CSP gives you the power to make the family feel good when they walk in your building or your classroom or whatever stuff you are setting up with it. … All the new equipment … it gives parents such great confidence when they take children in a new school when it's outfitted the correct way—a full potential of the learning. – Start-up Subgrantee* *Overall, when families come on day one they usually go to tour the school. And then when they go to the classroom, they see the classroom is fully furnished. Furniture is there. Families also see because we are a STEM school, we're providing them online curriculum and so all of that wouldn't be possible without the CSP. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I can say we were able to purchase all of the school furniture or equipment as we wanted to have in our plan. And that is a success, to build that school culture. … And once the people are in the building, they are seeing that it is a good-looking school. The first impression is very important. – Start-up Subgrantee* *[The CSP grant provided] the ability to get curriculum we knew we wanted to put in front of our students. And then the training to do that curriculum well, along with the school culture training that we had. The technology helped implement that and then the furnishings just provided a more appropriate setting to do that in. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Figure 16. CSP Grant Impacts During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Topic	Findings
Overview	Many of the start-up subgrantees expressed that CSP funds have been particularly critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, either with regards to opening their school or continuing to operate their school during this time period.
Use of Funds	• Technology (devices or software) • Furniture • Protective gear • Professional development
Quotes	*Not knowing that we're going to open the school in the middle of the pandemic, I think the CSP [grant] helped great in terms of acquiring those needed technologies such as the Chromebook and iPads … also some softwares [sic] that allowed us to interact with the students outside of school. … I think without this [CSP] grant I am not sure how we would face with the pandemic what's happening and how we would continue our teaching … online without having the ability to give [a] one-on-one device to each student.* *In the upcoming months, because of the COVID regulations and such, we needed to purchase additional materials. And we were able to amend the [CSP] budget accordingly to purchase some materials to keep the school open during this pandemic time. Like, the personal protection equipment, thermal camera, additional desks for the students because we need to put some space and we were using desks and tables for the students in a collaborative learning environment … the presence of [the] CSP grant made us … able to spend and buy [that] furniture and give the best service available for the students.* *Because of the pandemic, not because of CSP, [we] have to invest a lot in resource[s] to teach outdoors. So, a lot of that came from the CSP [grant] too because we opened in the fall with our students being outside for the majority of the day so [we] had to buy portable whiteboards and tables that can go outside and tents. … We were a pretty low-tech school before COVID … but then once we had to switch to distanced learning then we invested in a lot more Chromebooks.*

Additional Perceptions of the Usefulness of CSP Funding

In addition to sharing their perspectives on how CSP funding has been useful, CSP subgrantees were also asked about how grant funding could be made more useful to them or any other thoughts they might have about the use of CSP grant funds.

A few of the grantees noted that the ability to amend their budgets and carry forward funds to the next year is extremely useful in making the best use of the CSP funds.

I know that the planning period was very short. We were able to submit a carry forward request, so that flexibility and being able to move the funds to the future grant period was very helpful. – Start-up Subgrantee

If there were no budget revisions … it would be really hard, because … when you're trying to think of everything you may need in the future—and you had to pick these budget amounts and you could never deviate from these budget amounts. Like, we're getting ready to do a revision on our implementation 1. And I think if you just had the ability to do a revision, you would end up probably leaving a lot more money on the table because it's hard to guess what your needs will be when you don't have experience. – Start-up Subgrantee

Several start-up subgrantees expressed that the CSP grant is more restrictive than other funding mechanisms and/or expressed that more flexibility in how they could use grant funds would be beneficial (Figure 17). In particular, subgrantees noted the limitations on funding allocations for staff salaries, marketing/outreach and professional services. [25] [26]

Figure 17. Perception that CSP Grant is Restrictive

Theme	Quotes
Overall	*This [CSP grant] feels the most restrictive of other foundations or grants out there. So, I think hopefully in the future [there] can be less restrictions.* *So, it seemed as though there was a value of how a school should use its [CSP] funds that was applied for all schools, that felt a little bit prescriptive and restrictive … That's something that has been challenging from a broad-brush perspective … because we're fitting a square peg in a round hole, which we're used to doing because our model is a little bit different, but it seems like it does kind of stifle innovation, it does force you into a certain structure.* *But some of the areas seem a little more strict than they possibly should be on schools that are trying to be open and [develop] new forms of learning.*

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[25] Although subgrantees used grant funding for marketing/recruitment/outreach in previous years, the U.S. Department of Education does not consider marketing an allowable expense. As of July 2021, subgrantees were no longer allowed to use the CSP grant funds for marketing/recruitment and outreach.

[26] Subgrantees also indicated that they would like to see more flexibility in using grant funds for marketing and outreach, but marketing and outreach is no longer an allowable expense under current grant policies.

Theme	Quotes
Salaries	*I have [a] shortage of staff and I cannot even hire a coach or a lead teacher from the CSP grants to help me with stuff in the classrooms. So, they only allow for salary is 10% of the education director salary,[27] and the education director is doing a lot and not only 10% of the work that's related to the CSP. So, I think there must be room for going from 100% to staffing in the planning or even 25% is reasonable. Not zero.* *Part of my salary comes from CSP for grant management work. We use a lot of consultants, which is great for professional development, but going into next year when CSP ends I need to make those consultants—if I am going to keep them— convert them to employees. There are things like, could I have my teacher who is taking on a lead teacher role get paid from CSP for being a lead teacher? No, but could I pay her a stipend to do the curriculum development work that I would want her to do as a lead teacher? Yes, if it's outside of her current existing contract. So, I don't know, there are times where we can make it work and there are times where we can't make something work and we have to find a different solution.* *I would love, it would be great if we could have one staff or two staff as part of it. It's tight trying to staff when you have limited enrollment. And yet there's a requirement that you have a certain amount of staff to meet the needs of the kids. I am sure ... maybe they'll change that, but probably not.*

A few start-up subgrantees noted that there is more flexibility with CSP funding for the planning year, but more restrictions in how funding can be used during the two implementation years (Figure 18). A few subgrantees also noted that they had a shorter planning year and thus did not have as much time to take advantage of the flexibility in funding that the planning year provides. Given the restrictions, a few start-up subgrantees felt like they need guidance from MDE on how they should spend the money during implementation to make the most effective use of the funds.

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[27] MDE clarified that the actual amount is up to 100% of the education director salary during the planning period and up to 15% of the education director salary or 5% of the period award amount for subsequent years, whichever is less.

Figure 18. Challenges Related to the Implementation Phase

| Theme	Quotes
Implementation Phases	*So, what happens then by the time you get to implementation year 2, you can only spend money on stuff. Which is great, everyone loves stuff, whether it's furniture or technology or whatever, pencils, but at some point, the limitations that MDE puts on it[28] … not necessarily [our school] because we're not there yet, but I have seen it make schools make poor decisions because they can't spend it on stuff that they would spend it on otherwise* *There is much more red tape in the second year. … Basically, I think it's the second year, the CSP start to put us in a situation where they want us to be kind of disconnected [from] the CSP for all the administration tasks. Insurance, business manager, part of the salary of the school manager. They want us to start flying by our own wings … It would be nice if the implementation grant would allow more of those expenses [for example, legal services, audit services, insurance] to be allowed. … But they still give you a lot of leeway to buy materials, fundamental bricks for your school. For planning, because planning was much more open, so basically, we charged the CSP for everything we can for such expense[s].*
Short Planning Period	*Something that we did struggle with is that we lost some of that flexibility from the planning grant. We really had to make a case for a lot of expenses that would've been allowable in the planning period that weren't off-the-bat allowable in the implementation period. So, we had spent a lot of time as a team working with the CSP program officers to really figure out, 'Is this an allowable cost, are we able to make this work?'* *The school, like [the director] just alluded to, [the director] didn't start spending money out of CSP until late April or May. So, with the grant switching quickly from planning to implementation, the school rolled over quite a bit of money from planning. I think planning total … maybe it was only $88,000 or something like that [and that impacted what could be spent in the implementation phase].*

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[28] MDE does not place additional restrictions on grant expenditures beyond what is required by federal program guidance.

Theme	Quotes
Need Guidance from MDE	*We have the money and we don't know how to spend it. … Also, the time that I am spending on the CSP grant is more than anything else, so, and I know we have 10% of the salary of the education director can be allocated for CSP … I have only 1 year to spend the entire grant money. And it is a huge amount of money. And I am not a person to spend the money just for the sake of the money because it is free money there. Maybe some people are, but not me. So, I feel I will end up giving this money back to the department, because one year we did not spend the money for almost 10 months, so now the entire grant is squeezed into 2 years and 2 months—some stuff like that.*

Expansion/replication subgrantees were asked to indicate their level of concern regarding the sustainability of their charter school as well as their educational model now that their grant period had ended.

Figure 19 shows that in most cases, these established schools are not overly concerned with questions of their ongoing operation; two thirds of survey respondents indicated that they were either a little concerned or not concerned at all with the sustainability of their school or education model. However, some participants expressed concerns unrelated to the grant—such as disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and natural fluctuations in student demand—as sources of concern. No grantees indicated that their concerns were directly related to the grant ending.

Figure 19. Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Level of Concern with the Sustainability of their School and Education Model
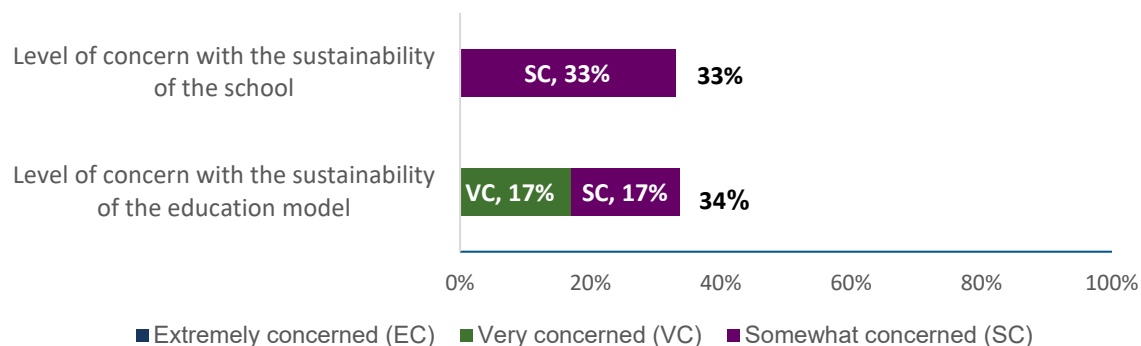
Summary

Most subgrantees expressed that CSP funding was critical to opening, expanding or replicating their school. Funding categories that CSP subgrantees identified as most useful included:

- Salaries for director/school leader during the planning phase; subgrantees viewed this as critical for many (or all) aspects of planning the school

- Physical resources (for example, classroom furniture and educational technology)
- Marketing/outreach/recruitment; subgrantees viewed this as critical to obtain sufficient enrollment numbers to open
- Curriculum; subgrantees used funding for both materials for students and teachers, as well as professional development and coaching support for teachers implementing the curriculum

In addition, start-up subgrantees noted that access to CSP funding allowed them to focus on their school's mission and make purchases that further support the learning environment for students and teachers. CSP funding also provided needed support during the COVID-19 pandemic because subgrantees were able to purchase technology (tablets or laptops) for students to use as part of online learning.

Subgrantees shared their perspectives on how to increase the usefulness of CSP grant funding. They would like more flexibility in how they can use the funding, especially during implementation phases. Subgrantees indicated that having more funding to allocate towards salaries, marketing/recruitment/outreach and professional services would be useful.

One subgrantee suggested that other subgrantees share best practices for using CSP funding during the implementation phase. MDE also may want to consider providing more guidance to subgrantees on ways in which they can use the CSP funding during the implementation phases.

MDE Grant Administration Processes

This section addresses the sub-question: **What are effective CSP grant administration processes?**

We describe MDE's grant processes based on a review of CSP grant documents that the department provided to ICF. We also include subgrantee perceptions of MDE's grant administration processes (for example, application process, onboarding/TA, budgets and reimbursement processes, monitoring and reporting) based on the start-up subgrantee surveys (n=19), expansion/replication surveys (n=6), start-up subgrantee interviews (n=12), and expansion/replication subgrantee interviews (n=6). We end this section with a summary of MDE's effective CSP grant administration processes, as well as recommendations based on our review of documentation and subgrantee feedback.

Application Process

MDE holds a biannual competition in the fall and winter for start-up charter schools and an annual competition in the winter for charter schools planning to significantly expand or replicate. MDE advertises the CSP grant competition(s) on the Competitive Grant Opportunities for MDE web page[29] (which provides links to unique web pages for each competition[30]), through Charter Center Update

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[29] See MDE's Districts, Schools and Educators web page for more on this.
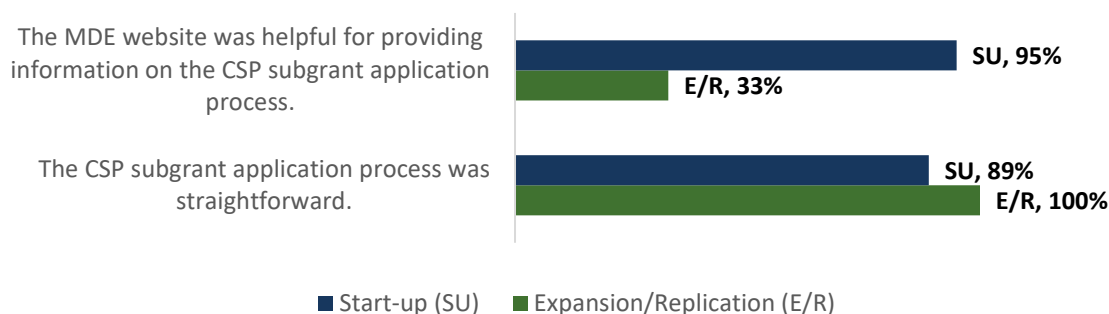[30] See MDE's Districts, Schools and Educators web page, MDE's Charter Schools Program winter Start-Up Grant Opportunity online, and MDE's Charter Schools Program summer/fall Start-Up Grant Opportunity online for the winter 2020 expansion/replication, winter 2020 start-up, and summer/fall 2020 start-up grant opportunity solicitation web pages.

emails that are distributed to individuals in Minnesota who work in or with charter schools,[31] and through emails from MDE staff targeted to all eligible, high-quality charter schools for significant expansion/replication competitions. These emails link interested parties to the unique competition page on the MDE website, which details the application process and relevant contact information. MDE's document on *Guidance on Forming a Charter School in Minnesota*, which can be found on MDE's charter school website, includes information on the CSP competition and a link to the competitive grant opportunities web page.[32]

The application can be found on each unique competition page. The process requires a narrative, a budget sheet and authorizer information. MDE supports applicants by providing written instructions detailing eligibility, application components and application scoring information, along with a separate set of instructions that can be used for budget development. Additionally, MDE supports applicants by allowing them to email questions during a set Questions and Answers period, after which MDE posts a Q&A document to the web page allowing all interested applicants to see MDE responses. Lastly, MDE provides a webinar training session on the application process, which includes a slide deck. MDE does not post the webinar online, but potential applicants can request the slide deck.[33]

Most surveyed subgrantees agreed that the application process was straightforward (start-up – 89%; expansion/replication – 100%) and almost all start-up subgrantees agreed or strongly agreed that the MDE website was helpful for providing information on the subgrantee application process (start-up – 95%) while only 33% of expansion/replication grantees agreed that the website was helpful (Figure 20).[34] This difference may be due to the fact that these more-established schools already had the information from the website and therefore found it less helpful.

Figure 20. Subgrantee Agreement with Items about the Application Process

The MDE website was helpful for providing information on the CSP subgrant application process.
- SU, 95%
- E/R, 33%

The CSP subgrant application process was straightforward.
- SU, 89%
- E/R, 100%

■ Start-up (SU) ■ Expansion/Replication (E/R)

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[31] Anyone can request to be included in the Charter Center Update distribution list. The emails primarily target charter school leaders, school founders (who have not yet opened a charter school) and organizations related to charter schools.

[32] See MDE's Charter Schools web page.

[33] Information obtained via phone call with the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center and the Federal Charter Schools Program grants manager on Aug. 13, 2020.

[34] In this graph and subsequent graphs that compare start-up and expansion/replication subgrantee responses, start-up subgrantee survey data will be labeled as "SU," and expansion/replication subgrantee survey data will be labeled as "E/R."

Subgrantees who participated in interviews were asked about their experiences with the application process, however few of the expansion/replication subgrantees offered feedback about the process. A third of the start-up subgrantees were not involved in writing the application for their CSP-funded start-up charter school. In general, those start-up subgrantees involved in writing the grant application thought that the overall process was adequate. Feedback on grant competitiveness was mixed. A couple of start-up subgrantees did indicate that the process was not easy or that the process was competitive. One expansion/replication subgrantee said that they had support from their authorizer in the application process, which made it easier to navigate but may not have been available to all applicants. One start-up subgrantee expressed that the application should be easier (less competitive), a couple of other start-up subgrantees noted that the process should remain the same and one indicated that the process should be competitive. Most grantees did not comment on MDE's website and trainings, but the few that did shared that MDE resources were helpful in completing the application (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Subgrantee Feedback on the Application Process

Theme	Quotes
Straightforward	*It's very easy. It's a cookie cutter. If you follow the guideline, they really lay out really clearly what they expect. They know the first grant [application] will be not good, because usually it's not good. But they really are very helpful. They always answer the questions. The guidelines are pretty clear. If you follow the guideline and if your project … [is] good, you're going to get the CSP grant at one point. – Start-up Subgrantee*
MDE Training is Helpful	*The process of the application, the guidance, [MDE] did a webinar with questions and answers. All [of it] went really well. – Start-up Subgrantee* *It [the application process] was pretty clear though, and anytime I had a question I was able to get help. I had participated earlier also in some CSP application training kind of program that was offered at that time. So, my notes from that meeting also helped in the preparation period. – Start-up Subgrantee*
Support from Authorizers	*I will say our authorizer helped a great deal. So the fact that authorizers were engaged in that process to some extent was helpful. Of course ours is a really good authorizer so I am not sure if that extends to other authorizers or if it was just ours. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

As part of the application process, MDE uses a team of peer reviewers to rate each CSP application narrative. MDE solicits peer review volunteers through the Charter Center Update email and selects a team of peer reviewers who have a background in charter school leadership, authorizing, instruction, service or training to review the CSP application narratives. MDE hosts a peer reviewer training (including a slide deck) and provides guidance in MDE's *Peer Reviewers Guide* on how to read and score

the application narratives using a rubric included in the guide. Peer reviewers are trained by MDE to avoid bias and to identify any conflict of interest before reviewers compare application materials to the rubric provided by MDE. Application elements are rated on their completeness, their perceived strength, and the potential for the application to result in a high-performing charter school that will meet federal CSP grant goals and priorities.[35]

After reviewers rate the applicants, they submit the scores to the MDE grant specialist, who oversees the peer review process. MDE then aggregates scores for each CSP applicant. MDE facilitates a peer review meeting where MDE staff and reviewers discuss scores and make decisions on which applicants to recommend for funding to the Minnesota commissioner of education. According to MDE, although the commissioner may ask questions about recommended applicants, the commissioner has a demonstrated history of approving all recommended CSP applicants.[36]

Although subgrantees were not explicitly asked about the peer review process during the interviews, a few start-up subgrantees provided comments (Figure 22). Two of the start-up subgrantees shared that they had been unsuccessful in a previous CSP grant competition. These subgrantees felt that the rubrics used by the peer reviewers were too subjective and that they did not receive helpful feedback from the reviewers. Two start-up subgrantees had served as CSP peer reviewers in the past (not at the time when they applied). One felt that the process was very good while the other felt that the process should be improved.

Figure 22. Start-up Subgrantee Feedback on the Peer Review Process

Theme	Quotes
Organized Process	*So, I sat on the other side of the table as a [CSP] grant reviewer and I found the process that they followed and the way in which they went about reviewing and trying to ensure that there was consistency across the board with reviewers ... I thought they did a good job of that. It felt like it was a thoughtful, thorough and well-organized process.*
Rubric was Subjective[37]	*I thought the rubric ... left a lot of room for subjectiveness. And I thought that manifests itself even with our own application [feedback] by seeing just a really crazy range of scores.* *The rubric is very subjective ... I think there were five different ranges of numbers out of 20 and 20–18 was excellent and 17–14 was very good. What does that even mean, what does 'very good' even mean?*

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[35] MDE *Charter School Program (CSP) Peer Reviewer Guide,* April 2018.
[36] Information obtained via phone call with the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center and the Federal Charter Schools Program grants manager on Aug.13, 2020.
[37] MDE provides rubric and inter-rater reliability training to peer reviewers to address subjectivity concerns.

| Theme	Quotes
Feedback not Helpful	*In my opinion, the feedback that we got was … not helpful. And in several cases, contradictory to what the other reviewers said. … And I felt like this process was very opaque, sort of a black box that we got the answer spit out and it wasn't helpful at all. Almost like a thumbs up or thumbs down and no explanation for why …*

Grantee Onboarding and Initial Training

MDE's subgrantee onboarding process includes providing subgrantees with contractual documents as well as hosting on-site onboarding sessions with all new CSP subgrantees. MDE uses several contractual documents to negotiate the terms of the grant with each subgrantee throughout the grant period, including a tentative offer letter, an official grant award notification and official grant award amendments as needed.

Once official grant award notifications have been completed, MDE supports new subgrantees by inviting the CSP grant manager and all other school staff who will be involved in the grant (often a financial service provider) to an in-person training session with information on grant guidelines, key documents and expenditure reports. [38] [39] During this training, MDE provides subgrantees with several key documents that will help them effectively manage their grant. These documents include the *General Guidance* document detailing the role of the CSP grant manager and required processes and documentation for grant continuation, such as grant monitoring, annual reports and continuation requests.

Most surveyed subgrantees agreed that the MDE onboarding training was helpful (start-up – 79%; expansion/replication – 67%) (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Start-Up Subgrantee Agreement with an Item about Onboarding Training

MDE onboarding training for new subgrantees was helpful.
SU, 79%
E/R, 67%

■ Start-up (SU) ■ Expansion/Replication (E/R)
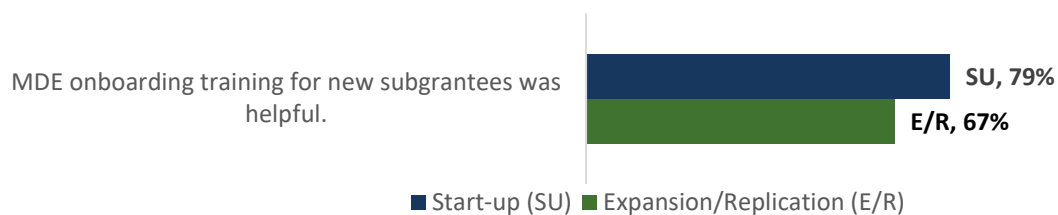
A few start-up subgrantees stated that they did not participate in any onboarding training; one of these subgrantees noted that they had a separate meeting with an MDE staff member to discuss CSP grant expectations. Most of the start-up subgrantees and half of the expansion/replication subgrantees who

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[38] Information obtained via email from the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center on Sept. 14, 2020.
[39] These meetings, which were formerly conducted in-person, have switched to virtual presentation due to COVID-19.

attended MDE onboarding training found at least some aspects of the training to be helpful, including guidance on allowable/nonallowable costs and how to prepare budgets for submission (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Subgrantee Perceptions of Onboarding and Initial Training

Theme	Quotes
Onboarding Training and TA	*The orientation meeting was great. I think there are individuals at the Charter Center that shared information that was pertaining to CSP. And also there was a lot of PowerPoint [slides] that [were] shared after the meeting so that was helpful. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think it [onboarding training] was awesome … They did presentations and it was a combination—one-on-one sometimes. … But the meeting that was conducted with other schools I think was a great meeting because it provided the opportunity for the start-up coordinators or the CSP grant managers and the school administration side, the opportunity to share ideas and ask questions and stuff like that. – Start-up Subgrantee* *We attended … the grantee orientation training. And we had received all the documents from MDE in regard to that … [MDE] went over basically the budget preparation and budget submission and how budget amendment would work . – Start-up Subgrantee* *They've [MDE] had some real useful webinars that we've taken advantage of and some helpful kind of … they had some meetings I believe I attended right after we received the grant to walk through some of the materials that MDE uses to help to monitor the grant and budgeting. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I would say the training was good. I think, if I remember correctly, I participated in two meetings … [it covered] a lot of what you can do, what you cannot do and how they're doing reimbursements, and what's allowed and what is not allowed and stuff like that. – Start-up Subgrantee* *There wasn't a time where I felt we had just been left to our own devices to figure it out. There were trainings, there were things available and it was pretty clear if you had questions who to go to. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Theme	Quotes
MDE Available at Training to Answer Questions	*The whole onboarding [was helpful] and after that it was important, for example you know, 'How do you request reimbursement? What can you use for this?' And they answer all the questions … 'Can I use this; can it be used?' What [we] cannot use for the grant, how to apply when you're reimbursing, how to do the reporting, the weekly reporting … for example … how [the grant coordinator in school] can use that to get reimbursed, everything that you request for the school from the state … It was very important in that regard. – Start-up Subgrantee* *When we had our questions [MDE staff] was always there to answer them. So, it was a good training to start with, understanding the process of how MDE operates the funds and what the requirements are in terms of budget making and amendments. – Start-up Subgrantee* *There's plenty of reporting and required activities and I think they all make sense. So I think it was a quality onboarding program. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Although most subgrantees found the trainings helpful, over half of the start-up subgrantees and one expansion/replication subgrantee who attended onboarding training sessions suggested some areas for improvement (Figure 25). Some of these subgrantees noted that there is a lot of information covered during the training and that it might be helpful to make the session more interactive or to break up the information across multiple sessions to allow for more detailed, situation-specific information.

A couple subgrantees suggested that it would be helpful to learn from other school leaders or staff from financial firms who have gone through the CSP grant process about how they have used the grant. Half of the expansion/replication subgrantees also suggested that conducting more thorough one-on-one meetings with each subgrantee during the process would be helpful to address site-specific questions relating to allowable expenditures and how to categorize specific purchases.

Figure 25. Subgrantee Perceived Areas for Improvement of MDE Training

Theme	Quotes
More Interactive or Sharing Opportunities	*I think the experience of onboarding could be much more human-centered, design-based … try to do it [the onboarding] through an experience that's much more designed around not just being talked at for a long period of time but really to be reflective, to ask questions and be more of a conversation. – Start-up Subgrantee* *More clarity in terms of what other ... folks that were on the grant, some of the ... things that they have learned ... that worked for them or didn't work. Sharing those also would've been helpful. – Start-up Subgrantee*
Need for More Detailed Training	*I only attended one orientation session. And quite frankly there wasn't much information that was practical for me. I had to depend more on the financial firm like [the accountant] and his team. – Start-up Subgrantee* *It's a lot of information, hard to process in one training session. I don't know [what could be improved], maybe if it could be split in two or some follow-up sessions it might be more helpful. But generally, [the onboarding training] looked pretty good. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think the training that MDE provides to initial grantees is pretty good regarding allowable costs. But I do think that … some of the interpretations in actuality aren't exactly what is written. – Start-up Subgrantee* *It'd be very helpful to just—why not do that one-on-one with the school. If there's eight schools that received the grant, 2 weeks of one-on-one meetings where they can ask questions specific to them and get the response back. And get that comfort level in place that this is significant money and it's got … federal ... rules and regulations attached to it. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *I think a place where I think that would've helped me to attend something where somebody could walk me through … how we decide what's allowable and all those kinds of things and be able to ask questions. But, again, I love that I am also able to ask individual questions and have those answered. That's really helpful. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

After initial onboarding and training, MDE does not plan ongoing training sessions unless specific subgrantees request a review of the information given in initial trainings.[40] Staff may coach subgrantees

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[40] Verbal conversation with MDE staff in April 2022.

on an as-needed basis to ensure that subgrantees remain in compliance with MDE policies and that grant administration procedures are being followed (see next section on TA and Resources).

TA and Resources

MDE supports new and existing charter schools by providing TA on the budgeting process for applicants during the application webinar training session and during the subgrantee onboarding session. Additionally, MDE also provides subgrantees with additional guidance on the CSP Grant Resources website, which includes instructions and templates for budgets and reporting; guidance on procurement, contracting and conflicts of interest during the negotiation process; and ongoing TA as necessary on an informal basis, by request. MDE provides information on allowable (or reimbursable) expenses based on project period (for example, wherein all costs must be "reasonable, allowable, allocable and necessary") in the budget instructions document provided to applicants.

On the start-up subgrantee survey, subgrantees were asked the extent to which they found different MDE resources important with regard to effectively carrying out subgrantee activities (Figure 26). Most start-up subgrantees indicated that all types of resources were at least somewhat important, including recorded webinars/videos (95%), live webinars (94%), written resources and guidelines on MDE's website (90%), in-person presentations/trainings (90%), and slide decks from trainings or webinars (89%). All expansion/replication grantees indicated that written resources and guidelines on MDE's website were at least somewhat important (Figure 27). Two thirds (66-67%) of expansion/replication subgrantees said the same of live webinars, slide decks from trainings or webinars, in-person presentations/trainings, and recorded webinars/trainings.

Figure 26. Start-Up Subgrantee Feedback on the Relative Importance of Different MDE Resources
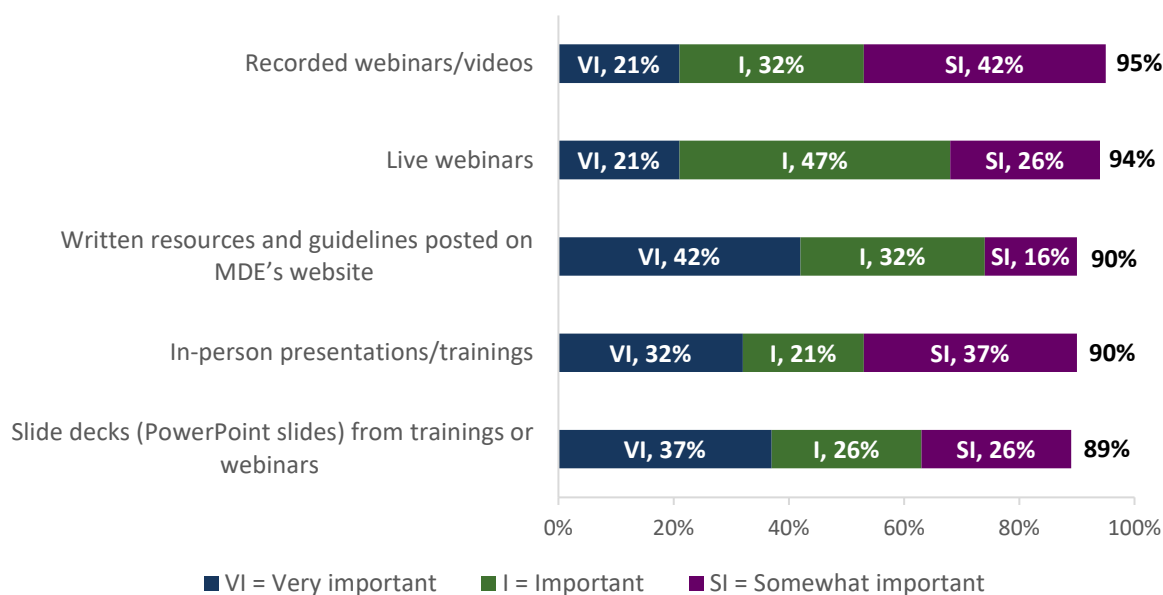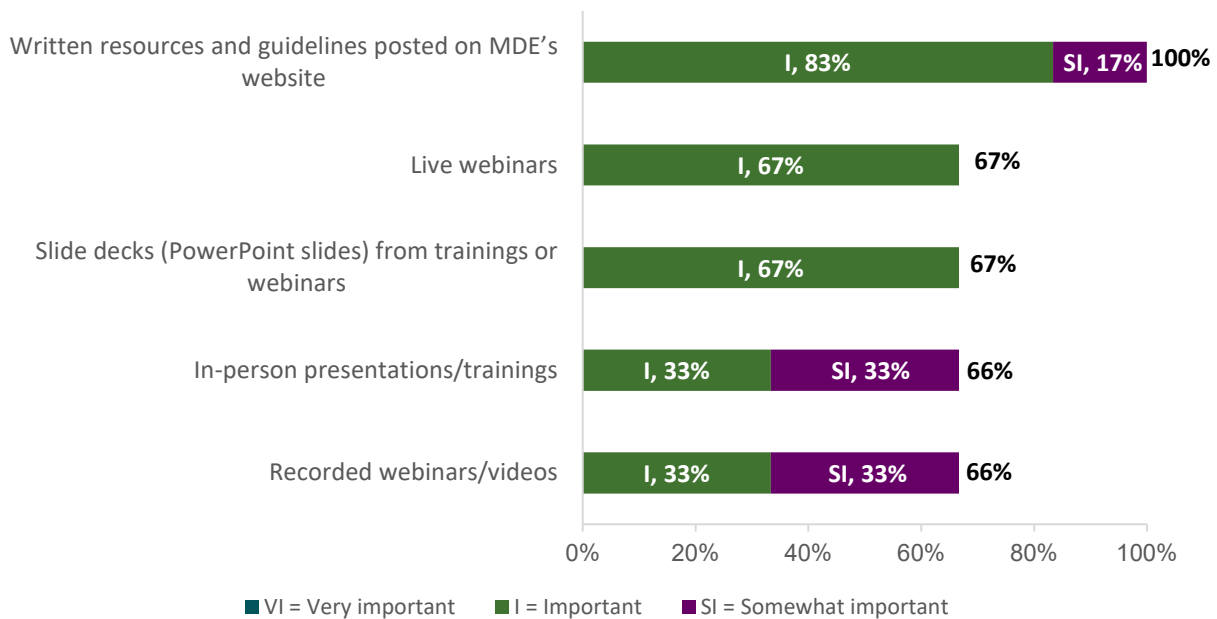
Figure 27. Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Feedback on the Relative Importance of Different MDE Resources

Subgrantees also said that they liked the written guidance, budget templates and/or receiving the PowerPoint slide decks.

Several subgrantees also said that trainings and readily available guidance resources should cover more information on allowable costs and the specific interpretations of allowable costs (Figure 28). While some start-up subgrantees noted that written guidance was helpful, other start-up subgrantees reported that the guidance is not sufficiently detailed or clear. One expansion/replication subgrantee said they felt like they received sufficient guidance at the beginning, but by the end of the grant they realized they had never gotten a full picture of what the grant would look like prior to implementation. One subgrantee perceived the guidance to not be very detailed and was dependent on a financial firm for assistance.

Figure 28: Subgrantee Feedback on MDE Resources

Theme	Quotes
Written Guidance and Documents	*I think the template for the budget was helpful. I think back to breaking down the categories—I think there was a notes column that explained what went into each of those. I thought that was really helpful. That would be a big one. – Start-up Subgrantee* *They sent out a revised … expenditure guidance document sometime in the past few months that was helpful because it said that one of the things that was in my currently approved grant was no long[er] approved. So, it was helpful to know. – Start-up Subgrantee* *The written guidance has been really good. There have been some really nice examples and very explicit language that made it clear when certain costs would just not be allowable in the grant … it's really nice that there's both the written guidance and the PDFs and then also the PowerPoint presentation decks were always shared as well. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think the documents they provide are good. They're short enough that they're a good reference, right. They can't really be exhaustive and be a good reference. So I think that's fine. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Theme	Quotes
Need More Detailed and Clear Guidance	*MDE does have some basic … guidance of these things are not allowable or are allowable, certain percentage under pre-planning or implementation year 1. But like I said it's not very detailed … I remember I went to a couple of trainings that were in person, at least one and maybe another online. And they go over that for certain but they're fast. There's a lot of information given to you. And I remember there being like certain things they were ambiguous on, and they said … 'You're just going to have to sort of check with us as you go through the process.' … There's an attempt, of course, to educate people on what is allowable. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think more [guidance] in terms of the usage of the grant and limitations so that we can plan [would be useful]. … I think the language is kind of clear, but I think ... trying to highlight the areas that are important [with regard to grant usage]. And not just hand out a big PDF and assume everyone would understand what's on there, but to lay it out, to say, 'This is what it [CSP funding] can be used for and this is what it cannot be used for (for example, allowable and not allowable).' I think that language was there, but I think it could've been more structured. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I don't know how feasible this is, but to be able to provide an extensive list of 'Here are the types of things that are allowed under this area, under the [Uniform Financial Accounting and Reporting Standards] UFARS code.' There's some stuff in there but inevitably it's not that you're trying to skirt the system at all, but you're trying to make things work for your own school, so you're asking questions like, 'If we do this, would this fit under furnishings or would this fit under training?' And then they provide an answer like, 'Yes that should." They follow through on it and they come back and say, 'Well, because of this, it doesn't.' – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *Their website was 3 years out of date,[41] so any time you tried to go there to find resources that would be relevant, they're not relevant. And I pointed that out to them every time they emailed me. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

MDE Communication

MDE supports subgrantees with managing their CSP grant through email and phone communication. On the start-up subgrantee survey, subgrantees were asked the extent to which they find these two different forms of communication with MDE important, if at all (Figure 29 and Figure 30). Of these forms of communication, more start-up subgrantees said that email communication from MDE (95%) is very important or important, compared to phone communication (79%). Expansion/replication subgrantees

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[41] It is not clear whether the CSP website was out of date at the time of the interview or in the past time frame the subgrantee was referencing. As of this writing (May 2022), the website contained updated materials and resources and MDE stated that the website is updated at least annually.

also indicated that email was comparatively more important than phone communication, with 100% of expansion/replication subgrantees indicating that email was either important or very important compared to 66% for phone communication.

Figure 29. Start-Up Subgrantee Feedback on the Relative Importance of Different Forms of MDE Communication
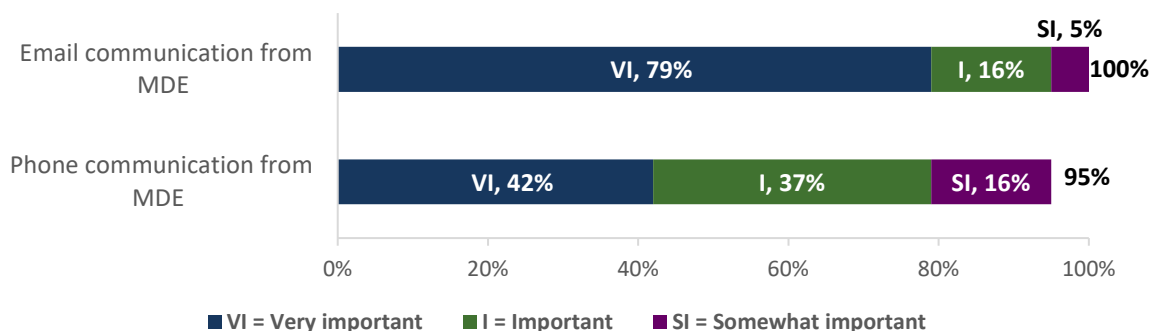

Figure 30. Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Feedback on the Relative Importance of Different Forms of MDE Communication
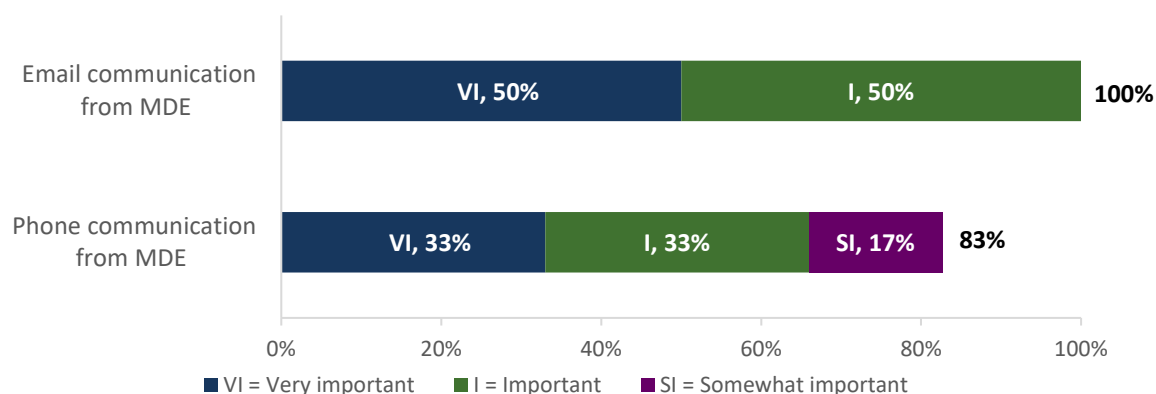
According to MDE policy,[42] MDE primarily communicates with subgrantees through email. MDE does not schedule regular phone calls[43] or check-ins but will speak to the subgrantees that are more engaged in grant processes (for example, submitting expenditure reports) more frequently over the phone. In addition, some of the start-up subgrantees noted that their third-party financial services firm and/or accountant will handle reimbursement processing, budget development and communicate directly with MDE for these purposes.

Most subgrantees surveyed indicated that MDE is communicative and responsive to their needs (Figure 31). At least half of subgrantees agreed that MDE staff are available to speak on the phone to respond

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[42] Page 4, *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), General Overview for CSP Grantees,* updated June 2020.
[43] From communication with MDE personnel on April 19, 2021.

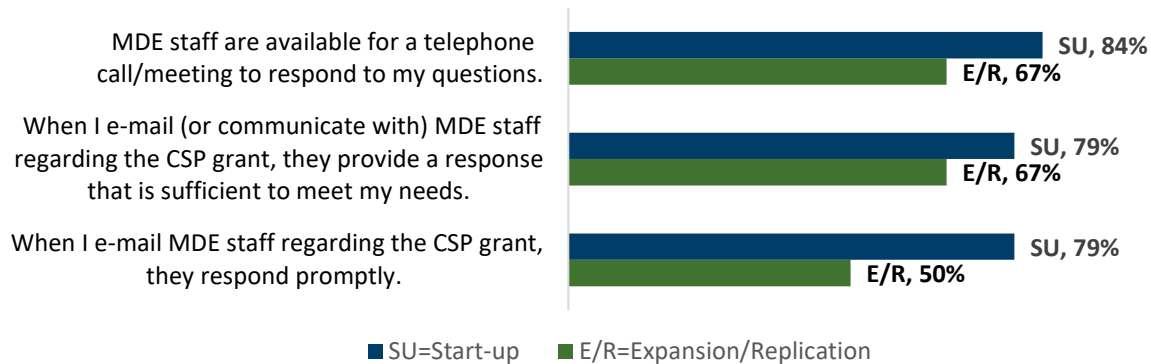to questions (start-up – 84%; expansion/replication – 67%). Although most start-up subgrantees reported that MDE respond promptly to emails (79%), only 50% of expansion/replication subgrantees agreed.[44] Most subgrantees agreed that MDE's responses are sufficient to meet their needs (start-up – 79%; expansion/replication – 67%).

Figure 31. Start-Up Subgrantee Agreement with Items About MDE Communication[45]

Many of the start-up subgrantees and more than half of the expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed expressed that they use MDE staff as a resource and/or that MDE is responsive to questions (Figure 32). A couple of expansion/replication grantees expressed concerns with the responsiveness of MDE staff and grant administrators, but it seems these concerns may have been limited to certain times or certain cases. For example, one expansion/replication subgrantee encountered difficulties hearing back from their grant administrator in a timely manner, claiming it was taking weeks to hear back. The same subgrantee said they then met further difficulty when they attempted to contact their grant administrator's supervisor directly but were directed back to their grant administrator. While these experiences were isolated, there were situations where specific subgrantees encountered issues with communication beyond what most subgrantees experienced.

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[44] While 50% of expansion/replication subgrantees did not agree, this only reflects the perspective of three subgrantees who may have had a different experience than the majority of other subgrantees due to unknown factors.

[45] In the subgrantee survey, subgrantees were asked about the promptness of MDE responses to communication, however the definition of "prompt" was left up to participants.

Figure 32: Subgrantee Feedback About Communication with MDE

Theme	Quotes
MDE Staff Responsiveness	*I usually just ask [MDE CSP grants manager] … and then she is very responsive and helps with whatever we need help with… And that [MDE CSP grants manager] has a lot of experience [with regard to allowable expenses for CSP funds] as well. – Start-up Subgrantee* *When you have any kind of questions, [MDE staff] are very responsive … when you ask a question, usually you get an answer in a timely, in a [responsive] or timely manner. It doesn't take months for you to get an answer [to] your questions. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think they've all been helpful. I know they all end up having far more to do than they have time to do. So they're not always helpful in a timely fashion, because they have a lot of people needing a lot. But I think, in general, they're always responsive and willing to work with me and try to help me figure something out. – Start-up Subgrantee* *And I think that, in general, the MDE team was always available for question and things like that. – Start-up Subgrantee*
MDE Communication Concerns	*It'd be weeks. And we did get frustrated with our grant administrator and we tried to contact their supervisor. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *Weeks, I would send them a request … in the beginning, they would respond back within 24 hours if they received my request and it would be weeks later and I would start bugging them and be like, 'Hey did you receive my request because I never heard back?' And they're like, 'Oh yeah, we're working from home, sorry for the delay, we got it.' Or then they would respond back, 'Oh, by the way … you have an issue, the food is on here. That's not supposed to be on here. So you have to revise this and then resubmit it.' So then we would have to revise it and then submit it again. So it'd be weeks before even a response. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Budgets and Reimbursement Processes

Subgrantees submit a budget with their initial CSP grant application. MDE reviews the budgets before grant awards are made official, however, subgrantees cannot purchase items on the budget before the MDE signs the subgrantee's official grant award notification.[46] Throughout the grant period, subgrantees may request to make modifications to their approved budgets; MDE supports subgrantees by reviewing and approving such modifications in the order in which they are received. In some circumstances where

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[46] *Budget Development Instructions*, updated June 2019

timing is more critical, MDE may expedite the review of a budget revision to help avoid financial difficulty.[47]

Reimbursements are a large component of the grant administration process. MDE supports subgrantees through the reimbursement process by providing explicit instructions to them, including that they should not submit reimbursement requests for items that are not on the approved budget, and to wait to submit such requests until any necessary budget modifications are made and approved.[48]

To request a reimbursement, subgrantees complete an expenditure report (which must be approved by the school's authorized official) and submit via email to MDE's Grant Services team. MDE encourages subgrantees to submit the reports monthly. MDE uses their *CSP Expenditure Report Checklist*[49] before approving the expenditure reports. Once MDE approves the reimbursements, they are processed through electronic fund transfer direct deposits through the Minnesota Management and Budget system. If the subgrantee submits sufficient documentation for the reimbursement request, MDE must process the reimbursement within 30 days of receiving the completed expenditure report.[50]

According to MDE staff, this ongoing support often involves an iterative process of subgrantees submitting reimbursement requests, MDE providing feedback or asking the subgrantee questions about the reimbursement requests (for example, items are not properly categorized or documented in the report) and the subgrantee resubmitting documentation to MDE after corrections are made.[51]

 This 30-day time limit for reimbursement starts after MDE has reviewed and approved the expenditure report (in other words, the report is completed correctly with all needed documentation). If the subgrantee is required to make revisions, the time between purchases and reimbursement to subgrantees can exceed 30 days if the subgrantee needs to make substantial revisions or if there are delays in communication between MDE and the subgrantees.[52]

We gathered feedback from subgrantees about MDE reimbursement processes through the subgrantee survey and interviews. Most surveyed subgrantees agreed that MDE provided clear guidelines about the reimbursement process (start-up – 89%; expansion/replication – 67%) and allowable activities for reimbursement (start-up – 74%; expansion/replication – 67%) (Figure 33).

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[47] Email correspondence with MDE staff on May 3, 2022.
[48] Page 6, *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) Grant, Budget Development Instructions*, updated July 2021
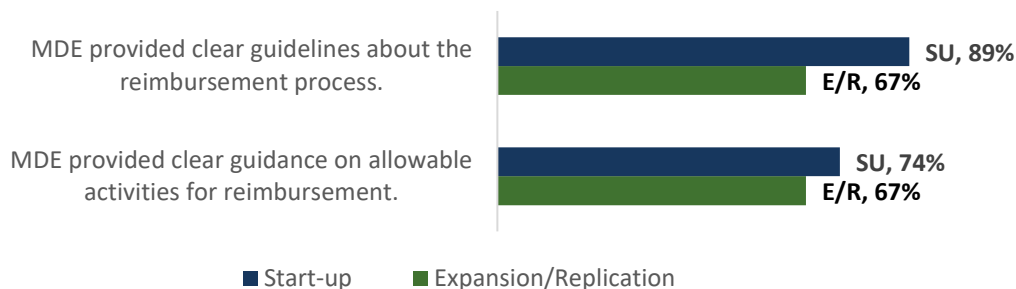[49] *CSP Expenditure Report Checklist* was provided with other CSP materials in June of 2020.
[50] Page 56, *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), New Grantee Training*, April 2021
[51] Verbal communication with MDE Staff on March 22, 2022
[52] *CSP Expenditure Report Checklist* was provided with other CSP materials in June of 2020.

Figure 33. Subgrantee Agreement with Items About Reimbursement

MDE provided clear guidelines about the reimbursement process.	SU, 89% / E/R, 67%
MDE provided clear guidance on allowable activities for reimbursement.	SU, 74% / E/R, 67%

■ Start-up   ■ Expansion/Replication

We also asked subgrantees during interviews, about their experiences with budgeting and reimbursement processes.

Although most subgrantees surveyed indicated that MDE provides clear guidelines about the reimbursement process and allowable activities, when subgrantees were asked for feedback about the budgets and reimbursement processes, most start-up subgrantees and all expansion/replication subgrantees shared challenges with the budget approval and/or reimbursement process. These challenges included:

- changes in MDE's interpretation of the guidance, which was attributed by subgrantees to the change in MDE staff who are responsible for approving budgets and reimbursements and their individual perceptions,[53]
- delays in budget approvals,
- delays in reimbursement, and
- rejected reimbursements

Subgrantees reported that these various challenges impacted their cash flow and ability to use the grant efficiently. These challenges are described in more detail below.

Over half of the start-up subgrantees and half of the expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed indicated that there has been turnover in MDE staff who are responsible for approving reimbursements (Figure 34). These subgrantees perceived that the definition of allowable expenses changed based on individual MDE staff's interpretation of the guidance. With turnover at MDE and perceived changes in guidance interpretation, subgrantees expressed that they were required to modify their budgets and, in some cases, that their reimbursements were denied, even though their planned budget expenses were initially approved by MDE.

One expansion/replication subgrantee specifically recalled an instance where a mistake slipped through MDE's review of their proposed budget and was only caught once the reimbursement was processed. This subgrantee noted that this led to a substantial cost being taken from general education funds for their school.

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[53] These guidance changes from MDE also coincided with instruction from federal monitoring of the CSP program. These changes were communicated to subgrantees as soon as they were made known to MDE staff.

Figure 34. Perceived Challenges with Budget Approval and Reimbursements

Theme	Quotes
MDE Staff Turnover	*Sometimes there was a situation where we've had a previous person in that position that was reviewing that would allow some expenditures. And then later a new person would start, and their interpretation would be different. And … therefore we'd have schools that would do a budget modification, get everything kind of lined up and then all of a sudden MDE would say, 'Oh, no, that's no longer allowable.' – Start-up Subgrantee* *Just as staff transitioned at MDE sometimes there were different opinions on allowable costs so we would often need to rehash costs even when they were included in an approved budget. So that just made the processing time take a lot longer … as staff transitioned [there was] some inconsistency of feedback that we received around our budgets and around allowable and not allowable expenses. It caused us to expend a significant amount of energy and at times [was] somewhat frustrating to have so much back and forth when we had not only verbal but written agreement about what was allowable for our expenses. That happened at least two to three times. – Start-up Subgrantee* *And I think there were some staffing changes at MDE. And then it got more particular and more particular as time went on and things were interpreted in ways that they hadn't previously been interpreted in my opinion. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*
Guidance Changed	*I think the only bit of feedback is just that those written guidance documents were updated somewhat frequently and sometimes without a lot of warning. So, the new guidance would sometimes even impact already approved budgets. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I feel like if a school has already been awarded the CSP grant under certain guidance, certain budget guidelines and things like that, we incorporate that not only for the grant period we're in, but also our operating budget. So, when there's a change made midyear or mid-implementation period, and then all of a sudden we have to change things that means we have to really redo even our general operating budget because some things are now going to be disallowed. I feel that once a school is entered into the CSP grant, whatever those guidelines are at that time should be the same ones throughout the entire grant period versus any changes. Because like I said, it can have a negative effect on the school's overall budget when changes are made mid-implementation. – Start-up Subgrantee*

Theme	Quotes
Different Interpretations of Allowable Costs	*I think that sometimes what is in the paper CSP manual of allowable costs or how the process works, sometimes that's up for a specific individual's interpretation. So, the CSP program over the last 4 years or so, has had maybe just as many bodies in the program coordinator position at the department of education. And so, … I think that there is probably more personal interpretation than there is in any of the other grants that we deal with. – Start-up Subgrantee* *There's one person at MDE that is taking all the emails and then he or she simply says yes or no. Yes, there are guidelines, but it seems like it basically falls on one person to be the gatekeeper … There are some that are much more allowable and flexible than others. It does not seem to be a very clear and transparent system. … I think when MDE was doing this last transition … we were seeing some inconsistencies on what was getting approved and what wasn't … the one person over there that has all of the power to either approve or deny and maybe it's just because they were just beginning that role as well and figuring out their position. – Start-up Subgrantee* *So that's where I just say the rigidity of the … whereas [colleague] was saying the first manager was like, 'Spend the money here we'll help you figure out how to do it.' The second manager was much more focused on the letter of laws and rules and rather than helping us figure out how to do it, it was more holding our feet to the flame and showing us how we did it wrong. It was just a flip in the relationship. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *The only thing that I remember that was difficult with the grant is that there were a couple of individuals that were responsible for the oversight. And it depended on who was in that oversight position in regard to allowable or not allowable expenditures. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Theme	Quotes
Approved Budget Items Denied	*That's been a frustration part of mine because we get it approved in the budget and then I go to do the claim and the claim gets turned down ... So, I don't understand how to get through in the budget and then later on you can't claim the money. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I think there were two or three times that guidance changed,[54] like we had to do things differently because the rules changed. And we had to find that information after the fact. It wasn't communicated with us before. So, when we submitted the reimbursement, that is when [MDE was] like 'Hey, you're not going to get this payment because this was not the guidance you followed.' – Start-up Subgrantee* *It felt like we would send a budget, the budget would be okayed, be approved, then we would spend the money and send in the expense report and they would say, 'This isn't allowable.' And we'd say, 'But it was approved on a budget' and they would say, 'We approved broadly but not specifically. You should've checked with us again!' – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *Where even though expenditures were approved, when it came down to it and we actually spent the money then they would scrutinize and say, 'No, no, no, that's not what we meant.' So those were months-long delays [in receiving reimbursements]. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *There was one expense report where we didn't get reimbursed … It was a line item in the budget that was approved. Granted, it was in the wrong area, but MDE didn't catch it to tell us that. They approved it. And so then when it was spent … then they caught that it was in the wrong line and we didn't get reimbursed and that had to come out of [general education funding]. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

A few start-up subgrantees noted that there have been delays in obtaining approval for budget amendments, and over half of start-up subgrantees along with one expansion/replication subgrantee perceived delayed reimbursements from MDE to be a challenge (Figure 35). These subgrantees expressed that delays can impact their cash flow and subsequently can impact how they use their CSP funding. In general, subgrantees said that the typical time frame for receiving reimbursements was a month or slightly longer. When asked about these timelines, one start-up subgrantee said:

> *When you don't have funding available to pay vendors right away and need to wait for reimbursement—that time lag can, put a lot of stress on relationships between vendors and the schools. … the process for getting reimbursed through the CSP is so slow, you can end up*

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[54] MDE confirmed via email on May 3, 2022, that there were two instances where MDE changed grant policies in April and June of 2020, in response to federal guidance and instruction.

putting yourself in financial harm's way … Because of the timelines and expectations, revisions that would take 30 days or reimbursements that could take 30 days, so you're looking at a 60-day turnaround on certain things. And not having access to capital or funds to help … bridge that gap. It's been approved, okay, great, go buy it. But we have to sit there and wait for reimbursement from MDE to then order to then finally pay the vendor.

Although this is the expected timeframe for MDE processing, subgrantees report that receiving reimbursements more quickly would help with paying vendors in a timely fashion, making additional necessary purchases and/or to avoid taking out a line of credit with a bank. [55]

One subgrantee said that, due to the length of time for obtaining approval for a budget amendment, they have paid for allowable CSP items with their general education funding. Another subgrantee said that sometimes a vendor may have a good deal (for example, discounted tablets or laptops) and they cannot take advantage of the deal because it takes too long to submit a budget revision and obtain approval. A couple of subgrantees also noted that questions from MDE can cause additional delays to the process. If subgrantees do not have sufficient cash, they cannot make additional purchases for items included in their CSP budget until they have received reimbursement from previously purchased items. One subgrantee said that they have taken out a line of credit to pay vendors due to reimbursement processing time.

Figure 35: Subgrantee Perceived Impacts of Budget and Reimbursement Delays

Theme	Quote
Time for Reimbursement	*You're thinking that when you submit … within a week or two, within a week you can get the money so that you can pay those vendors. And sometimes it takes longer. … maybe it's an issue with me, but it could be a process in MDE—not only the CSP team—but you have to go through the accounting and … it goes through multiple individuals, multiple departments maybe. If that process can be shortened, I think it would be important as well. … I would say a month. Maybe … a little bit over a month sometimes [to get reimbursed]. – Start-up Subgrantee* *Last summer it was, from the planning year to the implementation year 1, the reimbursements were a little bit slow and that made it difficult because obviously we have to spend the money to get reimbursed … so, it makes it very tricky when you're starting a school … I don't remember what it was, but it was definitely over 30 days. Usually, they have 30 days to refund you … I would say it was at least 2 months. – Start-up Subgrantee*

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[55] The 30-day timeline was confirmed in *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), New Grantee Training,* April 2021.

Theme	Quote
Cash Flow Impacts	*The main challenge working with the CSP [is] its reimbursement basis. So, you need to have working capital in the account to spend the money to get the money back. So that's a big difference because if you spend $25,000, you need to have the $25,000 on your bank account. … But we cannot spend more money because we did not have enough cash in our bank account. … we have to submit the report [to MDE], they have to accept it, they have to ask … questions. It drags down the process but it's part of the reimbursement system, it's part of the rules you have to follow. – Start-up Subgrantee* *But the reimbursement payments for the CSP seem to be on the back burner and the last things that get paid. What that means then is we've had to take out a line of credit from a bank, and that means that we've got some fairly significant interest payments that we have to pay that cannot be paid with CSP … It's like we're doing what we're supposed to do, and yet we've got to wait a month or longer just to get paid on something that's like … Luckily, we have a great bank, and we have a great relationship with our bank. But if we didn't, we would not be getting paid on time. It would just be a mess. – Start-up Subgrantee* *We had to rehash is this allowable, is it unallowable ... it just added a lot of time and back and forth. And our school was really fortunate to have access to other sources of funding … I could just imagine that if a charter school didn't have access to those kinds of funding sources, from a cash flow standpoint, the significant delays in receiving reimbursements could cause incredible challenges including missing payroll and things like that. – Start-up Subgrantee* *If you are submitting a reimbursement request every 30 days, say, and they have a question**,** but they don't have to get that question back to you for 30 days and then you respond to that and then they still have another 30 days after that response to actually get you the funding—unless you have a really robust cash balance that is unrelated to CSP, which no new schools generally [have], it's really hard. – Start-up Subgrantee* *You throw in a big honking grant for which we're grateful. But we're having to put the cash out and then get reimbursed, it added to our cash flow stress for 3 years … We have a line of credit with the local bank. So it comes in handy when we're in the midst of a grant like this. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Theme	Quote
Use Other Funds	*Then once you get the approval and the approval does not take 1 day, it takes weeks, sometimes months. I think with the process they have 30 days to give us the approval I guess, if I am not mistaken, but that's what it is. It can change lives. So sometimes physically, we as [our financial consultant] mentioned, purchased some items that I know is allowable under the CSP grant because of the time and now we are paying it from a general fund and we have shortage somewhere. So, the process is a little bit, sometimes I am tired or don't have much time to manage that. So, I just go ahead and buy it from the general fund. I don't know what to do after that. – Start-up Subgrantee*

About half of the start-up subgrantees and a couple of expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed reported that they had at least one reimbursement request rejected. For some of these start-up subgrantees, the rejected request was due to a salary-related issue (for example, ability to use CSP funding to pay for staff professional development, curriculum development or marketing).

Although a number of subgrantees identified challenges, some start-up subgrantees interviewed noted that none of their reimbursements were rejected and one said that they had no delays with being reimbursed:

> *We received the reimbursements probably in a couple weeks, especially for the implementation 1 period. It was lightning fast. … The reimbursement process was very easy … they were generally approved within a couple weeks; we received the money in a couple weeks … after submitting the reimbursement requests.*

In addition to MDE support for the budget and reimbursement processes, over half of the start-up subgrantees and most of the expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed said that they had a third-party financial services firm and/or accountant who they rely on for support.

A staff member from a financial services firm has worked with several charter schools and noted that subgrantees responsible for managing CSP funds need more training, but also expressed that it is hard for these individuals to take in all the information. Furthermore, this staff member noted that not all financial service firms have expertise in CSP grants:

> *It gets tough as a director being the sole person at the school in charge of everything. Even if [MDE] provided a lot of training, I think it would be difficult for the director to soak everything in and really feel comfortable to implement everything. Unfortunately, in Minnesota some of the competing firms of mine are more along the lines of bookkeepers versus accountants and financial advisers that really know the CSP grant in and out. I've taken over schools in the past where their CSP grants, things were getting denied, [they] were just a mess because the director didn't have enough training from the state. And then ultimately the service provider just didn't have the expertise and knowledge of the CSP grant. … I've been doing this a long time, so I understand a lot of the complexities. But*

> *unfortunately, there's some support out there that [doesn't] have the same type of knowledge.*

Monitoring

MDE conducts program and fiscal monitoring of all subgrantees. Monitoring frequency is determined by grant amount; grants between $50,000 and $250,000 require monitoring at least once during the grant period while grants of over $250,000 are subject to program and fiscal monitoring annually. All CSP grants meet this threshold and are required to engage in annual monitoring.[56] During this visit, the MDE Charter Center staff will discuss how each subgrantee school is progressing in meeting their CSP goals and objectives and provide TA to the subgrantee.[57]

Program monitoring involves an on-site visit or desk review, during which monitors and key subgrantee staff discuss strategies for implementing the goals laid out in the grant application including the implementation of planned education models, maintenance of proper records and inventory requirements and overall adherence to grant requirements.[58]

MDE Charter Center staff discuss progress towards goals and objectives with subgrantee staff, including the school's CSP grant manager and perhaps the board chair and school authorizer. The MDE Charter Center staff member conducting the review completes a grant monitoring form, which includes questions about the ongoing implementation of the school model, retention of key documents for CSP grant administration and reimbursement process feedback, among other topics. Upon completion of the monitoring process, the MDE Charter Center staff member provides feedback on any lack of compliance with policies or statutes. If there is evidence of noncompliance, MDE sends official letters to subgrantees and their authorizers to request that these issues are promptly remedied.

The fiscal monitoring process, or financial reconciliation, requires subgrantees to complete and submit a fiscal monitoring tool prior to having a discussion with the MDE grant specialist or other authorized representative.[59] This fiscal monitoring tool includes instructions and a form for subgrantees to enter data. MDE requests that subgrantees submit requested information via the tool within 3 weeks, after which the Grant Services team reviews the information and works with authorized school staff to answer questions or request more data. The fiscal monitoring process concludes when MDE has completed its review, conducted a final phone call with the subgrantee and sent a final closeout letter.

Many of the subgrantees (start-up – 63%; expansion/replication – 83%) agreed that MDE provided clear guidance on the program monitoring process, and most subgrantees (start-up – 74%; expansion/replication – 50%) agreed that MDE provided clear guidance on the fiscal monitoring process. However, when these responses were examined based on whether subgrantees have already participated in program monitoring or fiscal monitoring, results differed. All subgrantees who had participated in program monitoring (n=10, 100%) agreed that MDE provided clear guidance on the

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[56] Information obtained via email from the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center on Aug. 13, 2020.
[57] Page 13, *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), General Overview for CSP Grantees,* updated June 2020
[58] *Federal Charter Schools Program Grant Monitoring Form*
[59] Information obtained via email from the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center on Aug. 31, 2020.

process, and all subgrantees who had participated in fiscal monitoring (n=12, 100%) agreed that MDE provided clear guidance on the process (Figure 36). Most subgrantees who have not yet participated in program monitoring (n=9) or fiscal monitoring (n=7) selected neither agree nor disagree or disagreed that they have been provided clear guidance, indicating that subgrantees may fully understand the process only *after* participating.

Figure 36. Subgrantee Agreement with Items About Monitoring Processes
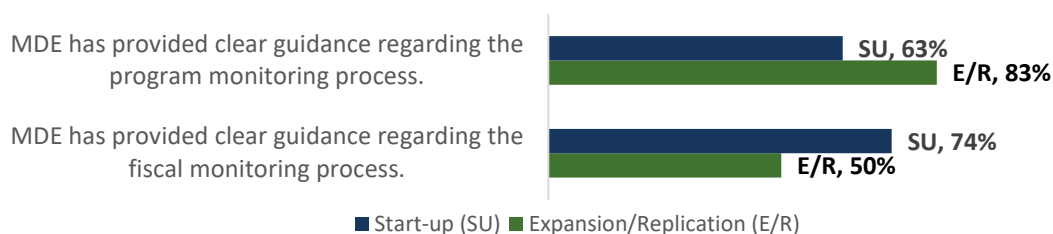
Subgrantees who participated in interviews were asked if they were monitored and their perspectives about this process. Most subgrantees stated that they had been monitored, but a few were not sure if they had been monitored. One of these subgrantees said that it would be helpful to obtain more information about the monitoring process.

A couple of start-up and one expansion/replication subgrantees noted that the monitoring process was good; however, comments about monitoring were mostly neutral: half of start-up subgrantees and almost all expansion/replication subgrantees acknowledged that they had been through the process, but did not make positive or negative comments about it. A few grantees said they received feedback from MDE as a part of the monitoring process. A couple subgrantees said that feedback was positive or satisfactory, while a couple others recalled feedback with regards to future submissions (for example, submitting timely reimbursement requests). None of the subgrantees reported any overall challenges with the monitoring process itself, though half of the expansion/replication subgrantees stated that they thought the process was slightly tedious and could have been run more efficiently.

One grantee said that MDE webinars have been useful for learning about the monitoring process:

> *[MDE] had some meetings, I believe I attended right after we received the grant to walk through some of the materials that MDE uses to help to monitor the grant and budgeting. So those are really helpful, and I would say necessary given the level of detail that MDE required in terms of monitoring. – Start-up Subgrantee*

Reporting

MDE requires all subgrantees to submit several reports and documentation at the end of a project period.[60] These include the annual report (for all subgrantees) and a continuation request (for subgrantees in their planning year or implementation year 1, who are expecting to receive funds for the following project period per their official grant award notification). MDE provides templates and timely

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[60] Page 31, *Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP), New Grantee Training*, April 2021

reminders for all subgrantees to complete this documentation. The annual report includes questions about subgrantees' progress on WBWF priorities, accountability goals and Ready to Open Standards (if applicable). Additionally, the annual report must be submitted with a property inventory record that details all nonconsumable items purchased with CSP funds and their status (location, custody and security information). Continuation requests also include a mid-award risk assessment to ensure that financial policies and practices are in place; if any issues need to be addressed, they become negotiation items for the pending official grant award amendments. The continuation request is a variation on the grant application, and similarly requires a budget for the upcoming project period, authorizer form and current board roster. Upon MDE approval, an official grant award amendment is completed, detailing the award and any revisions since the previous official grant award notification or official grant award amendments.

All start-up subgrantees (100%) and most expansion/replication subgrantees (83%) who were asked about the annual report (those start-up grantees who had completed a year of the subgrant, n=8, and all expansion/replication subgrantees, n=6) agreed that MDE provided clear guidance for the annual report (Figure 37). Additionally, 88% of start-up subgrantees and 83% of expansion/replication subgrantees agreed that MDE provided clear guidance on the continuation report.[61]

Figure 37. Start-Up Subgrantee Agreement with Items about Reporting
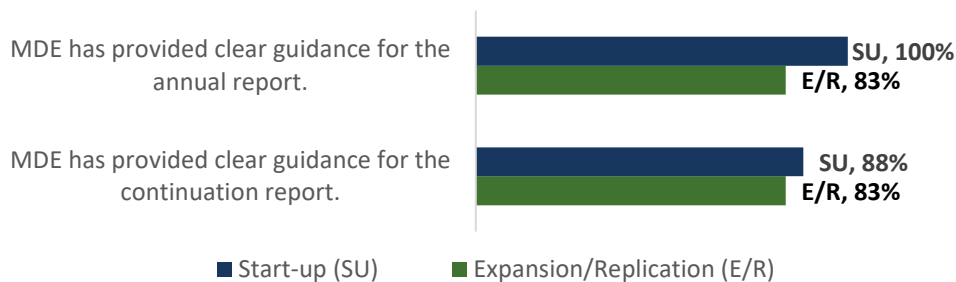
Other State Educational Agency Effective Grant Administration Processes and Resources

In this section, ICF presents findings related to a review of documents published by other state education agencies (SEAs) who received the CSP grant along with Minnesota in 2017. The purpose of this review was to identify effective practices employed by other SEAs that could help inform MDE's future implementation of the CSP grant.

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[61] Due to limited time during the interviews, most subgrantees did not provide feedback about MDE's reporting process.

ICF thoroughly reviewed the public websites of the state education agencies of Indiana,[62] Maryland,[63] Mississippi,[64] New Mexico,[65] Oklahoma,[66] Rhode Island[67] and Texas[68] related to CSP grant administration to find policy documents and resources used by each state in their implementation of the CSP. ICF found in their review that across most states, SEAs published a limited number of documents specific to CSP subgrantees, and some states only had materials related to the request for proposal (RFP) and initial application processes posted on their websites. ICF categorized these documents into relevant categories and evaluated their content to identify areas that could be useful to MDE.

Of the materials that were posted, the majority of resources identified were similar to resources provided by MDE. These included marketing or program resources for prospective subgrantees, subgrantee resources such as a subgrantee handbook or manual, calendars of events and deadlines, RFP materials or rubrics, guidance related to allowable costs and budgets and TA resources for subgrantees. While many of these resources, such as the RFP and any restatement of federal guidelines, are the same across all states, there were several areas where SEAs addressed areas such as budgeting and allowable costs in a different way than MDE. Additionally, there were some practices, such as surveying parents of students in CSP funded schools,[69] which MDE could consider in the future.

One of the SEA documents identified on the Mississippi CSP website provided a good example of an alternative way to provide details in identifying allowable costs.[70] This chart, while similar in some ways to the resources MDE has created, is a good example of a way to convey detailed information relating to allowable costs while remaining organized. The Mississippi CSP document included a description and examples for each funding category along with special instructions and guidance specific to that category. The document also included information relating to when in the grant cycle (planning versus implementation) the costs were allowable and common object codes used in budgeting those items. The document also color-coded different types of allowable expenditures (for example, operations, classroom level, instructional support), The document also included unallowable costs and other conditions impacting allowability. The way the document was organized could be beneficial for subgrantees as it includes a wide variety of allowable expenses and provides examples without being overwhelming for the subgrantees. The Indiana CSP website provided a similar document,[71] however it was not as clearly organized as the previous example.

Overall, ICF determined that a more thorough examination of CSP best practices used by other states would likely need to involve more than an examination of public-facing websites. While some of these documents were helpful and could provide insight for MDE staff for future implementation, additional

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[62] Indiana Department of Education website
[63] Maryland State Department of Education website
[64] Mississippi Chart School Authorizer Board website
[65] New Mexico Public Education Department's New Mexico Charter Schools Program Grant page
[66] Oklahoma Public School Resource Center's web page on the Chart School Program Grant
[67] Rhode Island Department of Education's web page on Rhode Island's Charter Public Schools
[68] Texas Education Agency's web page on Charter School Program Grants
[69] ICF could not determine the content or quality of these surveys, nor could ICF identify any positive outcomes for conducting such a survey.
[70] Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board's *Charter School Project (CSP) Grant Allowable Costs Guide* PDF
[71] Indiana Department of Education's *Cohort 5 Allowable Cost Guidance* PDF

avenues of inquiry, such as interviews with other SEA staff, could be useful in identifying effective practices across states.

Effective MDE Practices

Many of MDE's effective practices, as found in ICF's evaluation, related to clear processes and helpful trainings for subgrantees. Below, ICF lists several specific effective grant practices that were reflected in the data gathered and helped inform recommendations for further improvement.

MDE provides comprehensive resources about the application process. Based on our review of MDE's documents, MDE provides CSP subgrantee applicants with a number of resources, including written instructions detailing eligibility, application components and application scoring information, along with a separate set of instructions that can be used for budget development, webinar training sessions with slide decks and opportunities for Q&A. For the most part, subgrantees reported that the application process was straightforward.

MDE provides comprehensive training to CSP start-up and expansion/replication peer reviewers. Based on our review of MDE's documents, we found that they provide their peer reviewers with a number of documents about the process, including a guidance document that includes information regarding grant goals and policies, specific requirements for different elements of the grant application and other insights regarding how to avoid bias in the scoring of submitted materials.[72] MDE also provides peer review training PowerPoint slides, a rubric and guidance materials for peer reviewers.

MDE provides training and a number of resources to subgrantees as part of the onboarding process. Many of the subgrantees indicated that onboarding training, written guidance documents and/or MDE availability to answer questions was helpful. Many subgrantees also indicated that resources introduced during this initial training period—such as trainings, webinars and online written MDE resources—were very important with regard to effectively carrying out subgrantee activities.

MDE is communicative and responsive to subgrantee needs. Many subgrantees expressed that they felt MDE staff respond promptly to emails, are available for phone calls to respond to their questions and that MDE staff provide responses that are sufficient to meet their needs.

MDE provides clear guidance for subgrantee annual and continuation reports. Nearly all start-up and expansion/replication subgrantees agreed that this guidance is clear.

Recommendations

After reviewing CSP documents and analyzing subgrantee feedback from survey responses and interviews, ICF has developed a list of recommended actions MDE may want to consider to further improve the administration of the CSP grant:

Continue to develop and post additional resources. While current CSP policy and guidance materials are helpful in guiding subgrantees through their grant period, MDE may want to provide additional

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[72] MDE also provides rubrics and inter-rater reliability training to peer reviewers to address subjectivity concerns.

guidance materials in some of the more subjective areas of the grant administration process to minimize confusion and remove issues of interpretation. Specifically, over half of subgrantees suggested that additional detailed examples of allowable costs for different grant categories and what is not allowed for each budget area could help clear up issues with varying policy interpretations.

Creating a subgrantee portal. MDE may want to consider creating a password-protected portal exclusive to subgrantee personnel that includes CSP grant guidance, training materials, instructional videos and other resources. With this added layer of security, CSP can further ensure that sensitive grant information is not available to the public while still addressing subgrantee requests for more detailed resources as mentioned above.

Host additional trainings for subgrantee leaders who join after initial onboarding. To address reported cases where school administrators, grant administration staff, or third-party contractors become involved in the administration of the CSP grant after the initial phase of onboarding, it may be helpful for CSP to hold additional trainings later in the grant period. In these instances, such additional training opportunities could also provide more experienced subgrantee staff the opportunity to refresh on CSP policies and receive any updates throughout the grant period.

Conduct one-on-one meetings with subgrantees during the grant period. While group training has proven helpful for initial onboarding, MDE may want to consider planning more individualized check-in or training meetings after the first months of the grant period have passed. These meetings, as proposed by subgrantees in interviews, could potentially increase subgrantees' knowledge regarding grant administration at their site and may encourage subgrantees to ask more insightful and relevant questions as their plan for the grant solidifies. During this time, subgrantees could share their vision for their school and MDE could provide specific suggestion for how they allocate funds to meet their vision.

Create and distribute specific examples of how CSP funds are used and subgrantee best practices. In order to further address reported issues with interpreting MDE's CSP guidance around allowable costs, we strongly recommend that MDE produce several brief case studies or specific detailed examples on how other schools have used grant funds to start up and operate their schools and how they have followed MDE's CSP guidelines with regard to budgeting and reimbursement policies. This could help remove perceived gray areas in policies and avoid issues of interpretation. In addition to helping clarify how CSP funds could be used, such descriptive examples from the experiences of past subgrantees could also address important other areas of interest such as marketing without using CSP funds, the differences between planning and implementation phases or other relevant areas that could help see policies fully applied.

Find ways to track metrics related to subgrantee communication. In order to further improve the speed and consistency of communication between CSP staff and subgrantees, CSP may want to consider implementing ways to track response times related to subgrantee communications for different grant administration purposes. In this way, MDE could also demonstrate their adherence to communication policies if there are delays that lead to financial consequences for subgrantees as were reported in several subgrantee interviews.

Consider refining the review process for initial budgets. As indicated in subgrantee feedback, some subgrantees experienced situations where budget items that were initially approved were rejected when the time came to reimburse the purchase cost. To help further reduce the number of instances where previously approved budget items are not reimbursed, MDE staff should consider a more comprehensive review of initial subgrantee budgets to ensure that no mistakes or misinterpretations of policy have taken place. Investing additional effort on the front end will reduce complications down the line and decrease the likelihood of subgrantees having their reimbursement requests rejected.

Clarify some aspects of peer review scoring guidelines. While the majority of peer review guidance and relevant resources are strong, there could be room for specifying how a reviewer should determine a point value within each rating category. For example, if a peer reviewer wanted to rate the educational program component of the application as excellent, additional guidance could be given to help them determine whether the applicant should receive 21 or 25 points.

Provide additional guidance for recruitment and outreach. Because the U.S. Department of Education does not consider marketing/recruitment/outreach to be an allowable expense, MDE may want to provide suggestions for other resources or methods for subgrantees to recruit students and their families. Such insights could also contribute to the sustainability of charter schools after the grant period ends.

Charter School Boot Camps

In this section, we address the following evaluation subquestion: **How does Minnesota support subgrantees through the Charter School Boot Camps?**

Our findings and recommendations are based on interviews with start-up subgrantees (n=12)[73] as well as our analysis of feedback surveys administered by MDE.

MDE hosts monthly Charter School Boot Camps, which are open to all charter schools in Minnesota, including CSP subgrantees.[74,75] Boot camps are half-day events that cover a wide range of topics to better prepare charter school leaders for their role in the organization.[76] Topics include, but are not limited to: how to support family and community engagement using Title I funds, how to navigate the MDE website and use its resources, and how to create a bullying prevention policy in accordance with the Safe and Supportive Schools Act.[77]

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[73] As Charter School Boot Camps are designed to assist new school leaders, MDE noted that expansion/replication subgrantees were not as likely to attend them. As a result, we asked start-up subgrantees about their boot camp experiences.

[74] These meetings, which were formerly conducted in-person, have switched to virtual presentation since COVID-19. MDE offers an opportunity to fund representatives from new charter schools and new charter school directors in greater Minnesota to attend the annual on-site Charter School Trainings at MDE.

[75] Boot camps are intended for all charter schools in Minnesota, and therefore do not focus on CSP grant processes. However, previous boot camp topics have included expansion/replication grant application processes.

[76] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, boot camps are currently being held virtually.

[77] Information obtained via phone call with the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center and the Federal Charter Schools Program grants manager on Aug. 13, 2020, and through a review of past boot camp agendas.

MDE advertises Charter School Boot Camps on the MDE Charter School webpage, through a newsletter sent to all charter school leaders and via direct emails to new charter school leaders.[78,79] Information is also provided in monthly updates to MACSA so they can notify founding board members and new leaders.

Although subgrantees are not required to attend the boot camps, based on survey findings, all CSP start-up subgrantees attended at least one boot camp prior to their school's opening, with one subgrantee reporting that they had attended more than 13.[80] On average, respondents had attended four boot camps. Nearly all subgrantees interviewed also stated that they had attended at least one boot camp.[81]

During interviews, start-up subgrantees shared how the boot camps have been helpful; over half had some feedback in this regard (Figure 38). Subgrantees found boot camp sessions particularly helpful for learning more about financial and student reporting systems, lease aid applications, special education services and food programs/nutrition. One subgrantee expressed that the meetings were beneficial for making connections with MDE staff. This subgrantee also noted that sometimes it was necessary to attend a boot camp session on the same topic more than once, just to learn the acronyms and have a deeper understanding of the different topic areas. Other topics that subgrantees found helpful include grant usage, environmental air quality, English learners, title applications, transportation and hiring staff.

A few grantees could not recall specifics from the boot camps and/or confused the boot camps with CSP subgrantee onboarding or other MDE trainings.

Figure 38. Overall Helpfulness of Boot Camps

Theme	Quotes
Boot Camps Were Well Received	*I think over the years I've probably attended all the various topics. And I would say the main takeaway from the boot camps is how wonderful [they are] ... [the boot camps] really cover the full life cycle of charter schools and all the various reporting requirements and things to be aware of. So rather than pointing out one specific topic, I think the fact that there's a full robust professional development learning program that covers the various specialty areas is really important and super helpful. And I know some of our teacher leaders also attended some of those boot camps and found them very helpful.* *[Charter School Boot Camps] are helpful. Because even though you know it's long … it's very informative. ... Boot camps are good … they're very good trainings that they have … You know, honestly, because I was very selective, every boot camp that I go [to] is helpful.*

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[78] See [MDE's Charter School Boot Camp web page](#)
[79] Information obtained via email from the MDE supervisor for the Charter School Center on Aug. 31, 2020.
[80] The survey data was collected in 2020 and it is possible this count was higher for the 2021–2022 school year.
[81] One subgrantee interviewed was not aware of the boot camps.

Theme	Quotes
Lease Aid Application	*The lease aide application is very meticulous … [MDE will] tell you exactly how to do, what to expect, how your application can't be … returned. … All the pitfalls and hows and whens, to dos and not-to-dos—[the boot camp was] very helpful.*
Reporting Systems	*So [Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System] MARSS is our student reporting system and UFARS is our financial reporting system and structure … I've attended MARSS and UFARS reporting [boot camps]; that was also hugely beneficial just because of the technical aspects.*
Special Education	*I think we had some things with special education, which was helpful.*
Food services Program, Nutrition, Meals	*I think if they're there early enough [at the boot camps] in your planning process, the food service topics are critical as you're trying to figure out what kind of food service program you're going to operate.*

MDE administers feedback surveys to participants at the end of each boot camp. Although MDE asks participants for input on future boot camp topics through boot camp evaluation surveys, their surveys do not assess how attendees have increased their knowledge or capacity through attending these sessions. The subgrantee survey did ask about these topics, to better understand how MDE's boot camps have supported charter school leaders.

Specifically, subgrantees were asked on the survey how boot camps have increased their knowledge and capacity for planning and operating their schools. Most subgrantees who received funding for a planning year (n=18) agreed that the boot camps helped increase their knowledge and capacity in planning for their school (88%) (Figure 39). Similarly, most subgrantees whose schools are in operation (n=14) agreed that boot camps helped increase their knowledge and capacity in operating their school (79%).

Figure 39. Start-Up Subgrantee Agreement with Items About Charter School Boot Camps

Increasing my knowledge and capacity for planning (n=18)	SU, 88%
Increasing my knowledge and capacity for operating (n=14)	SU, 79%
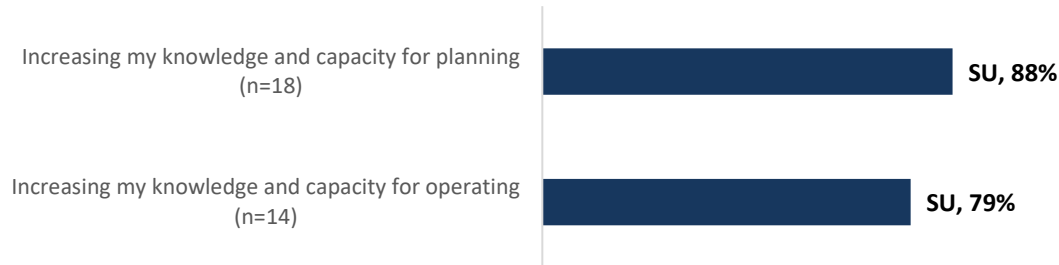
During the interviews, we asked subgrantees for suggestions on topics related to the Boot Camps. None of the subgrantees had specific topics, although one grantee expressed that there is a lot that MDE doesn't cover about charter school operations.

> *I think there's a ton about actual charter school operations that MDE doesn't [cover], they might answer a question if you called and asked but they don't necessarily provide training on. And the operations is not usually a category that people that are excited about planning and launching a charter school hold a lot of expertise in. So, a lot of times I think there's a gap there.[82]*

MDE does not post their boot camp slide decks online; however, based on communication with MDE staff, MDE reported that they provide slide decks and handouts to charter school leaders who attend monthly sessions as well as electronic links to those who attend virtually. The materials are also available for nonattendees who request them. One subgrantee said that it would be helpful to have access to materials from the boot camps posted on the MDE website:

> *Each [boot camp] subject had a ton of information that there's no way one human being was going to absorb all that, you know. So … I always think it'd be great to have MDE just have a part on … their site that says Boot Camp Reference Page … where you can go back and look at all the materials and information that was handed out during those boot camps.*

Subgrantees were also asked in the survey if boot camps were scheduled at times when they were able to attend. Two-thirds of subgrantees (68%) agreed that boot camps have been scheduled at times when they could attend. Subgrantees were also asked during the interviews if they encountered any logistical challenges with attending the boot camps in-person (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). Most subgrantees did not report any barriers to attending, and two said:

> *I am able to attend in person very easily and I think that should be available to everyone because of the benefits of having that time in person.*

> *No [barriers to attending in person]. It was perfectly fine where it was located, and the scheduling was ahead of time.*

A few subgrantees expressed that they prefer in-person boot camps as opposed to the virtual boot camps, while another expressed a preference for virtual. One subgrantee noted that they would plan to

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[82] MDE's goal with the boot camps is to help prepare charter school leaders for their role in the organization, not necessarily teach individuals every aspect of how to plan and operate a charter school.

go in person if MDE resumes in-person boot camps, but also "appreciates the ability to do it virtually." One grantee mentioned that it has been difficult to attend the boot camps due to a busy schedule, but still expressed a preference for in-person boot camps.

Summary

Boot camps provide an opportunity for MDE to further support new school leaders and instruct them in different aspects of running a charter school. They train and instruct leaders on a variety of subjects from the use of Title I funds to how to hire staff and assist in making connections between leaders as well as between leaders and MDE staff.

Recommendations

After reviewing information and data gathered related to Charter School Boot Camps, ICF recommends MDE consider the following to further improve their efforts to support subgrantees:

Post resources and materials from the boot camps on the MDE website. Reference materials could assist new leaders in retaining knowledge gained in trainings and help disperse knowledge to other subgrantee staff members.

Offer in-person boot camps when allowable considering MDE's COVID-19 guidelines. Such in-person interactions could further assist in networking and participant engagement.

World's Best Workforce (WBWF)

The WBWF was developed in 2013 to ensure that school districts and charter schools in Minnesota enhance student achievement through teaching and learning supports.[83] School boards that govern districts and charter schools are required to develop comprehensive, long-term strategic plans that address the following five WBWF goals:

1. All children are ready for school.
2. All third-graders can read at grade level.
3. All racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed.
4. All students are ready for career and college.
5. All students graduate from high school.[84]

MDE is also required to report on progress in key areas related to WBWF to the U.S. Department of Education to demonstrate progress in areas like providing TA sessions, increasing submission rates of WBWF summaries and subgrantee progress towards reaching WBWF goals.[85] Throughout the grant period, MDE has provided different types of training and support to subgrantees with regard to WBWF goals and reports.[86] From 2017 through July of 2019, MDE partnered with Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest to co-host trainings as a part of a 2-year project. After that period, and as a result of staff turnover at MDE, no large training sessions were held and MDE opted to employ smaller, 2-hour

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[83] Minnesota Statutes 2021, section 120B.11
[84] MDE Website (https://education.mn.gov/mde/dse/wbwf/)
[85] U.S. Department of Education *Grant Performance Report (ED 524B) Project Status Chart*, 2022
[86] From MDE correspondence on Aug. 24, 2020

sessions for any school that requested additional assistance according to a "just in time" model as the December 2020 deadline for WBWF reports approached. Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no trainings held during the 2020–2021 school year, but starting in June 2021, WBWF training sessions were again hosted regularly during the 2021–2022 school year for subgrantees who signed up to attend.[87]

MDE conducts these trainings for key staff of subgrantee charter schools to assist subgrantees in setting and tracking SMART goals and including that data in their *WBWF Strategic Plan*.[88] These strategic plans must include district goals and campus goals, a process for measuring student progress, a system for reviewing and evaluating curricular and instructional effectiveness, improvement strategies, effective education practices and an annual budget.[89] MDE has offered direct and indirect support opportunities throughout the academic years of the grant period. For example, direct support opportunities have included virtual and in-person training, webinars, workshops, and orientations both in groups and for specific campuses. Indirect support includes sharing pertinent resources and facilitating networking opportunities between districts and charter school leaders. Currently, WBWF training sessions are open to all school leaders and there are no requirements to attend.[90]

In this section we will address the following research question: **How does Minnesota support subgrantees in achieving WBWF goals?** (Objective 2)

To address this question, ICF reviewed WBWF documents and surveyed subgrantees to determine whether they had attended WBWF trainings and gauge whether they believed the trainings were helpful. ICF then interviewed subgrantees to gather additional narrative details related to subgrantee experiences with WBWF trainings and resources. After initial findings from start-up subgrantees, both survey items and interview questions were updated for expansion/replication subgrantee data gathering in order to understand the full picture of subgrantees' experience with WBWF. In this section, ICF will discuss findings related to subgrantee attendance, MDE trainings and resources related to WBWF as well as other supports subgrantees leveraged in creating their SMART goals.

Prior Experience in Writing WBWF SMART Goals

At the time of the interviews, some of the start-up subgrantees and all the expansion/replication subgrantees had experience writing WBWF goals, plans/reports, reviewing other schools' WBWF plans or experience with writing SMART goals more generally. A few subgrantees stated that they either had experience writing SMART goals as part of their charter applications submitted to their authorizers and/or using SMART goals from their charter application as their official WBWF SMART goals. Referencing this use of goals in multiple places, one subgrantee said:

> I wrote our WBWF in [the] annual report this fall … We had to write those goals when we applied to [the] authorizer for our school. So those are the goals that we used, so they were already written. And then we used those same goals when we applied for CSP as well

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[87] From MDE correspondence on May 9, 2022.
[88] Read MDE's *What is World's Best Workforce (WBWF)?* PDF
[89] MDE's World's Best Workforce website page has more details.
[90] From MDE correspondence on May 9, 2022.

Subgrantee WBWF Training Attendance

Subgrantees were asked during the survey and interviews about the number of WBWF sessions they attended. There were some differences in survey and interview responses related to start-up subgrantees' recollections of whether they had previously attended WBWF training sessions. Although subgrantees are not required to attend WBWF training sessions, based on survey findings, approximately half, or nine, of the CSP start-up grantees (47%) remembered attending at least one WBWF training session since 2017, with one respondent indicating they participated in more than six. Among the 12 start-up subgrantees interviewed, most of the subgrantees reported that they had not attended or could not recall attending a WBWF training. Two of these subgrantees said that they had never heard of the training. Another subgrantee noted that they "vaguely remember emails" about the training. Among the few start-up subgrantees who attended the training, one could not recall what specific training they attended and another stated that they attended a few years ago. All but one expansion/replication subgrantee (83%) reported attending at least one WBWF training and described their experiences in subsequent interviews.

MDE WBWF Training and Resources

When asked about the extent to which they found WBWF trainings to be helpful, most of the nine start-up subgrantees surveyed who had attended at least one training responded that they found the training(s) to be very helpful, helpful or somewhat helpful (88%) in increasing their ability to write SMART goals (Figure 40). Sixty percent of expansion/replication subgrantees also agreed that these trainings were helpful (Figure 41).

Figure 40: Start-Up Subgrantee Perspective on the Helpfulness of WBWF Trainings

How helpful, if at all, have WBWF trainings been for increasing your ability to write SMART goals? (n=9)

| VH, 22% | H, 22% | SH, 44% | 88% |

VH = Very helpful H = Helpful SH = Somewhat helpful
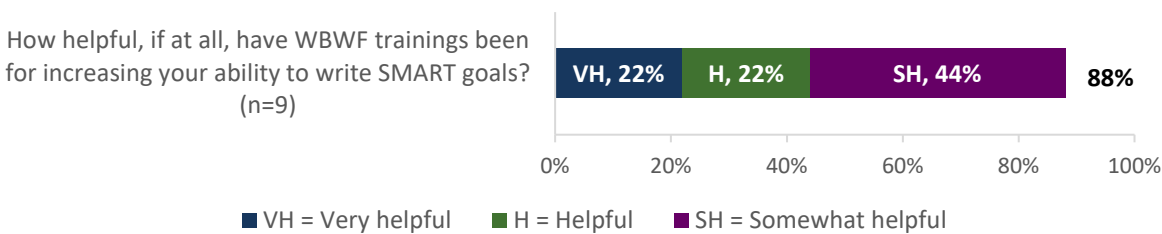
Figure 41: Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Perspective on the Helpfulness of WBWF Trainings

Trainings have been helpful in increasing my ability to write SMART goals. (n=5) — 60%

A = Agree
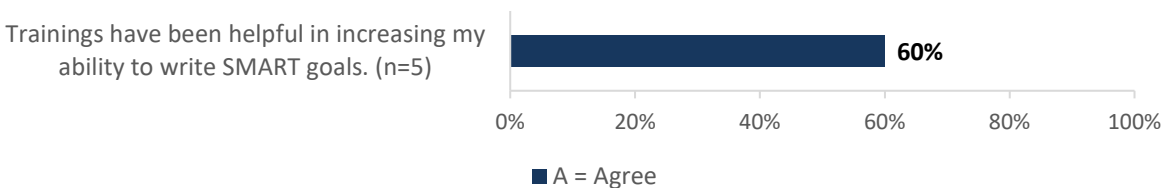
Subgrantees interviewed also provided feedback about MDE WBWF training and resources (Figure 42). One start-up subgrantee noted that the training was helpful, while a couple of start-up subgrantees said

they were confused about what would be expected of them during their first year of operation (with regard to WBWF requirements).

Although most start-up subgrantees indicated in interviews that they had not attended MDE's WBWF training, more than half of these subgrantees had used WBWF resources found on MDE's website. A few of the start-up subgrantees and one expansion/replication subgrantee explicitly noted that the resources were helpful. A couple of subgrantees said that they use the resources but rely more heavily on external support (see section below on other resources). One start-up subgrantee noted that an in-person or virtual training would be better than having to review documents from the website. Two start-up subgrantees explicitly stated that they had not used any of MDE's WBWF resources.

Most expansion/replication subgrantees expressed that they generally have mastered the goal-writing principles of WBWF and no longer feel the trainings are necessary.

Figure 42. Subgrantee Feedback on MDE WBWF Support

Theme	Quotes
Positive Feedback	*I remember [from the WBWF training], learning to navigate the templates that MDE has provided to school districts in regard to writing your goals. That's the biggest piece for us. Not necessarily writing the summary report but deciding on the district goals and how to write it in a language that reflects the expectations of MDE. How those goals are specific, attainable, measurable at that time. Learning about that stuff and how to navigate some of those examples was quite helpful. – Start-up Subgrantee* *MDE's website was the main resource [in helping to write SMART goals]. – Start-up Subgrantee* *I actually tried to look out for resources from MDE and then you know I had to learn how to incorporate those resources into the [WBWF] goals. – Start-up Subgrantee* *[Learned about the WBWF process through] training and just reading the World's Best Workforce ... [the] guide that's put out by MDE ... most of what I learned I just learned from reading the guide. – Start-up Subgrantee*

Theme	Quotes
Constructive Feedback	*I remember being really confused about what new schools are supposed to do [with regard to WBWF reporting]. Because the timing seems unclear and then you ask somebody at MDE, and depending on who you ask at MDE you might get a different answer ... You usually haven't had a lot of data to be able to identify any kind of pattern or needs and then make a plan to address them because you're brand new. So, you still have to write this report. … I recall being very confused about what I was supposed to be identifying in a first-year school, to be able to report on. – Start-up Subgrantee* *There's a site on MDE [with WBWF resources] which is a kind of ... it's not that helpful. I mean, it kind of gives you a template. It says you need to answer this question, this question—but I just recall thinking it's too vague. It's not really helping me understand what I need to write here. – Start-up Subgrantee*
Training May Not Be Necessary	*I think [we] struggle with the relevancy for the work we do and the WBWF report. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *I go to those every year as part of my role is I write the WBWF report every year and they're really just a Q&A session … When they used to do them in person at MDE years ago, they were helpful because they actually went through information. But as an educated person I know how to write a SMART goal, so I don't really need a training on that. But they're kind of required. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee* *I don't want to sound, like, snotty but WBWF seems like something we just have to do to check a box, because we do it in … much more depth, like, in various ways throughout our network. But we can't present those ways; we have to do it in the way they want. – Expansion/Replication Subgrantee*

Other Resources Used for Writing SMART Goals

Almost half of the start-up subgrantees and a couple of expansion/replication subgrantees shared that they have received support from their authorizers in writing SMART goals in the form of training, coaching or in writing their charter school application contract. One subgrantee stated that they hired an outside vendor to help with the WBWF SMART goal writing process.

A couple of the subgrantees said that they referred to other schools' WBWF plans to help with writing SMART goals and developing their own plans. One subgrantee said:

> *Since I know these [WBWF reports] … are published on school's websites, I went ahead and identified a couple high achieving schools … checked their websites, found their WBWF reports and analyzed them … learned from their best practices. … It was really helpful in creating our own goals or directing our efforts in creating these [WBWF SMART] goals.*

Confidence in Writing WBWF SMART Goals

When asked in the survey about the extent to which subgrantees were confident about their abilities to write WBWF SMART goals, 95% of start-up subgrantees responded that they were very confident, confident or somewhat confident (Figure 43). All expansion/replication subgrantees also either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident writing SMART goals (Figure 44).

Half of the start-up subgrantees and all expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed indicated that they are comfortable with writing the WBWF SMART goals and/or do not need any additional support from MDE to improve their ability to write SMART goals.

Figure 43. Start-Up Subgrantee Self-Perceptions of Relative Confidence for Items Related to WBWF SMART Goals

How confident are you, if at all, about your ability to write WBWF SMART goals? (n=19)

VC, 16%   C, 42%   SC, 37%   **95%**

VC = Very confident   C = Confident   SC = Somewhat confident
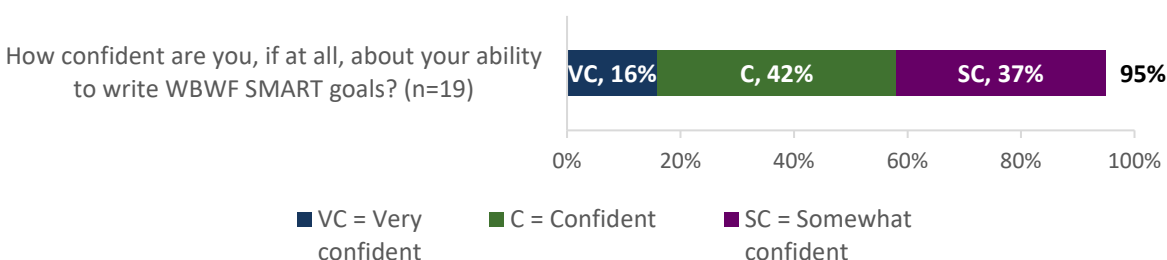
Figure 44. Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Self-Perceptions of Relative Confidence for Items Related to WBWF SMART Goals

I am confident in my ability to write WBWF SMART goals. (n=6)

SA, 50%   A, 50%   **100%**

SA = Strongly Agree   A = Agree
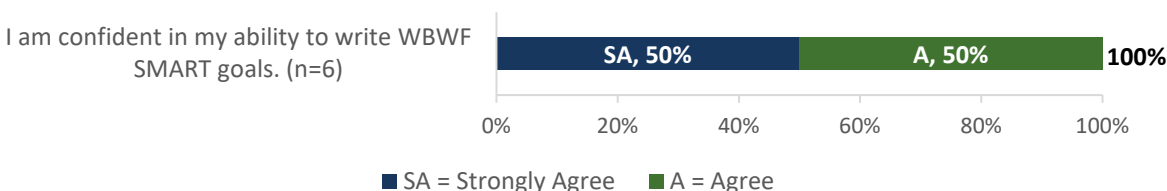
Two start-up subgrantees provided some recommendations for improving MDE support for increasing their ability to write WBWF SMART goals (Figure 45). One subgrantee expressed that they would like more examples and another subgrantee mentioned that in-person or virtual trainings would be helpful.

Figure 45. Additional Support for Writing WBWF SMART Goals

Theme	Quotes
WBWF SMART Goal Examples[91]	*I am hoping that they have examples of … successful or acceptable World's Best Workforce goals. And a variety because, especially with charter schools, they're very different. I guess they've changed what [and] how they've been doing it since I started writing these. I don't know how long they've been around but probably almost 10 years now, so they've changed a little bit. But maybe just some exemplars … I don't even know if they have those, maybe they do but that would probably be what I would go to, to start writing new ones. – Start-up Subgrantee*
In-Person Workshop	*I would say probably a training in person or virtual would be a better way than just posting some documents on the website. … I know that people hate meetings, and it depends on how people run the meetings. It can be an introductory for half a day and then really work on your own—not just listening. You can just [cover], 'Here is the goal that you submitted to the authorizer and MDE.' And bring another team member from your school and how you're going to … so it's just a workshop versus a training. So, I would say a combination between half a day training and half a day workshop to work on your own goals. And somebody to revise these with you from MDE, I think would be awesome. Versus somebody like me, just online finalizing it. I had to have some of my staff reviewing it with me, which is good for them to be exposed to it. But I think a workshop versus a training is better in my mind. – Start-up Subgrantee*

Summary

MDE support in helping charter schools (and subgrantees) with the WBWF SMART goals, has varied throughout the pandemic. MDE assists subgrantees by working to help them become confident in the creation of SMART goals relative to the goals and priorities of WBWF. While trainings were not offered during some years of the grant due to the COVID-19 pandemic, MDE works to provide appropriate training opportunities and has created resources and materials that assist subgrantees in the ongoing process of creating and tracking SMART goals as a part of their strategic plan.

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[91] MDE publishes a resource for writing SMART Goals that includes examples in a document titled *Setting SMART Goals Tool.*

Recommendations

After reviewing information and data gathered related to WBWF, ICF recommends that MDE consider the following to further improve their efforts to support subgrantees:

Ensure that expectations are clear regarding attendance for WBWF trainings. Several subgrantees stated that attendance at WBWF trainings was mandatory, while others had not attended trainings. Clear requirements and expectations could assist in clearing up confusion regarding attendance.

Include opportunities for more experienced subgrantees to build on knowledge when they have mastered the creation of SMART goals. Rather than repeating previously mastered content, more experienced subgrantees could discuss best practices or additional strategies for meeting goals as a part of WBWF trainings.

Develop a tracking system to document attendance by subgrantees at WBWF training sessions. This could further clear up confusion related to whether school leaders have or have not attended, and support data reported to the U.S. Department of Education.

Evaluation Question 2

How well is Minnesota supporting charter schools through board development, education leadership pilot programming, and other TA for charter school leaders aimed at increasing sustainability?

To address this evaluation question, ICF reviewed documents related to the board development and charter school leadership grantees as well as the Charter School Leadership Network (CSLN). ICF also conducted interviews with grantee staff to learn more about the board development training and the charter school leadership pilot program goals, activities and outcomes. Other MDE TA for charter school leaders (e.g., Charter School Boot Camps and WBWF resources) were discussed as part of Evaluation Question 1 and not included in this section. In the sections below, we discuss (a) work conducted by Novation Education Opportunities (NEO) under a Board Development and Training Grant from MDE; (b) work conducted by Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) under a Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program grant from MDE; and (c) the CSLN.

Board Development and Training Grant (Novation Education Opportunities)

MDE awarded Novation Education Opportunities (NEO) the Board Development and Training Grant in April 2018. NEO was tasked with establishing charter school board training, designing educational curriculum (e.g., developing videos and providing resources), and developing a website and space ("board exchange") for board members to access and share resources. In years 2 and 3 of the grant, NEO's goals included expanding resources by developing board training modules, including video production of curriculum and interactive web-based training to be remotely accessible to charter school board members in Minnesota. NEO has an additional goal of increasing resource sharing among board members and tracking increased knowledge and capacity of charter school board leaders as a result of participating in board development courses.

The information in this section is based on ICF's review of the following MDE documents that describe the board development grant program and NEO's goals and objectives:

- NEO grant application
- NEO applications for continuation
- NEO interim progress reports
- NEO final progress reports
- Schools registered with MNcharterboard[92]

In order to gather additional context about NEO's work, in February 2021 ICF interviewed NEO's project manager responsible for overseeing the board development grant and discussed elements of the grant's implementation.

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[92] MNcharterboard is NEO's site that includes board development training modules.

Goals and Objectives

NEO noted in its application that Minnesota Charter School Law identifies the specific roles, responsibilities and training requirements for charter school boards. NEO analyzed data from 140 board meeting observation reports of more than 20 charter school boards and found that despite these requirements "many charter school boards had difficulty with basic policy matters related to their duties." Some examples of policy matters that some boards struggled with included implementing a board development plan; developing a strategic plan and monitoring progress; developing, reviewing and using board bylaws and policies; and the evaluation of leadership.[93]

NEO concluded that a different approach from the 1-day session of charter school board professional development and training is needed, and in its application proposed to "establish and offer training and educational curriculum on key topics related to charter school board governance." NEO noted that through their grant-funded activities, they would help charter schools "use a project management tool (board development planner) to customize their goals, design the professional development plan for meeting them, schedule trainings, store trainings resources, and track and document completion." NEO also noted that charter boards will have "on-demand access to indexed short videos and resources."[94]

Throughout the years of grant implementation, NEO has focused their efforts using the Agile Iterative Approach to product development. Following this model, their goals for each subsequent grant year built on the work of previous years while emphasizing the importance of feedback from participants in planning improvements of course modules as well as in developing additional minicourses.

Goals for each year, as described in progress reports and continuation applications from each year, fell into several key categories:

- Increases in capacity and the hiring of personnel
- Development and improvement of data platforms and websites
- The development of additional courses, videos and resources
- Improving the quality and applicability of courses
- Improving accessibility
- Increasing data collection related to participation and mastery of course concepts
- Increasing outreach to additional board members
- Facilitating knowledge sharing between board members

Program Impacts

According to its annual reports and continuation applications, NEO made impacts in various goal areas as summarized below.[95]

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[93] NEO *Board Development and Training Grant Application*, page 13.
[94] Ibid, page 14.
[95] At the time of writing, NEO had not yet submitted their 2022 progress report, so these impacts are described as of the summer of 2021.

- Trainings that are now available to charter school boards through NEO cover 38 topics, including the use of public funds, evaluating school leadership, and compliance with various state and federal regulations.
- As of December 2020, according to website analytics, there were 1,618 users registered for training, representing 173 of 186 (96%) charter schools in the state. Of those, 385 users had actively engaged in taking at least one course, and those users represented 95 out of 186 (52%) charter schools in Minnesota. A total of 130 users had completed at least five courses using the MNcharterboard site.[96]
- Rather than implementing set pathways, or a set progression of course topics board members would need to take in a set order, NEO determined that a more individualized, pick-and-choose model of selecting courses from a list of offerings better met participant needs based on participant feedback surveys.[97]
- NEO has begun implementing "flip board trainings," where NEO staff allow board members to take a course and then meet to discuss their experience using the platform and address any concerns.
- NEO continues to solicit feedback from participants through end-of-course surveys relating to course content as well as follow-up inquiries over time to see how board members implement and apply what they have learned.
- NEO has leveraged relationships with charter school authorizers to spread awareness of the trainings and resources they make available. They have also encouraged boards to set aside time in board meetings for all members in attendance to participate in a training together.[98]

Sustainability and Quality

While NEO does not track any metrics directly related to the increase in sustainability and quality of charter schools that they can attribute to their board development training resources, NEO staff are confident that their efforts are contributing to these areas for board members who participate in trainings. In their interview with ICF, the program manager stated,

> *If schools are not meeting these basic roles and responsibilities and if they don't understand the financial management and the employment policies and practices at the board level, and there's not that oversight, these things get missed. And then they end up creating issues for the sustainability of the school … It was [NEO's] theory of action that if charter boards are informed so that they can provide appropriate oversight, then many of the issues that have caused problems for schools and ended up even in closure will be avoided.*[99]

Based on usage data, ICF can determine that board members from most Minnesota charter schools have registered for board development courses or are active users on the platform. However, we are not able

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[96] NEO *Final Program Report*, 2021
[97] NEO program manager interview in February 2021.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

to attribute any changes in sustainability or charter school quality directly to the training resources provided by NEO through the board development grant.

Recommendations

Based on our examination of NEO documents and the interview with the NEO program manager, ICF has developed a list of recommended actions MDE may want to consider to further improve the administration of the board development grant:

Consider implementing more advanced data tracking for training platforms. While currently NEO is able to provide metrics related to total usage, there may be potential to gather more specific data related to course completion by subject, by school, or by authorizer. These data could help further improve course content as well as help identify trends across schools and authorizers.

Further improve communication between NEO staff, MDE staff and NEO's external evaluator. NEO is working with its own external evaluator as part of its Board Development and Training Grant. While it was not entirely clear to ICF what role the "external evaluator" hired by NEO played in the implementation of the grant, this relationship could be a potentially underutilized resource. More consistent expectations and more frequent communication with all three parties could help clarify roles and lead to more effective interactions.

Gather more comprehensive user experience data from board members who have completed trainings. While NEO does ask a handful of optional survey questions after board members complete a course, these findings have been leveraged more to improve their training modules as part of the Agile process rather than in evaluating impacts. A more thorough evaluation of program impacts from the perspective of the end user could help make the impacts of the grant clearer.

Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program Grant (SMSU)

In this section, we discuss the Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program (CSLP) that was implemented by Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) as part of the CSP grant. The CSLP program was designed to train future charter school leaders by offering specialized training in school leadership with the goal of improving the "capacity, quality, and sustainability" of charter schools in Minnesota. SMSU was awarded the Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program (CSLP) grant December 3, 2019. MDE executed the Official Grant Award Notification (OGAN) in January 2020.

The following section includes an overview of the first two cohorts of the CSLP.[100] It includes an overview of the program goals, details on the curriculum and specific program components, and various aspects of program implementation. It ends with an analysis of how program staff are assessing

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[100] Cohort 3 of the CSLP is in progress, and there is not current data or feedback pertaining to program implementation.

participant progress in the program, how SMSU is tracking student progress beyond the program, and overall participant feedback on the program.

To analyze program elements and outcomes, ICF reviewed MDE and SMSU documents that describe the school leadership pilot grant program implemented over their grant term (2020–2022), including:

- SMSU's *Charter Schools Education Leadership Application* to MDE

- Email communication between SMSU and MDE

- SMSU's progress reports

- SMSU's curriculum and program documents

- SMSU's participant survey findings

- SMSU marketing and advertising fliers

ICF also conducted an interview with five SMSU program staff in April 2021, including the following team members:

- Graduate program director at SMSU and one of the grant application authors

- Two adjunct professors who are instructors and contribute to curriculum development and the mentorship component of the program

- An adjunct professor who is also the Charter School Leadership Program recruiter

- Program coordinator who is also an SMSU professor and serves as the Charter School Leadership program coordinator

During this interview, ICF asked the SMSU team to describe and provide updates to various program components, including the mentorship program, consultative review team, plans for marketing the program and recruitment of participants. ICF also discussed how they will assess program outcomes and how the program contributes to sustainability of charter schools in the state.

SMSU Program Goals

SMSU's goals for the charter school leadership pilot grant included the following:

- Developing and establishing a sustainable charter school leadership program and curriculum.

- Establishing an advisory council to guide the charter school certificate program (members may include SMSU staff, parents, instructors, and authorizers).

- Developing a charter school leadership mentoring program that includes training and marketing the charter school leadership program to prospective participants.

During the interview, SMSU program staff explained that charter school leaders in Minnesota do not need a principal's license, so their charter school leadership certificate program fills a gap in leadership training. One program staff stated that the program provides, "real life training and leadership … [and] gives them the pathway for further licensure if they want."

SMSU program staff also noted that this program is designed to emulate the K–12 administrative or licensure program by requiring the mentorship/internship program component as well as requiring

participants to complete a portfolio. Although the hour requirement for the mentorship/internship is not as intensive for program participants, SMSU noted that participants are required to work with a mentor so they can shadow and learn from current charter school leaders in a similar way to those who are obtaining a K–12 principal license. More details about the mentorship and portfolio program components are discussed in the sections below.

Charter School Leadership Program and Curriculum

SMSU proposed in their application that they would develop a 19-credit certificate program. SMSU program staff conducted research to identify needed program components for the leadership program, which included examining SMSU's administrative licensure program, identifying types of courses and competencies that are needed for those school leaders, and conducting interviews with charter school leaders.

After assembling a draft of the 19-credit course certificate program, SMSU staff obtained feedback from charter school leaders, made revisions to the curriculum and progressed through the necessary steps at the university to obtain final approval of the Charter School Leadership Certificate Program.[101] The program is completed over three semesters—including a summer term, fall term and spring term—and consists of the courses below.[102]

SEMESTER I	CREDITS
ED 659 Charter School Community, Climate, Culture	3 CR
ED 655 Leadership Mentorship I	1 CR
ED 663 Instruction Leadership I: Mentorship Programs, Classroom Observations, Curriculum, and Assessment	3 CR

SEMESTER II	
ED 650 Technology Integration	1 CR
ED 652 Charter Law & Governance	3 CR
ED 656 Leadership Mentorship II	1 CR

SEMESTER III	
ED 653 Human Resources & Financial Mgmt.	3 CR
ED 664 Instructional Leadership II: School Wide Data Driven Decision Making, Interventions, IL, and SPED	3 CR
ED 657 Leadership Mentorship II & Capstone	1 CR
Total	**19 Credits**

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[101] Steps for approval discussed during the interview with SMSU program staff in April 2021.
[102] This list of courses was included in SMSU's progress report submitted to MDE on Sept. 15, 2020.

Opportunities for Licensure

In its Jan. 15, 2021, progress report, SMSU noted that approval was granted through the SMSU curriculum process to allow the 19 credits from the Charter School Leadership Certificate Program to be added as an area of emphasis for anyone wanting to pursue a master's in education with SMSU. SMSU reiterated during the interviews that students can transfer the full 19 credits from the certificate program toward a master's degree with an emphasis in charter school leadership.

The program made efforts to align some of their coursework with the K–12 Principal Licensure Program. In its February 2022 progress report, SMSU noted they, "have intentionally used specific language in our Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program course competencies to align with the required competencies for an initial K–12 principal's license. Students who complete the Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program can now transfer up to 12 credits toward the K–12 principal's license." SMSU further explained that this alignment will "help strengthen our ability to market to those who want more than just a certificate and we feel as we continue to recruit and grow this program, we will be able to create multiple pathways for charter school leaders."

Recruitment

SMSU was initially going to implement a marketing plan to help recruit participants through quarterly presentations, discussions with authorizers and presenting at a conference to industry leaders. However, COVID-19 restrictions impacted these recruiting efforts, so marketing events took place over Zoom video conferencing. During the interview, adjunct faculty shared that recruitment for the first cohort also included sharing details about the program in their professional networks and identifying prospective students who would be effective leaders.

SMSU faculty shared during the interview that recruitment for the second year included more extensive outreach. For example, the adjunct faculty sent over 4,700 individual emails to charter school teachers and leaders throughout Minnesota, held 17 informational sessions via Zoom and sent direct mail to all Minnesota charter school board chairs and executive directors. They also presented about the benefits of the program at a Minnesota Association of Charter School Authorizers (MACSA) meeting and at a Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) meeting.

Program Advisory Council

In their application, SMSU proposed an advisory council made up of charter school experts and other members such as SMSU leaders, a Minnesota Association of Charter Schools representative, parents, instructors and authorizers to help guide the charter school certificate program. SMSU proposed quarterly meetings to discuss planning and program improvement.

SMSU noted in their January 2021 progress report that the first meeting of this advisory council was held in December 2020, at which time there were 11 members, including Executive Directors of charter schools, SMSU faculty and staff, a MACS representative, and an authorizer. No parents are currently

involved in the advisory council, however SMSU staff said they have extended calls throughout the state to grow the council. The six stated goals for the group included:

- Work to build a strong foundation of support and communication between the charter community at large, charter schools and their administrators/executive directors, prospective leaders and the SMSU programs.

- Identify opportunities for support for prospective candidates and mentor leaders.

- Serve as advocates from the Charter School Education and Leadership Training Pilot Program at SMSU.

- Review final assessment data for each program.

- Review new curriculum and changes to the programs and provide feedback.

- Provide advice for marketing the programs.

Program Participant Demographics

In its application, SMSU proposed to train 20 students per year.[103] Although SMSU has not reached their initial target, they were successful in enrolling 10 students in their first cohort (Summer 2020) and 17 students in their second cohort (Summer 2021). In their July 2022 progress report, SMSU noted that as of that point there were 12 students enrolled in their third cohort.

The first cohort included instructional leaders, classroom teachers and an executive director. The second cohort included students from 13 different charter schools that had more diverse roles, including counselors, teachers, operations managers, principals, executive directors, athletic directors, and business managers. The second cohort of students was also more ethnically diverse; over a third (36%) of students in the second cohort were people of color, compared to zero of the students in the first cohort.

One of MDE's goals was to engage CSP subgrantees in the education leadership pilot. SMSU reported that none of the students in their first cohort represented CSP subgrantees; however, 5 of the 17 students (29%) of the second cohort are affiliated with CSP subgrantees.

Program Components

Mentorship

During the interview, SMSU noted that all students enrolled in the certificate program work with an on-site mentor for a least one semester. The mentors help the students complete various experiences and activities that align to principal competencies. The three SMSU adjunct faculty also oversee the relationships between mentors and students, including holding check-ins with the students, asking about their relationship with the mentor and helping them design their activities to ensure they develop

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[103] SMSU's application submitted September 16, 2019 stated that their marketing plan would help attract 20 students per year.

entry level proficiency in the principal competencies. The SMSU adjunct faculty also hold check-ins with mentors to see how the students are performing and ask them to complete an evaluation at the end of each semester to identify student strengths and opportunities for growth.

Preparation for opening a charter school

ICF asked SMSU program staff how the program helps to prepare their students to plan and open a charter school as a leader/executive director. SMSU program staff shared that "the program does fulfill and meet the need for leaders that are currently working in positions of a charter school and that may go on to be a charter school leader." The staff explained that their culminating activity asks students to write a new charter school application. As part of this activity, students break into two different mock school boards, write an application and submit it to an actual Minnesota authorizer (who agreed to provide feedback) and are then interviewed by the authorizer to better understand the steps "from the foundation of starting a charter school all the way into the implementation."

Diversity, equity and inclusion

With an increased focus on diversity, equity and inclusion nationwide, ICF asked the SMSU program staff about how they incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion within the content areas of the curriculum. SMSU program staff shared that one of their courses focuses on the charter school community, climate and culture and that they "take a dedicated look at how to look at diversity from that individual family approach." The staff also said that they discuss how to close the achievement gap from an instructional leadership perspective. They noted that in future years they will have additional speakers who will help them focus on diversity and equity, noting that these speakers either teach or represent members of the Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) community.

End of program portfolio

SMSU program staff indicated that one program requirement is that student complete an "eFolio"—a Google site that includes activities that align to the principal competencies. The students are also asked to write an *Educational Leadership Belief Statement* that pertains to the competencies. An SMSU adjunct professor then reviews the student's belief statements and their portfolios using a rubric to provide them with feedback.

Assessment of students' knowledge

During our interview with SMSU staff, ICF asked how they measure changes in school leader knowledge beyond their student feedback surveys. SMSU staff said that one way they assess students is through their end-of-program portfolio; one staff member noted that the portfolio "shows the competency pieces" and "shows the experiences that students have had throughout the program."

Another staff member discussed the mock charter school application that students fill out as part of the program:

> [We measure student learning] through that charter school application process, because in that application process it has all the main areas of which we're teaching on from

human resources, governance, learning programs, finance. So we can see over time, we can see at the end what they have. And in that application process we start having conversations with students about where they're at and what they're understanding. … So it's more of an informal piece from the start of the questions that they're doing. And they're submitting their application throughout so we're able to do adjustments in the application itself and get feedback.

Finally, SMSU staff emphasized the importance of the mentorship program, especially in promoting self-reflection among students. One staff member said, "Throughout the mentorship program, they do have to self-assess themselves on the competencies. And it's a 4-point rating scale and then they also write reflection papers that are embedded throughout the courses." By relying on self-reflection and feedback from their mentor, SMSU staff noted, students are simultaneously developing their leadership skills while gaining a valuable resource and mentor who has established themselves in the charter school space.

ICF also asked SMSU staff if they assess changes in their students' educational practices, such as whether they implement something at their school differently based on what they learned through the program. The program staff said they do not measure this systematically, but some students talked about how they went back to their school's leadership team to talk about what they learned and propose potential changes in school practices.

Tracking participants beyond the program

SMSU noted in their application that they would track individuals who complete the certificate program. During our interview, we asked SMSU about their specific plans, and one program staff indicated that they would administer a survey 1 year after participants completed the program to "see where they are [now]." This staff said students have multiple pathways from the program: the opportunity to transfer the credits to a master's degree or apply them towards a K–12 principal licensure and the option to seek out leadership roles at charter schools. At the time of the interview, they noted most students would likely stay in their current position at their charter school.

Professional Charter Leadership Networking Program

In addition to the Charter School Leadership Certificate Program, SMSU also proposed in their application to establish a professional charter leadership networking program. As part of this program "charter school leaders will be mentored and trained on relevant leadership topics." In their proposal, SMSU estimated there would be a minimum of 20 charter school leaders participating each year.

SMSU said they received over 23 applications and selected the first 18 applicants who applied to the program. During the interview, SMSU program staff shared that the current cohort of mentees is diverse, with seven participants representing the BIPOC community, including the Hmong and African American communities.[104] Participants represent seven outstate schools and eight schools in the seven-

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[104] This interview with SMSU program staff took place on 4/14/2021 and reflects the Spring 2021 cohort of mentees. Information about the Spring 2022 cohort of mentees is not detailed in this report.

county Twin Cities metro region. The three SMSU adjunct faculty members each serve as a mentor to six mentees.

The leadership network meets once a month for four hours as a large group, and then SMSU adjunct faculty members meet 1 hour per week with their mentees (sometimes as a small group and sometimes one-on-one).

Five of the participants in this network have since applied for SMSU's Charter School Leadership Certificate Program. One of the SMSU program staff noted:

> *I think the mentorship network program has been a good feeder for the Charter School Leadership Certificate Program. It's kind of an introduction to that. And the relationships that we are building with these mentees have been phenomenal. When we talk about networking, these mentees are learning about each other and networking with each other. And they're reaching out.*

According to SMSU's July 2022 interim progress report, they enrolled 23 participants for the spring 2022 networking program.

Charter School Leadership Certificate Program Participants' Feedback

Throughout their work, SMSU collected data from students enrolled in the Charter School Leadership Program to get feedback on their experiences. Most of this feedback was very positive, although some students did note that at times the work could be overwhelming and more clarity would have been helpful for some assignments.

In their progress reports throughout the grant period, SMSU included feedback from students—for example, in its September 2020 progress report, SMSU noted students rated their overall learning experiences as an average of 2.75 on a 3-point scale, with 3 being excellent. In these progress reports, SMSU provided a number of illustrative quotes from students about their experiences, including the following eight student responses:

> *I have been impressed with the program thus far and have already begun to use items I've created or learned in my position.*

> *I love reading about case studies! It really helps me tie in those experiences with the work I am doing right now.*

> *I am learning a lot from leaders sharing about previous experiences. It has also been meaningful to engage in discussion with leaders from other schools. I would love to gain more knowledge about cultural differences and ways to make a school wholly inclusive.*

> *I have become more aware of the challenges (and successes) of charter schools as we continue working with a mentor already in a leadership role. I have been able to see education from a broader perspective by balancing grad school with a full-time job.*

> *The biggest way I have grown is in my confidence as a leader. The internship [mentorships] portion of this program has allowed me to stretch my wings and be a*

crucial part of the decision-making processes and to help problem-solve some of the obstacles of education during a pandemic.

Facilitators were available and knowledgeable about my leadership journey. They seemed to know my strengths and areas for continued growth. My input about the program facilitation and its goals [was] requested and taken seriously.

Writing my educational leadership belief statement now compared to the beginning has opened my eyes to how I see things and how much I have grown professionally.

I enjoyed the interview with another education director It made me reach out of my comfort zone and get another perspective.

Recommendations

Based on our examination of SMSU documents and the interview with program staff, ICF has developed a list of recommended actions that SMSU or MDE may want to consider to further improve the administration the Charter School Education and Leadership Training pilot program:

Include parents in the Program Advisory Council. In their application, SMSU proposed that the program advisory council would consist of charter school representatives, parents, instructors, and authorizers. However, as of June 2022 no parents are involved in the council. Including parents in the Program Advisory Council will help bring a unique stakeholder perspective to inform how future charter school leaders should be trained in parent communication and engagement.

Add in questions about changes in educational practice to the one-year follow-up survey. SMSU currently administers a survey one year after the participants complete the program. We recommend including questions in this survey pertaining to whether charter school leaders have implemented anything different in their school based on their experience in the pilot program. This will provide MDE with valuable feedback for evaluating the long-term impact of the program.

Charter School Leader Network

MDE's CSLN provides an opportunity for charter school administrators to meet and discuss various topics that are important to effective leadership specific to charter schools. MDE sends notifications of these meetings via an email distribution list of over 250 charter school leaders in various roles who have requested to be added to the list.

These monthly meetings are generally 3 hours long, and administrators earn three continuing education units per session.[105] For the 2021–2022 school year, the Charter Leader Support Network Advisory Team, which consists of various charter leaders from across the state, determined that the topic for the year would be Coaching for Equity and follow the text *Coaching for Equity: Conversations That Change Practice* by Elena Aguilar. Each month, topics would follow several chapters of the text and involve

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[105] *Charter Leader Network 2019–20 Schedule*

discussions led by MDE staff on topics such as transformational coaching, recognizing impact, and moving towards liberty and justice for all. In the past, other topics have included elements of emotional resilience for educators in alignment with *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators* by Elena Aguilar, including themes related to understanding emotion and building community.

To assess the support that MDE provided through this network, ICF reviewed CSLN documents, conducted a survey of subgrantees, and interviewed subgrantees to gather additional narrative details related to subgrantee experiences with CSLN trainings and resources. In this section, ICF will discuss findings related to subgrantee attendance to CSLN events, including some barriers to attendance and the perceived helpfulness of such events.

CSLN Attendance

Of the 19 start-up subgrantees surveyed, 14 responded that they had attended a CSLN event. Among the 12 start-up subgrantees interviewed, a little over half indicated that they attended at least one CSLN event.

All expansion/replication subgrantees interviewed were aware of the CSLN events, and many had attended the events in the past. Of the six expansion/replication subgrantees surveyed, all but one stated that they had attended at least one CSLN event and almost all indicated in interviews that they had experience with these events.

When asked for reasons that they had *not* attended more of the CSLN events, survey respondents most frequently said that they were not aware of them, they did not have sufficient time to attend given other responsibilities or that they had schedule conflicts. Two subgrantees who said that they were not aware of the meetings acknowledged that it is possible that may have received an email from MDE but overlooked it.

> *I might have [received an email about the CSLN events], I got tons of emails, from MDE, from daily report … I don't know for that one if I received a specific [email] that tells me, 'Go to [the Charter School Leader Network].' "*

This subgrantee recommended that MDE highlight vital emails, for example using red to call attention to important information.

Barriers to Attendance

Some expansion/replication subgrantees cited competing priorities that made it difficult to attend CSLN events. One subgrantee cited some redundancy with other similar state-run networking events. Another subgrantee noted that despite the convenience of virtual meetings, it can be difficult to fully separate from day-to-day activities and needs when attending virtually from one's office on campus (for example, staff knocking on the door to ask questions or being asked to address an urgent on-campus matter). One subgrantee also stated that it is particularly difficult to attend meetings at the beginning and end of the school year because of how busy those times of year are for school staff.

Two subgrantees suggested offering several different options for meeting times. Another said that having events outside of regular school hours might make it easier to attend.

Helpfulness of CSLN Events

Of the nine surveyed start-up subgrantees who had attended at least one CSLN event, most found the events very helpful, helpful, or somewhat helpful at increasing their confidence as a school leader (85%), their knowledge and capacity for operating (80%), and their knowledge and capacity for planning (78%) (Figure 46). Of the expansion/replication subgrantees who had attended at least one event, at least half agreed that the event increased their confidence as a school leader (80%), their knowledge and capacity for planning (75%), and their knowledge and capacity for operating (60%) (Figure 47).

Figure 46. Start-Up Subgrantee Feedback on the Helpfulness of CSLN Events
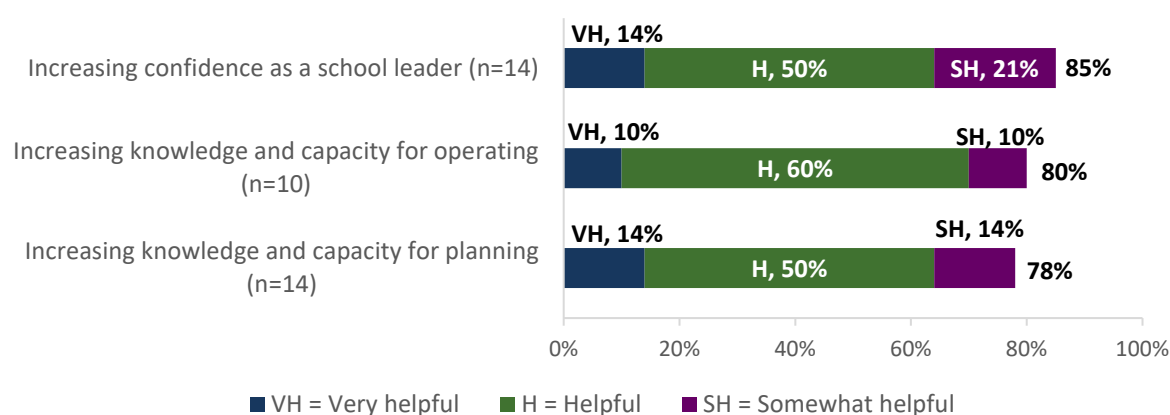
Figure 47. Expansion/Replication Subgrantee Agreement on the Helpfulness of Charter School Leader Network Events in Various Areas
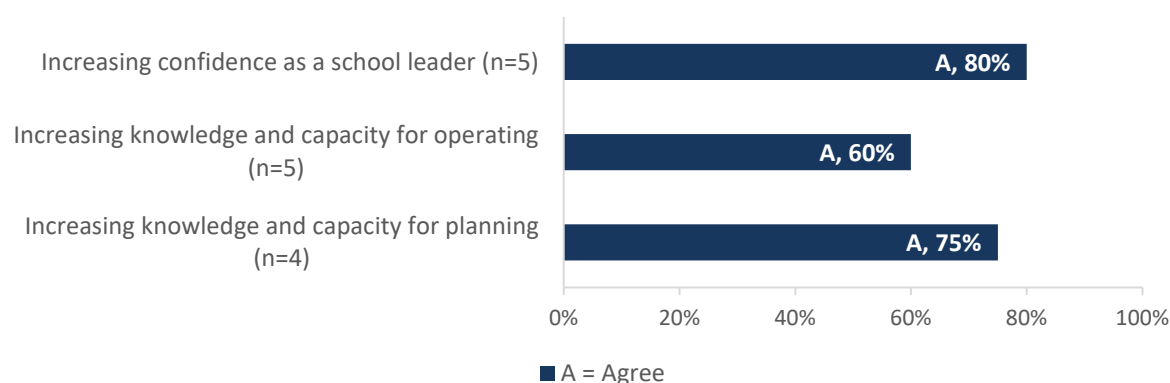
A few start-up subgrantees and most expansion/replication subgrantees who recalled attending the Charter School Leadership Network events indicated that the meetings were helpful for networking, connecting and sharing with other leaders. One start-up subgrantee commented that the events could be valuable for their teacher leaders as well. Two start-up subgrantees valued having conversations on

equity and cultural awareness as a part of these meetings, while one grantee shared that other topics in addition to equity should get more emphasis in these meetings.

Figure 48: Helpful Aspects of Charter School Leadership Network Events

Theme	Quotes
Networking, Connecting and Sharing Resources	*[Charter School Leadership Network Events are] helpful in terms of meeting people and networking. [The MDE Charter School Leadership Facilitator] does a great job of looking out for us as people ... it's been a lot of talking through around being resilient and talking more about your feelings or kind of where you're at and giving some more social-emotional tools just as professionals. And does a lot of breakout rooms and just talking and sharing. So, I wouldn't say it directly impacts our planning by any means, but it helps in just building relationships and a network of leaders.* *What I benefit from is kind of the summaries of those [Charter School Leadership Network] sessions. [The Charter School Leader Network facilitator] … meets monthly, specifically with charter leaders, and facilitates a space for shared learning and really supporting charter leadership.* *I think there's been a lot of great resources [from the Charter School Leadership Network events] and understanding [of] running a school and staying afloat and positive. And now being in the middle of a pandemic there's no blueprint out there that allows you to understand how to maneuver and work through this. So, it's been great sitting in on those trainings to understand how to keep the morale of the whole staff, keeping a positive outlook.* *If you're asking about some of the charter leader support stuff that MDE has done in the past couple years, that has been really high quality professional development. I think we get a lot out of it and it's very meaningful. The people that they have doing those are ... yes, they're engaging, they're helpful, we love those.*
Discussions About Equity	*We come together and they talk about different topics such as cultural issues at schools, cultural awareness, equity and inclusion, leadership.* *I've noticed too that [the MDE Charter School Leadership Network facilitator] is really centered on equity in this next year's sessions. And so I really appreciate that as a focus.* *I think they [CSLN] mostly were focusing on equity in schools and that kind of thing. Which I mean is always important but when you're starting a charter school there's a few things that take precedent at that moment to surviving.*

In summary, subgrantees report that the CSLN provides leaders an opportunity to meet and discuss with other leaders from various charter schools across the state and learn from one another's experiences.

These sessions deliver an opportunity for networking and sharing of best practices among charter school leaders across a variety of important topics.

Recommendations

After reviewing information and data gathered related to the CSLN, ICF recommends MDE consider the following to further improve their efforts to support subgrantees:

Continue to address a variety of topics, especially questions of equity. Subgrantees found these topics helpful and appreciated the chance to discuss sensitive topics with other charter school leaders.

Solicit feedback from potential attendees on the timing of CSLN events. Some subgrantees expressed having difficulty attending meetings after school hours as well as during busy times of the year such as the beginning and end of the school year. Soliciting feedback from participants on a regular basis could help MDE consistently find times where CSLN events could be easier to attend or identify a time for a secondary meeting for those with scheduling conflicts.

Evaluation Question 3

How does the authorizer training support initiative and MDE-led training build authorizer capacity? How does the CSP grant impact authorizer knowledge, capacity and practice?

In this section of our report, we also address each of the following subquestions under Evaluation Question 3:

- What are authorizers' perceptions of how changes in their practices impact quality of their charter schools?
- How has the quality of authorizers changed during the CSP grant term?
- How does the CSP grant impact changes in the authorizer landscape in Minnesota?

To address this research question, we discuss findings from authorizer surveys, interviews and reimbursement requests to get a sense of how authorizers perceived the trainings and conferences to impact their knowledge, capacity and practice. Then we analyzed MAPES Round 1 and 2 data to describe how the quality of authorizers has changed during the CSP grant term. Finally, we analyzed MDE documents related to high-quality charter schools to discuss how the authorizer landscape has changed over the course of the grant.

Perceived CSP Impact on Authorizer Knowledge, Capacity and Practice

During interviews, we asked authorizers to comment on their perceived knowledge gains and changes in capacity and practice based on participation in these activities. We cover these topic areas below. We also look at authorizer feedback on the CSP-funded training reimbursement process, perceived benefits of training and how the training impacted their relationship with schools.

Although we asked authorizers similar questions about the impact of CSP-funded training and MDE-provided training, it is important to acknowledge the inherent differences in these opportunities. Authorizers have some flexibility in seeking CSP reimbursement for training opportunities that they perceive as potentially beneficial for their organizations. These trainings could cover a range of topics and vary in scope (in other words, one-on-one training, regional, national). MDE conferences are held annually, and state authorizers are highly encouraged to attend these sessions.[106] These pre-existing differences between professional development opportunities may influence how authorizers view perceived impact.

Nevertheless, sometimes authorizer staff participating in interviews provided general feedback about the training they had participated in, through CSP-funded trainings provided by MDE, without distinguishing between them; they reflected on the impacts of professional development they had taken part in overall. For example, some authorizers had a hard time pinpointing or isolating specific training content or sessions that directly led to a change in capacity or practice, instead acknowledging that the professional development that they took part in broadly impacted them in a positive way. See below for illustrative quotes.

> We're holding our charter schools to more accountability and we have a system for it. In general, we learned that at our MDE meetings, we learned it at MACSA and then it was heightened at [the National Association of Charter School Authorizers] NACSA.

> I don't in any way want to undermine or in any way disregard the department [MDE conference] sessions … I just view it [CSP-funding and MDE authorizer conferences] as all contributing, pieces contributing to the same thing … it all contributes to the whole. And leaving the department out that if the department were to stop doing what they're doing, I do think that would be a loss, even though I started this conversation by saying I am one of the oldest people so I might get less out of it. But you heard from [the other staff member] how beneficial it was and she's part of my team and I rely on her, so it all does contribute to a quality outcome, which I value.

> It's really hard to be able to point a finger and say, well we've changed this practice because we have attended or learned this from a particular conference … we really are committed to continuous improvement. We pick out ideas in many different places and in many different forms … I don't know that I ever walked away with an 'Ah-ha, we should do this.' I have walked away with 'Yeah, we're on the right track.' And let's build on this idea or this idea that we've learned kind of reinforces what we're doing more than anything. I don't know if that makes sense … but that's how I'd frame it.

All interview participants had participated in MDE authorizer conferences, although newer staff had sometimes participated in fewer sessions. Among authorizers who had been approved for reimbursement of authorizer training through CSP funds, all interview participants had attended at least one such reimbursed training.

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[106] Authorizers were required to attend the MDE conference that was held Jan. 9–10, 2017, but have since then not been required to attend.

In several instances, authorizers have been able to involve other stakeholders (e.g., board members, leadership team members, staff involved in financial oversight) in relevant training opportunities through CSP reimbursement:

> *We went to … the National Charter School Conference in Texas, and I believe that was one of the conferences that we attended that we got some reimbursement for … And one of our board members actually was able to attend that because of the additional funding, which really helped. Especially around finance, it's very important in the board decision-making that they understand the information they're receiving about the charter schools or making decisions about opening.*

CSP Reimbursement Training

Authorizers can apply for eligibility to receive funding support through the CSP grant for participation in professional development.[107] Each authorizer may receive up to $2,500 per year for their staff to attend training. To receive these funds, authorizers must identify a training opportunity of interest and submit a pre-approval form to MDE to confirm the training is appropriate for reimbursement. The pre-approval form includes a brief narrative describing the training of interest, and the proposed budget for participation. Once MDE has provided approval, authorizer staff can participate in the training and incur training-related expenses. To receive reimbursement, a reimbursement request form needs to be completed for MDE review and approval. In the reimbursement request, authorizers are asked to explain how the training has benefited their staff and helped build capacity for effectively supporting charter schools.

As of November 2020, most authorizers (79%) had been approved for at least one training reimbursement request (Figure 49). Over one-third of all authorizers have been approved for three or more requests; one authorizer has received approval for six requests to date. As of July 2022, over half of the authorizers (54%) have been approved for at least three training reimbursement requests. Only two authorizers (15%) have not been approved yet for a reimbursement request.

Figure 49. Percentage of Authorizers with Approved CSP Reimbursement Requests

Number of Approved CSP Requests	November 2020 (Survey Completion) (n=14)	June 2022 (n=13)
None	3 (21%)	2 (15%)
One Request	3 (21%)	1 (8%)
Two Requests	3 (21%)	3 (23%)
Three or More Requests	5 (36%)	7 (54%)

Note: One authorizer withdrew between November 2020 and May 2022

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[107] Information about the reimbursement process was communicated from MDE on Aug. 6, 2021.

As described in interviews and confirmed via reimbursement requests that ICF reviewed,[108] the professional development opportunity that authorizers most often sought CSP funds for was the NACSA[109] conference.

Other training opportunities that authorizers submitted reimbursement requests for were specific to their needs, such as a series of financial trainings with a professional services firm and training on the interactive data visualization software Tableau; or related to their mission (for example, a conference on teacher-powered school models); and conferences related to environmental education.

As one authorizer said:

> MDE has been very supportive. We've attended the Green School Conference and Expo; we've attended the Minnesota Association of Environmental Ed Conference. And we've been reimbursed … we've done master naturalist training, a variety of environment … very specific to the authorizing that we do that no other authorizer does. It's really specific to our shop. And MDE has been very supportive of those initiatives.

At the time the survey closed in November 2020, the three authorizers that had not yet submitted a training reimbursement request were responsible for three or fewer schools each.[110] Two of these authorizers were interviewed in early 2021 and during those conversations they were asked to elaborate on their reasons for not seeking training reimbursement funds. Individuals we spoke with in interviews from these authorizing organizations shared that they get their professional development from other channels and thus have not had a need for this specific support from MDE. One authorizer noted that other organizations typically use CSP funding for NACSA conferences, and this particular authorizer did not find NACSA to be as valuable of a training opportunity.

As of June 2022, all but two authorizers have submitted at least one training reimbursement request. Most authorizers submitted multiple additional requests, which were typically for the same type of conferences as 2020. The most popular request remained NACSA, with other requests including the Overcoming Racism Conference, the Transforming Learning Summit, the North American Association for Environmental Education and other professional service conferences.

Reimbursement Request Process

Overall, authorizers found the CSP reimbursement request process straightforward, with reimbursements received in a timely fashion (Figure 50).

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[108] Reimbursement requests were provided to ICF by MDE.
[109] More information on the goals and mission of NACSA can be found on the Who We Are page of their website.
[110] One authorizer who participated in the survey did not participate in an interview as they will no longer be active by June 2021.

Figure 50. Authorizer Feedback on Reimbursement Request Process

Theme	Quotes
MDE was Helpful and Proactive	*MDE's really been pretty helpful when it comes to step-by-step helping us with that, with submitting requests, with getting the fund back. I don't have any complaints with the process.*
User-Friendly Reimbursement Process	*I thought it [the reimbursement process] was really easy. I didn't find it to be cumbersome hardly at all. I thought it was reasonable. The request to be reimbursed, what training, what are your anticipated expenses. And then when it was done it was just, submit those receipts and how much you actually spent. I thought it was pretty easy.*
Reimbursements Were Received Quickly	*I felt like the whole process was very user friendly. The MDE charter center folks were very helpful. We got this set up to access these funds a year and a half ago. And they were very helpful in getting that process set up and guiding me through the steps to do that and entering into the agreement. And then once we entered into that agreement the forms are shared with authorizers through MACSA but I think they're also posted on the website … they've been very encouraging of authorizers to remember you have these funds if you're interested in trainings, here's the forms to fill out. Very manageable forms and paperwork. And the response in turnaround time was quick. So, I have zero complaints about that.*

Two authorizers noted a few challenges with the reimbursement process. One authorizer stated that while they found the process "functional, efficient and clear" the nature of their authorizing organization complicated their ability to accept the funds, since this authorizer set up the CSP funds as "mini-grants" and the organizational processes triggered by this setup are the same regardless of funding amount.

Another authorizer felt that the process was too complicated, given the pre-approval required and the fact that the funds are not immediately available for use but must be reimbursed.[111]

A number of authorizers disliked MDE's requirement to submit a pre-approval request prior to registering and attending the training. One authorizer noted that this could sometimes mean missing out on savings, if a conference had an early-bird deadline, although another authorizer noted that pre-approval was typically obtained in timely fashion, allowing adequate time for training registration.

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[111] According to MDE staff, the U.S. Department of Education requires preapproval of CSP-funded training and funds are only available through reimbursement.

Authorizer trainings requests are included in the evidence reviewed as part of the MAPES process. One authorizer noted that it would be helpful if MDE provided more clarity on how the information gathered for reimbursement requests would later be used as part of the MAPES process, so that authorizers could ensure they are providing comprehensive information if they may be later evaluated by their submission during the MAPES review (for example, if there is an expectation for explaining how training content was specifically applied to authorizer processes or work).

Criticalness of Funding

Authorizers were asked how critical the CSP funding support was to them, as far as enabling them to take advantage of training opportunities that may otherwise be challenging to attend from a financial perspective (Figure 51).

About one-third (4) of the 11 authorizers who responded to this question felt that the funding support was very important to them. A few authorizers noted that they only attended some professional development opportunities because of the availability of reimbursement funds or that they were able to take advantage of more opportunities than they would have otherwise. One authorizer noted that the CSP funding support opened doors for more "out-of-the-box" training, going beyond their typical attendance at NACSA.

Figure 51. Authorizer Perceptions Regarding Criticalness of Funding

Theme	Quotes
Funding Support is Critical	*So, if you're asking me would I miss [reimbursement funding]? Absolutely … when I am looking at conferences on the national level where they're thousands of dollars, I don't have that in my budget to do that. So yeah, I would miss it. And I appreciate the opportunity to be able to … continue to develop.*
	The year I went to [state], I would not have gone. We could not have afforded that … as an authorizer. I would not have gone. This year, because it was a virtual conference, it was way cheaper. You didn't have all the travel and the accommodations expenses and the meals. It was just the registration. We probably could've paid for it, but I don't know if we would've chosen [to attend]. I think because it was reimbursable, it was like, 'Yeah of course we're going to do it.' And then because it was recorded sessions, if you couldn't do it live, I can still go back and watch the ones I haven't been able to attend yet still. So that was really nice. We probably could've afforded it this year, but … when there's travel involved … we'll probably never be able to go, if it's back to normal and you travel to a conference, the grant is the only way we'd be able to go.

Theme	Quotes
Provides Opportunities for Targeted Professional Development	*Could we have squeaked it out and paid for that training independently? Yeah, we could. But would we have done it? Probably not, just because I knew that there was this special pot of money there. Rather than trying to sell to my boss, 'Hey I think we should do this special training that we're going to have to eat out of our general budget.' So, I do think it [access to CSP-funded training] was helpful in that regard.*

Slightly more than half (6) agreed that the funding support was beneficial but not critical for training attendance (in other words, they would likely still pay for professional development sessions in the absence of CSP support). In some cases, CSP funding made it possible for multiple team members to attend and benefit from training and professional development firsthand. Additionally, most training participation in the last several months has been more cost-effective given the transition to virtual conferences and professional development sessions.

> *We would still for sure go to the NACSA conference because for us it feels required. Well, I mean it feels required but also we really like to go. So, we would still go but the reimbursement helps because it's not normal that we send the whole staff. So, it allows us to send all of the staff that can go. And the other thing is the authorizing fees in Minnesota are pretty low … any additional support we could get for professional development is super appreciated. Otherwise, we would just pull it out of our normal budget.*

> *I would say from a budgetary standpoint, I mean the last few years have been weird. Last year, especially with COVID and the year prior to that, we had some budgetary oddities as well just due to staffing things. So, I wouldn't say [funding support has] been critical, we still would've been able to do trainings and things without it. However, I do think what was really helpful was that it spurred us to do some more in-depth training.*

One authorizer stated that CSP funding did not have a significant impact on their training participation because the reimbursement limit is a fraction of their annual training budget. However, this authorizer noted that their larger size as an organization meant they had more access to funds, and that the funding is certainly important for other authorizers that do not have similar capacity.

Broad Benefits of Attending CSP-Funded Trainings

During interviews and on training reimbursement requests, authorizers were asked to describe how their participation in training and professional development supported by CSP funds impacted their abilities to effectively support charter schools. All authorizers (11) who had sought CSP reimbursement for training opportunities perceived that the training they had participated in had a positive impact on their work.

Most authorizers cited the following benefits to participation in training supported by CSP funds: networking opportunities available through participating in the CSP-funded training, useful for onboarding new staff and introducing them to their authorizing role (for example, NACSA Boot Camp),

and providing opportunities for participation in targeted training that was specifically important for their organizational needs (for example, financial services training, Tableau) (Figure 52). For example, one authorizer staff person described how Tableau had enhanced her abilities to tell stories with student data, in ways that are more effective and interactive than tools she had used in the past. She felt that her ability to use Tableau enabled their authorizing organization to better meet the goal of telling authentic stories of student performance in their schools.

Figure 52. Broad Benefits of Attending CSP-Funded Trainings

Theme	Quotes
Networking Opportunities	*[What] I have found most fruitful is the ability to network. And I think this is also true of conferences ... I think you learn so much more—not more, but added—when you have built in that opportunity to just dialogue with other people. Because I think [with] a lot of that comes creativity, it is learning, it is brainstorming ... And you learn from one another what works and what doesn't work. And what could be, and [what] could we do jointly and that type of thing.* *Through the NACSA conferences, our national network has dramatically expanded. It's a lot easier for me to pick up the phone and call people in Tennessee or [Los Angeles Unified School District] or [the State University of New York system] where they're having authorizer practices that we find would be helpful. So, I think for me personally, the biggest [benefit is networking].*
Onboarding for New Staff	*In 2018, I flew to Orlando where the national conference was, and [CSP grant funding] paid for me to be trained, which was unbelievably helpful because I was new to authorizing. So, that was fundamental to us kind of changing how we do our practices.* *The grant money we used for me to go to NACSA that year I had just started. It actually was fairly invaluable to be able to go to the authorizer boot camp, it's a full 8-hour session that NACSA offers that just goes over all the core tenets, principals of NACSA, best practices and you really just get a great overview of how to be oriented in authorizing. I feel like I got a lot out of that … And that boot camp and those resources are very valuable resources to have and be able to refer to as needed. And they were a really good foundation, I was very thankful for that introduction … just to authorizing.*

Impact of NACSA Participation

Since the NACSA conference was the professional development opportunity for which reimbursement was most frequently requested, a subset of authorizers commented specifically on how NACSA attendance had affected their work as authorizers. Authorizers found NACSA conferences beneficial for multiple reasons. A number of authorizers in both interviews and in reimbursement requests noted that attending NACSA validated their own practices and felt they gained confidence to proceed with their practices or activities as planned, based on what they gleaned at NACSA conference sessions about

other authorizers' approaches (Figure 53). A few authorizers valued that there were a variety of sessions to align with a range of staff interests. One authorizer noted that their staff were able to get a better understanding of authorizing in general, in addition to differentiation of topics based on staff interests and needs. A few authorizers also mentioned that they gained an understanding of practices in other locales.

Figure 53. Impact of NACSA Participation

Theme	Quotes
Validation of Own Practices	*[That staff person] is an expert at school finance, so school financial oversight, she attended those sessions but it's not new information for her. It's just, okay, we're doing what we're supposed to be doing ... So, more affirming and not learning new things.*
	There were several [sessions where we heard] … what authorizers from around the country are doing … that I found helpful. In addition, here in Minnesota we can talk about, 'Oh we really see holes here, here, and here," but when we get together with our peers from around the country, in many respects it makes us realize how far ahead we are in several areas. So that's a calibration check as well. Instead of always seeing the hole—'Wow, we've got it pretty good.'
	I think being at the whole conference is really helpful. Authorizing can be a pretty small community and so to be able to understand how ... this is actually … one of the more helpful things, to do a certain level of comparative analysis of what we do in Minnesota versus other places to get ideas around what would we potentially suggest in terms of policy shifts, how do we look at our performance frameworks in a different way, how are other places thinking about educational and racial equity in different ways. I think outside of a particular thematic track or session … that would be the thing I would say has been the most beneficial.
	This year, [I] attended a session that talked about … how do you know when to renew and how do you know when to terminate [a charter school contract]? And then, what are some of the corrective interventions in between. We have a system down, but it was more validating that the process we're using is good. Like our corrective action steps along the way before you would close, it was nice to compare to see what other authorizers in the country are doing for that. So, I felt more than anything it probably just validated what we have in place.

| Theme	Quotes
Variety of Sessions	*The NACSA conference was an excellent way to build authorizer capacity to support high-quality charter schools in that … employees had an opportunity to connect with experts from around the country. The sessions attended on alternative measures of success, school finance and educational equity have improved our skills in these areas. Additionally, the connections made with individuals nationwide provide ongoing opportunities for increased perspectives, exemplars of best practices and technical assistance for our office as well as our schools.* *So, our human resource person is more of the human resources and board governance operations of a charter school. She went to sessions that were more geared to that. The high school principal went to more general leadership conferences, so it was nice to be able to attend what we thought pertained to our role[s] as authorizers.*
Gaining an Understanding of Practices in Other Locales	*Those conferences [NACSA] have such a wide array of breakout sessions that we were really able to home in on what sessions aligned with our strategic initiatives and our mission and to try and expand our learning based on that. So, I've been pleased … That's the only thing we've really used the CSP dollars for so far, but great conferences … Authorizing is a somewhat unique animal in that there is no handbook, there is no guidebook, there is no single way of doing it. So, there's always an opportunity through the network to learn, in order to improve your own systems.* *These conferences have been a great space for us to understand who else is working on similar projects, where they're at, networking, learning about their approaches. One of the national research [efforts], there's a group out there that has done a big project called the A Game, so we've been able to connect with them at both conferences because our projects have a lot of parallel work and similar goals. That's been really helpful for us. And we're at the place where we're actually implementing some of these initiatives into our accountability system with schools, so it's exciting for us. But definitely we're learning from other folks at these conferences and … stretching our thinking. Plus, the networking is just a wonderful opportunity.* *NACSA is the only conference tailored specifically to the needs of authorizers. As such, I was able to deepen my understanding of high quality authorizing while learning with and from authorizers throughout the U.S. … As always, networking with my peers was valuable and I made connections that I have relied on in the month since to inform [our] ongoing authorizing work.*

Impact of Training on Authorizer Knowledge, Capacity and Practice

In this section, we will discuss how the CSP-funded training impacts authorizer knowledge, capacity and practice. To address this research question, we used the results of the survey, qualitative analysis of the interviews and participant feedback from the training reimbursement requests to get a sense of whether authorizers noticed any difference in these focus areas after participating in the training. The sections below are devoted to these focus areas. Authorizers indicated changes in knowledge and capacity when they completed the survey. During interviews, we expanded to include impact on authorizer practices, although this tended to overlap with how authorizers described impacts on their capacity.[112]

Knowledge

Authorizers who participated in reimbursed training were asked on the survey about the extent to which their knowledge has been impacted by training participation.[113] All authorizers indicated either that they either substantially increased their knowledge (36%) or that their knowledge increased in some areas (64%) (Figure 54).

Figure 54. Perceived Changes in Knowledge Due to Training Participation (N = 11)
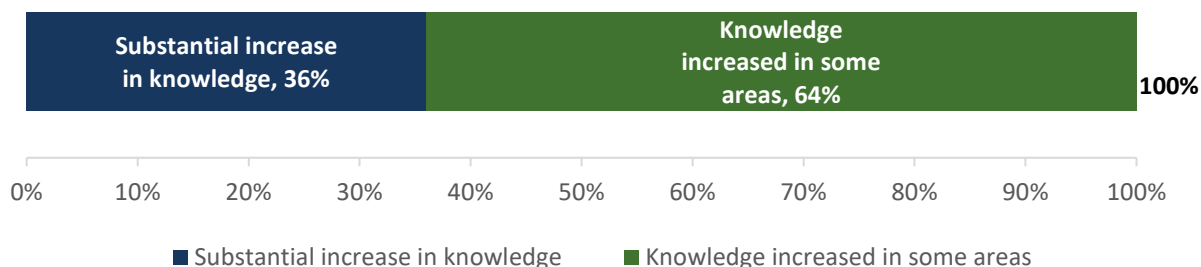
During interviews, authorizers were asked to expand on how CSP-funded training opportunities had contributed to their knowledge gains, including specific examples. A few authorizers discussed general knowledge gains in relevant content areas, but most authorizers also shared how content that they learned translated into their work (in other words, knowledge gains impacting practice). Authorizer-perceived knowledge gains fell into two thematic areas: 1) understanding authorizer roles and responsibilities and 2) school performance frameworks and equitable education.

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[112] In this context, we define capacity as the extent to which authorizers have made changes in how they recognize and understand their role in effectively engaging within schools. Practice refers to the extent to which authorizers have implemented changes in how they interact with their schools. In some instances, there is overlap between capacity and practice.

[113] Authorizers had the following answer options for this item: "I did not learn anything new"; "My knowledge has increased in a few ways"; "My knowledge has increased in some areas"; and "My knowledge has increased substantially."

Understanding Authorizer Roles and Responsibilities

Authorizers—particularly those newer to their roles—felt that training participation helped develop their knowledge base for how authorizers should effectively engage with schools. Specifically, some authorizers described how training influenced their thinking around their own processes and procedures, including a foundational understanding of their work with schools and the ways in which they provide oversight of schools, including early identification and mitigation of potential issues and approaches to accountability for student learning (Figure 55).

A couple of authorizers reflected on how training participation made them more aware of how to provide oversight to schools, with a focus on being more preventative—identifying potential issues early—rather than more reactive oversight—when small issues that may have gone unaddressed become bigger challenges.

Some authorizers specifically described knowledge gains related to decision-making around schools, including new school applications, school openings, interventions and closures. A couple of authorizers talked about capacity interviews[114] as an important aspect of the new school application process; a concept they had become more familiar with, and in some cases adapted, based on training participation. One authorizer described how staff had enhanced their knowledge through conference sessions of key prerequisites for approving new schools in order to prevent potential issues after a new school is already in operation.

One authorizer described lessons learned from sessions they had attended regarding how to handle school intervention or closure—lessons that they planned to keep in mind when faced with a similar situation. Another authorizer staff, attending a session with a similar topic, gleaned what they should be paying attention to on the front end to minimize the likelihood of a school having issues later (related to the theme around oversight described above).

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[114] NACSA defines capacity interviews as face-to-face interviews that authorizers may conduct with the proposed leadership team of a new charter school to supplement a charter school proposal. Resources and tools for conducting effective capacity interviews can be found on the Capacity Interview Resources page of the NACSA website. /

Figure 55. Understanding Authorizer Roles and Responsibilities

Theme	Quotes
Oversight of Schools	*One of the documents that's been most helpful to go back to [from NACSA] sometimes is the one about essential practices ... some of the pieces that I think most well oriented me to the work as I had just started and had no experience back then. One of the first things that I wasn't so privy to is how authorizers are oriented to the schools and their relationship and just how important … having a performance framework in the contractual agreement between schools and the authorizer is. That was one of the central pieces that I really came away from that session with. In addition to other certain principles NACSA has, like staying in your lane, ways to mitigate and not engage in authoritative overreach, whether it's in communication or actual practice and oversight. Those were great.* *Attending the national conference enabled [us] to learn more about best practices in authorizing and oversight tools from top authorizers across the nation … [the] focus was on school financial oversight, authorizing 101, managing portfolio reporting and school autonomy sessions.*
New School Decision-Making	*I was able to attend a couple different sessions. One was regarding capacity interviews and so looking at what goes into applications, understanding the aspect of transparency and expectations and what to do there. So, that capacity interview one broadened or deepened my knowledge as far as application and that process goes.* *I am thinking of some examples [of what I learned from a national conference] … like making sure that the schools provide a 5-year plan including a pre-operational year budget. And then what specifically to look for in the budget. And internal controls, what to look for in terms of making sure those are in place, and data privacy and practice.*
Intervention and School Closure Decision-Making	*One of the things [from a CSP-funded training opportunity] was looking at current status of the school, making tough decisions, how to go about doing that in terms of your stakeholders and also … priming the pump. What are the things you need to do to minimize backlash and irate parents, students and staff. So, it is a very methodical approach in terms of things that you should have on your radar that you are constantly informing, those type measures and things. And that certainly was very valuable. I think having attending that [session] … anticipating, knowing what's coming down the pike, how to position yourself to minimize, to mitigate—I found very, very helpful.*

School Performance Frameworks and Equitable Education

Authorizers also described a few topic areas where they felt they had gained important knowledge for informing their practices and/or where they were looking to continue enhancing their knowledge base. These topic areas included school performance frameworks,[115] including financial oversight and alternative measures for student learning and equitable education.

A few authorizers, when asked about how CSP-funded training has been helpful, described how they had either expanded their knowledge or gained a more nuanced understanding of the importance of performance frameworks, particularly financial indicators, in evaluating their schools' status and sustainability (Figure 56).

One authorizer noted that they have sessions related to specific educational models their schools may be implementing, such as environmental education. This authorizer attended a specific training about effectively measuring student outcomes related to environmental education. A couple of authorizers also shared how their knowledge related to alternative measures for student learning increased due to participation in training sessions and how this knowledge can help with having a more nuanced understanding of performance for some of the schools they serve.[116]

Some authorizers have sought out opportunities to advance their thinking about education equity. During interviews and on the training reimbursement requests, authorizers reported that these training sessions included in-depth discussions and tools to help advance their thinking and actions related to education equity frameworks and practices. Authorizers discussed their perceptions about the critical nature of educational equity, while acknowledging that this is a topic that requires continuous learning from those involved in the education field. They appreciated the opportunities they had through training participation to push their thinking in this area.

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[115] School Performance Frameworks can serve as tools to evaluate school effectiveness and communicate information about school quality to families and other stakeholders. Components and usage of these frameworks may be highly context-dependent and may include information about a school's financial standing; academic performance; and other indicators to inform decisions about interventions, expansion and school closure. Read more about them in this School Performance Frameworks: Lessons, Cases, and Purposeful Design report from Bellwether Education Partners.

[116] Traditional measures of student learning tend to have a more narrow interpretation of school performance (for example, scores on high-stakes standardized testing), which may be less relevant for a particular school context/population than alternative measures for student learning.

Figure 56. School Performance Frameworks and Equitable Education

Theme	Quotes
Performance and Financial Indicators	*I think we went to three different sessions and looked at how authorizers are really measuring their [schools'] financial success. And came up with a couple different ideas of how you can look at it besides just fund balance and just their budgets that they put in each year. There were some really good ideas. We haven't implemented those yet, but that's been on our tasks this year to do, with the financial oversight.* *In the last couple years just hearing the language of key performance indicators the authorizers are using with those schools, those particular metrics that they're looking at [has been helpful]. And then that came up again as related to COVID and the potential of impacts of funding for schools … and so authorizers were using some of those key performance indicators to kind of stress test the schools in their portfolios to see … are they in a financial situation that they should be okay? Or are they in a vulnerable financial position. I think those have been helpful.*
Alternative Measures for Student Learning	*Before I was in the director role, I was the primary environmental education evaluator. And one of the tasks I was hired for was creating our environmental education evaluation. And really figuring out how do we look at outcomes, and how do we help schools think about measuring outcomes. In terms of an area for which there isn't a standardized test. There's no nationally known assessment for environmental education. So … being able to participate in some of these national conferences and having these conversations with evaluators who are working on this, who are figuring out how do we measure how children are changed by environmental education; has been really crucial in shaping both how our framework looks as well as how we communicate with schools around gathering that data. And the way that they have their measures structured, the evaluation tools that they're using internally.*

Theme	Quotes
Equitable Education	*Last year where we were in person [at training], I think the big theme was really around educational equity and that was incredibly helpful for us because it really matched a lot of the ways that we approach the work. So, for us it was really validating, but also gave us … more tools around how might you think about concrete educational equity frameworks that are attached to your performance framework. How are we thinking about white supremacy and how it shows up in the education system? I think that was the biggest thing for us from last year.* *This year's conference that was CSP-reimbursed really had a lot of focus on equity. As an example, again I don't know that we've come away with a concrete 'Here's what we are going to do' in terms of action steps. But there were a lot of opportunities that were intended to push thinking and stretch our thinking about what equitable education looks like. And, really, what can authorizers and charter schools add to an education system that might prioritize equity?* *We as an authorizing [entity] have really sought out a lot of training…related to equity in education and specifically equity in our authorizing practices and the way in which white supremacy and whiteness is present in some of the educational processes that are established in Minnesota and beyond. And we have participated in a couple of things, especially in the last 2 years I would say that have really helped us continue to refine that lens as we look at our processes and our practices to further our pursuit of anti-racist authorizing and anti-bias within our schools that we authorize.* *Altogether, the sessions from this summit provided [us] with a re-grounding in values of equity and student-centered leadership, modeling of best practice for equitable processes (including through assessment tools) and tools for supporting staff to be resilient.*

Capacity and Practice

In the previous section, we described findings related to authorizers' gains in knowledge—what they had learned or information their staff had obtained through CSP-funded training opportunities. In this section, we turn to how authorizers perceived their knowledge gains translating into increased capacity for working with schools and the actual changes in their practice.[117]

Authorizers were asked how their capacity as an authorizer changed by attending CSP-funded trainings and what changes in their practices as authorizer they would attribute to the CSP-funded training. We

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[117] Since capacity and practice are closely related, the survey that was administered to authorizers did not distinguish between the two. In the following section, increases in capacity may also be related to increases in practice, and vice versa.

did not define the terms "capacity" or "practice" in the interviews with authorizers and to some extent there is sometimes an overlap in responses to these questions. For the purposes of our analysis and reviewing what authorizers shared, we considered capacity to be the ways in which authorizers improved their abilities and processes (for example, more effective communication, streamlined internal processes or managing their school portfolio) as a result of participating in CSP-funded trainings. We consider changes in practices to include establishing systems for school accountability, enhancing protocols for school evaluation and introducing equity-focused goals or practices.

Capacity

In the survey, authorizers were asked how their capacity to support and manage schools as an authorizer changed as a result of their participation in reimbursed trainings. Like the findings on knowledge gains, all authorizers indicated that their capacity has increased in at least a few ways (Figure 57). About two-thirds (64%) indicated they increased their capacity for working with their schools in some areas, and 18% indicated they experienced a substantial increase in capacity.

Figure 57. Perceived Changes in Capacity Due to Training Participation (N = 11)
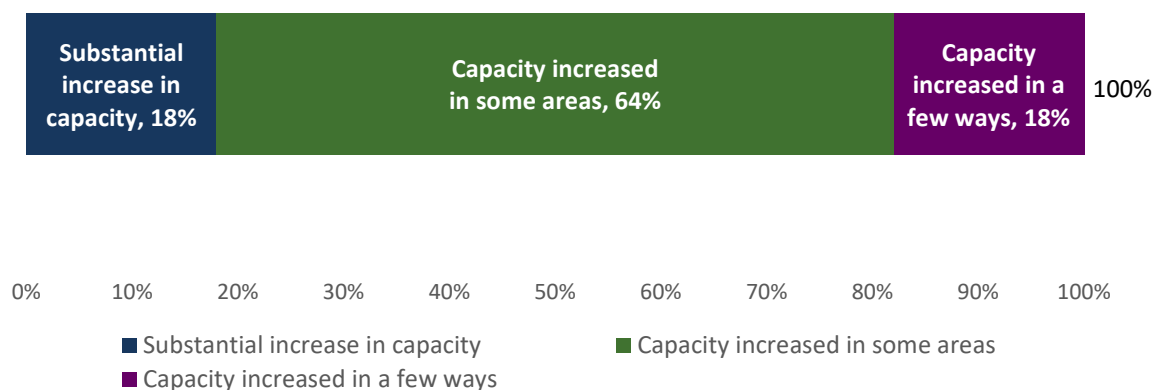
Authorizers that participated in the training initiative were asked to consider how the CSP-funded training has helped build their capacity to carry out specific roles as an authorizer and to rate how helpful the trainings have been for carrying out their authorizer roles (see Figure 58).[118]

We found that all authorizers who participated in reimbursed training indicated that the opportunities they engaged in were at least somewhat helpful with building capacity to effectively manage their school portfolios. Over 80% of authorizers who participated in training found it at least somewhat helpful for making decisions related to placing schools on probation (82%), and for providing TA to schools (81%). Although a majority of authorizers (54%) perceived training opportunities to be at least

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[118] In developing the survey we focused on authorizer capacity; however, some items may be related to authorizer practices and not just authorizer capacity.

somewhat helpful for financial management and improving capacity for fiscal oversight and auditing, it may be the case that the training sessions they sought out did not cover these specific topics.

Figure 58. Perceived Helpfulness of Training for Building Capacity in Various Areas (N = 11)
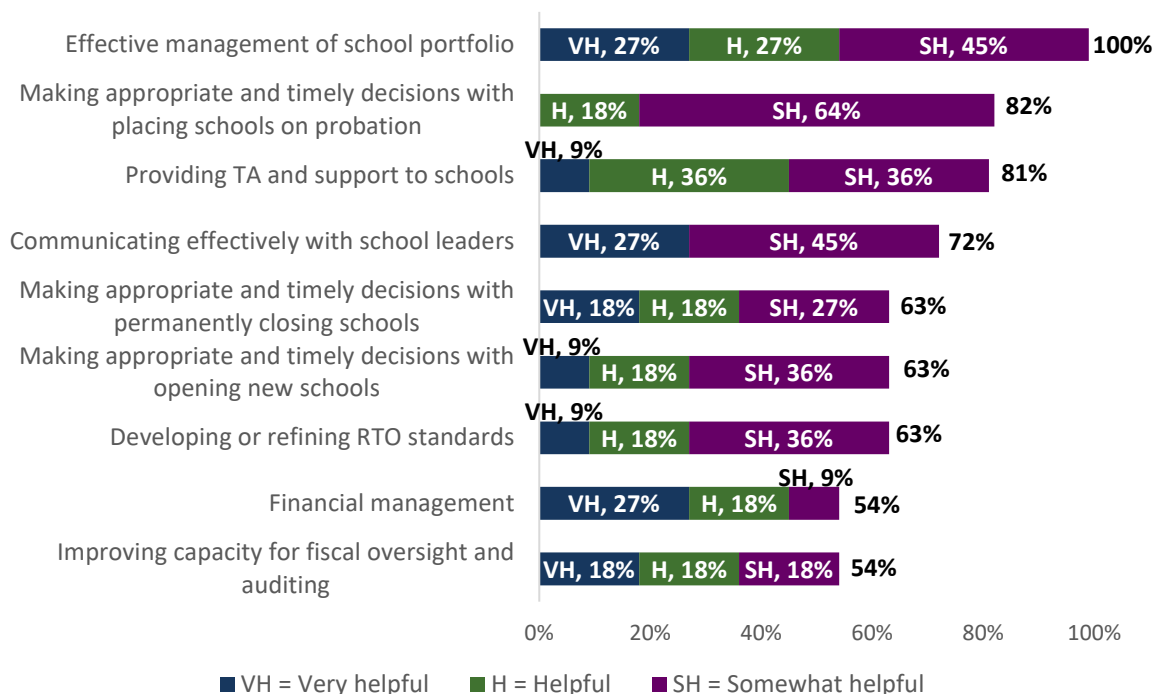
As noted earlier, authorizers were also asked in interviews to share ways in which their capacity was impacted by CSP-supported training. In the context of these conversations, authorizer staff had the flexibility to define capacity in their own terms in their responses.

For example, we found that authorizer interview responses regarding CSP-funded training impact on their capacity aligned most with the following survey categories (Figure 59):

- **Communicating effectively with school leaders.** Several authorizers talked about the influence of reimbursed training on their capacity for communication and interaction with their schools or other entities in the context of their respective roles. For example, navigating the authorizer role of providing oversight while respecting school autonomy and engaging with various stakeholders.

- **Effective management of school portfolio.** A few authorizers described approaches they had taken to streamline their own operations or continuously improve. These approaches included developing organizational norms, revising self-evaluation procedures, strategic hiring and the use of technology. One authorizer described how they use Basecamp[119] to organize critical tasks for schools by semiannual benchmarks, and how they had integrated readiness to open

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[119] Basecamp is an online platform that facilitates team collaboration through document sharing, assigning tasks and messaging capabilities.

processes into this tool to ensure all parties are on the same page about status when pre-operational. This authorizer acknowledged that the setup of their system was informed by practical concepts covered during a training session.

One subgrantee also perceived that information covered during a CSP-funded training opportunity ultimately contributed to their capacity for engaging in readiness to open work with schools.

> *There was … [a conference session] where we had some people … talk about their definition of school quality and some of the different things that go into their work in being community-based … how they do outreach and how they really are working with communities. I think that one was very interesting and just sort of contextualized the startup process and informed readiness to open, outreach and marketing. MDE required evidence of diverse improvement, so all of those ideas overlapped for me once I got back, and I really started having a hand in readiness to open.*

Figure 59. CSP-funded Training Impact on Authorizer Capacity

Theme	Quotes
Communicating Effectively with School Leaders	*When you attend these sessions … as an authorizer it [was] perhaps stressed to me the importance of how you communicate with these given parties … how to understand your audience in delivering information … it's some of those type of strategies that … I have been able to perhaps do a better job of understanding my role and respecting their role. But still, how do you nudge them [school leaders] to move them into a different direction? … I think a lot of how I provide oversight and monitor, I have a pretty good handle of what's happening in schools ... for instance I review board minutes and things like that monthly. So, if I see something that is troubling or I see a trend or pattern, how do I position myself? And not just to question it, but to have readily available some ideas and suggestions. And some of those ideas or suggestions might come from having had these opportunities through professional development.* *I think there is some subtle ways in which … what's happening across the country [related to authorizer practices and trends] and whatever the conversation is can filter ever so subtly into the way in which the daily work is handled. School autonomy was a big one … promoted at one of the NACSA conferences … so other things kind of fell out around that. So, thinking about how often might I email the school leaders with an ask, is there a way to streamline that such that the authorizing isn't becoming burdensome for the schools? Thinking about the way in which the schools do reporting, does that respect their autonomy, is it creating a burden on them?*

Theme	Quotes
Effective Management of School Portfolio	*I do think from a capacity standpoint, [what] jumps out from this particular training [on financial accountability] is that we did put together a document for ourselves as sort of an internal best practice, okay when we look at the financials here are the things that we agree as a team we're going to look for. So that was, I would say, a capacity building kind of a thing … also a norming, just making sure that the experience for each of our schools is similar. That we're all coming at this from a similar angle.* *One specific example that I did after this NACSA training was looking at … our self-evaluation of ourselves as authorizers. We had a rubric … that we filled out to see how well we were doing—but it was too comprehensive, too robust, that it just was daunting—and, actually, I felt like that hindered its ability to give any real feedback; it took too much time to do. So, we streamlined it and made it simpler and more focused on the key things we were looking for. That came out of the conference, like seeing how other authorizers do it.* *The way we increase our capacity is, as we hire new people, now we don't necessarily have new money for hiring new people, but when a position comes open we have a different set of things we're looking for in that person than we did when they were previously hired. If you look at our history of our admin person, the skills that we've been intentional to look for have changed over time based on the things that we've learned and the things we want to do more with. And I think [it's] also informed by the contractors we seek out for things like school site visits or renewal site visits or new school application evaluations. As we learn more, we look for people who have that capacity to help us do better.* *This isn't really a specific tactic or skill, but I think just building enough confidence to say no, we need to intervene when XYZ thing happens. I think not feeling so alone, to be able to be like nope we do need to hold schools accountable. And we do have to take action.*

Practice

During interviews, authorizers provided examples of how training participation resulted in changes with authorizing practices. We found authorizers provided more examples related to establishing systems for various purposes, including 1) accountability and new school evaluation, 2) financial oversight and 3) equity-related initiatives. Some of these practice areas were also mentioned as areas where authorizers have gained knowledge, which may indicate that knowledge gains from participating in professional development may translate into practices. In addition, authorizer interview responses related to training's impact on practice aligned with a couple of capacity survey items on decision-making related to schools (for example, when to place schools on probation or close).

One authorizer staff person who was new to their role credited their participation in CSP-funded training as a driving influence in revamping their organization's entire authorizing approach and practices. A couple of authorizers said they have increased their attention on financial oversight and a couple of others also discussed changes to equity-related goals/practices. Authorizer changes to practices are discussed in the sections below.

Establishing Systems for Accountability and New School Evaluation
Two ways that training participants increased authorizer practice that was related to performance frameworks was 1) enhancing protocols for new school evaluation and 2) establishing systems for school accountability (Figure 60).

- **New school evaluation**. Some authorizers indicated that practices in the areas of new school evaluation, including establishing systems such as revised new-school application processes and targeted site visit procedures (for example, being more purposeful in the information collected during a visit) have changed due to the CSP-funded training. As previously described under the Understanding Authorizer Roles and Responsibilities section, authorizers who talked about capacity interviews and supporting prospective schools during the application process had in some cases implemented these practices within their own organizations. For example, one authorizer noted how they had refined their expectations of new school applicants related to market analysis and demand based on information they learned from their CSP-funded training sessions. Another authorizer described how the CSP funds were fundamental in changing their evaluation process:

  > *CSP funds paid for me to be trained, which was unbelievably helpful because I was new to authorizing. So, that was fundamental to us kind of changing how we do our practices. Going to the training, I was able to help get our team out of corrective action and redo everything. Literally, we have a whole new charter school manual, we have a new process for application. Everything is aligned now. So, our applications to become a charter school—if a current charter wants to expand. Even our renewal and our annual assessment process is now all aligned with similar rubrics and criteria that we're looking for. We redid literally almost everything.*

- **School accountability**: Authorizers described how establishing protocols or rubrics, which they learned about or adapted from CSP-supported training sessions, helped convey expectations to their schools as part of school accountability. One authorizer talked about structures set up in the event of school closure, such as requiring schools to hire a closure coordinator to ensure an orderly process and supporting families in finding other options for students. Another authorizer provided an in-depth example of how they developed a tiered approach to intervention that they learned at a CSP-supported professional development, which consists of a "touchpoint dashboard" that they use to differentiate their approach to evaluating their schools and become more strategic in resource allocation.

Figure 60. CSP-funded Training Impact on Performance Frameworks

Theme	Quotes
Enhancing Protocols for Evaluating New Schools	*One of the most memorable parts of that session was about new school applications and that process. And some of the learning that I brought back as we talked through and … recently [we] revised some of our new-school application process[es] … we've looked at our process and talked about the idea of capacity interviews, which was something presented at the workshops. We've also talked about having a mentor to support schools that are in the application development phase. And we've implemented that with all of our applicants who would like that opportunity.* *The specific takeaways from a NACSA conference would be dealing with charter management organizations [CMO's] and enhancing our new charter school applications and specific charter contract provisions related to whether CMOs or… educational management organizations [EMO's] as well as virtual schools. So those were specific implementations resulting from NACSA conference attendance based on federal charter school program grants reimbursement.* *Some of the financial sessions that I've attended have also given me insights into questions that would be important to ask [school founders before authorizing the school]. Five years ago, we didn't do capacity interviews in our application process. We obviously evaluated the application and we met with schools, but now it's much more structured, like a job interview.* *One of the things we've talked more concretely about is around new school applications and how we think about market analysis on the front end. In our new school applications, previously it had been fairly loose and people can have a response. I[t] was like, well we did a social media campaign or we held a focus group. And then I had gone to a couple of [CSP-funded training] sessions … And they had really robust market analysis documents that they provided as examples, that just got our minds thinking in very different way of like it's one thing for you to just say you have these relationships and connections, but what are you pulling in terms of [U.S. Census Bureau] data? Are you understanding demographic shifts and trends? What is the saturation of high-quality schools in this area look like? That's one of the things that we shifted a little bit.*

Theme	Quotes
Establishing Systems for School Accountability	*One difference is … accountability. In the past we monitored them, and it was like, 'Yup, they're fine,' but it was kind of just checking the box. 'They're doing fine.' Now [after attending the CSP-funded training] there's real accountability. The annual assessment rubric that they fill out, they have to put in a link and provide evidence for every criteria that we're looking for in all the major areas like academic, financial, governance, oversight.* *We're able to evaluate our schools a little better [after attending the CSP-funded training] and see when things might be coming down the pipe that we should have a separate conversation with schools, maybe something concerning.* *I think the one thing that I took out of that [training] was designing a tool that I created especially for the governing board … a series of questions that they had to ask themselves. Either yes or no, and by the time you got to the end of this form, I think the decision was quite obvious for them that we needed to close the school.* *Learnings from this conference will support [us] to practically implement and build accountability, access, and antiracist culture within our own organization. Accountability was defined during the conference as being able to justify and communicate actions in both process and result, and that is a goal that [we are] striving for as we center students in our authorizing processes. In particular, [we are] leveraging key takeaways from these sessions to bolster work being done to revamp our hiring and onboarding processes.*

Financial Oversight

Related to performance frameworks, a few authorizers described their increased attention on financial oversight or indicators. Although fewer authorizers overall indicated that reimbursed training was helpful for these topic areas in their survey, a sizeable subset (for example, over one-quarter for financial management) perceived their training participation to be very helpful in these areas.

For example, one authorizer participated in a performance framework review through NACSA several years ago. The authorizer received recommendations on the financial indicators in their performance framework in the context of this review, to align more with national standards. When attempting to adapt some of these measures, it became clear to the authorizer that these financial indicators were not a great fit for their local context. After participating in training with a financial services firm, the authorizer gained the knowledge and capacity to feel more comfortable revamping their measures to be better aligned with the Minnesota context.

Another authorizer described how they developed better financial acumen through NACSA conference participation, in part by gaining a better understanding of the relationship between student enrollment and school sustainability.

Equity

As noted in the knowledge section, educational equity is an important topic area that authorizers are focused on. A few authorizers talked about how they had made changes to equity-related goals or practices due to participation in CSP-supported training. These changes included developing an organizational goal related to equity while in the process of revising a school's 5-year plan; revising how board training is framed to include a focus on "equitable outcomes" and "culturally appropriate and affirming curriculum" and being mindful of anti-racist and anti-bias lenses when considering evaluators or services providers. One authorizer expressed that a more thoughtful focus on equity in their work is an ongoing effort.

> *I would say [education equity] is [a] very emergent [topic], but we're in the beginning stages of talking about what does it look like to add some equity measures to our operations and governance evaluation, as well as our academic evaluation so that we can have a better sense of what sort of equitable education our schools are offering. And I think that's very much been informed by a lot of the learning that we've done in the last few years.*

Recommendations for CSP-Funded Trainings

As noted previously, MDE is not involved in the CSP-funded training, so authorizers were not asked during the interviews if they had any recommendations for improving the trainings. However, a few authorizers did suggest that MDE might be more proactive in offering suggestions for upcoming training opportunities or guidance on what might be acceptable for reimbursement. Additionally, MDE could provide suggestions for training opportunities other than NACSA, to encourage authorizers who get less out of NACSA to use CSP funds for other useful training opportunities.

> *It would help if [MDE] gave us a little more guidance ... We know that conferences are covered but it would help with a little more guidance on what some out-of-the-box training we could attend and we could expect to be reimbursed for. The reason I say that is because it just takes time to fill out the form and send it in to get approval. So, it would be better to have the list up front. On the major things—NACSA conferences, charter school conferences—those we know are going to fly through and they're going to be fine. So again, kind of the out-of-the-box training, so if you go to a private trainer to have training. Or you bring in somebody who does training for your board ... that information isn't readily available, as far as I know.*

MDE Authorizer Conferences

Participation

As of November 2020, when survey data were collected, 12 of 14 authorizers had attended all three MDE authorizer conferences that had been held to date. One authorizer indicated they had attended two conferences and one had attended none. Two authorizers agreed that they experienced challenges with attending MDE conferences, although both authorizers attended all three sessions that had taken place. Over half of the authorizers indicated that they did not have any challenges attending MDE conference sessions. Findings on the survey items in this section are based on responses from authorizers who have participated in MDE conferences (n = 13, unless otherwise indicated).

During interviews, authorizers provided their general impressions of the MDE sessions and described specific ways in which they felt MDE conference content impacted their knowledge, capacity and/or practices.

Broad Benefits of Attending MDE trainings

The biggest benefit that most authorizers perceived from the MDE conferences was the ability these sessions afforded them to network and connect with their peers in regional or local settings—where authorizing rules and norms may be more similar—maximizing the potential for knowledge sharing to translate into adapting new practice. These interactions are what authorizers felt most impacted their knowledge and practices because they were able to network and share challenges and solutions with each other. More specifically, authorizers found MDE authorizer conferences beneficial for networking, providing useful content for their work and for conveying important information to new staff (Figure 61). One authorizer described the high value they placed on the opportunity to learn from their peers during unstructured discussions because sharing of practices and approaches among authorizers can inform multiple authorizing organizations' activities and make the sector as a whole more effective in working with schools. Others noted that they found discussions with authorizers during MDE conferences to be more valuable than the planned conference content.

A few authorizers noted that MDE session content may be useful for new authorizing staff. Specifically, one authorizer staff person expressed that due to their years of tenure in their role, MDE conferences did not provide them with new information. However, they understood that other authorizing organizations had experienced staff turnover and that session content was probably useful for those who are newer to their roles. This was evident from the experience of another authorizing staff person, who described how the conference was helpful when they were new to their role, including an introduction to unfamiliar acronyms, the various initiatives and systems within the Minnesota educational context and gaining a better understanding of school performance through data.

One authorizer summed up how they view the MDE sessions as foundational knowledge for the local context, which can then be layered with professional development opportunities at NACSA or other conferences with a national scope:

> *Attending MACSA, which is our Minnesota group, and then the MDE trainings, and then reading statutes and learning on our own gave us the basics. And then … NACSA, the national one that we attended through the grant, that helped me differentiate. Just see how there's so many different ways to do it and get more advanced. So, I felt like we got a basic understanding here in Minnesota, what's required … and then we went national, it was kind of eye-opening to see how it can be done differently.*

Figure 61. Broad Benefits of Attending MDE Trainings

Theme	Quotes
Formal Sharing of Practices Among Peers	*The year before when we did the authorizer conference, one of the things they had us do was bring in our performance frameworks … and we were able to see across Minnesota, what our colleagues were doing. And I thought that that sharing of practice was really helpful because we don't all do it exactly the same. I felt like I … took away things that we were like, 'Oh we hadn't thought about doing it that way.' Or might not work exactly, but we could think about this. So, to me, the opportunity to provide for us to share what we're doing across authorizers has been enlightening and kind of helped build our strength as authorizers.* *Bringing us together—multiple authorizers together—to talk about our authorizing practices starts conversations. Specifically related to MAPES, as we're talking about something and somebody will say, 'Do you have a way that you do this?' And then we're sharing that information authorizer-to-authorizer, which is also scored in MAPES. So, it's another vehicle for us to be able to collectively as a profession build our skills and understanding because we're pulled together to have those conversations. I think the sharing of information and then even the sharing of actual documents, because often times I feel like what ends up happening is somebody will share something that they're either in the process of creating or something that they've already created. And it's like, 'Damn, I wish I would've known that 3 months ago.' So just the idea of then being able to … disseminate that information to other authorizers or get that information, definitely improves on our practices.*
Informal Interactions with Peers	*The conversations that we have in and amongst ourselves throughout the authorizer conference also illuminates things. As we talk about using accountability data, I hear how [another authorizer] is doing it … The secondary benefit is that I learn more about how our colleagues are moving forward in the work.* *The first couple of annual training sessions that I went to, you're sitting at a table with five or six other people, and either through your little table chit chat or discussions during breaks you get a chance to hear from other people what they're doing. And even though, maybe you … say 'Well, that's not part of MDE's responsibility, they didn't create that.' Well, yeah, they did, they brought us together, they created the environment for doing it.* *From my perspective, talking to [other authorizer staff] and the various conversations, we take more away from those conversations and meeting with other authorizers than we do from the state [MDE conference presenters].*

Theme	Quotes
Helpful for New Authorizing Staff	*There were three sessions during that conference that I personally found very helpful … very often when you start a new position you feel like you've kind of fallen into a bowl of alphabet soup with all the acronyms. It was an excellent experience for me to learn about different systems that are often expressed with their acronyms. The Minnesota Student Survey, the Disciplinary Incident Reporting System, the Ed-Fi program that is being rolled out, I found all of these very fascinating … [I] got more out of some than others just because of the level of detail that was provided. As a newcomer, a broader brush stroke was a little more helpful to me. But I felt that there was probably something there for everyone, from the very broadest overview to really getting down in the weeds for … people who were very familiar with them and had specific concerns or questions. So, I thought overall it was a very excellent conference.*

Authorizer Perceptions of MDE's Role in Conferences

Authorizers also spoke about their perceptions of MDE's role in organizing the conferences. Some authorizers appreciated that MDE made an effort to bring authorizers together and provided time during conference sessions for networking and interaction. One authorizer appreciated the proactive approach MDE staff take to providing session content. Here are two authorizer quotes on this topic:

> *[MDE sessions have] been well organized, it's been timely, people with expertise are there making the presentations. They're [MDE staff] open to questions and collaborative in nature in terms of really appearing to want to be helpful, including a variety of topics.*

> *It's always helpful to hear from [MDE staff] what issues they're seeing and communicate those to us. So that we understand more proactively what we can be looking for and providing information about to schools. Definitely the format … is helpful. MDE very much, I think in almost all cases that I can remember, approaches it where you really can do a back and forth or have a talk back. It's less of a lecture, a straight presentation. They're always open to answer questions, get ideas or feedback … So it's nice it's not a one-way communication in those sessions. You really can go back and forth.*

Constructive Feedback on MDE Conferences

Nearly half of authorizers had some criticisms of the MDE sessions. This feedback primarily fell into two categories: lack of clarity on how session content is relevant for authorizer roles, and a perception that sessions could be more engaging (Figure 62).

Authorizers were sometimes not clear on how MDE session content related to their roles with schools. For example, one authorizer described a session on the Minnesota Student Survey as a part of one of the MDE conferences, but said they were uncertain about what the takeaway should be for them as authorizers (for example, one authorizer wondered if the expectation was that authorizers should compel charter schools to participate in the survey and noted that this was outside their responsibility). Multiple authorizers felt that MDE sessions could be more action-oriented or interactive.

Figure 62. Authorizers Critical Feedback on MDE Conferences

Theme	Quotes
Conference Content not Relevant for Authorizers	*I mean it [MDE authorizer conference] built knowledge because now I know what that survey [Minnesota Student Survey] is, I know how often it goes. I know that the charters don't really participate [in completing the survey]. I know the data is public. But [what I learned about the survey] isn't going to change the way in which I do my work each day.* *On more than one occasion the presenter said, 'I don't know how this relates to charter schools and I don't know how it relates to your work as an authorizer.' And having committed to spend an hour with them on Zoom, that was super disappointing. The Charter Center folks tried very hard to bring each session back to like, 'This is maybe why we selected this one. This is maybe what we were thinking it related to in MAPES. This is maybe what we were thinking you could choose to do as related to it.' But as far as building me up to do my work, it's harder to see that connection.*
Desire for More Engaging Sessions	*It would be helpful when MDE hosts these trainings … one of the really good ones was when they actually got authorizers to talk about our current practices and workshop through that. In the most recent training in December, it was just a lot of information that was presented and there wasn't really any action steps or opportunities for us as authorizers to talk about. For example, with discipline, what are you looking at? What should we start looking at … so we can actually dive into the topics? It was just really like this is what MDE does, 'This is what we're seeing.' And I'd like it to be a little more action-oriented … I do think there is a unique role that they can play because they see all of our work. It's kind of like how a teacher can shape a class because they know what the class needs. And I think when they do that, those have been some of the better sessions. So just to reinforce that.*

Perceived Purpose of MDE Conferences

Multiple authorizers expressed the sentiment that they saw MDE conference attendance as more of a necessary requirement for compliance purposes and/or receiving information about initiatives or policies that might pertain to their schools (Figure 63).[120] However, there were a few authorizers who expressed that content that was anything more than informational would not be appropriate because this would be shifting too far into MDE attempting to regulate authorizer activities (by going through authorizers to describe requirements for schools).

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[120] Based on MDE communication on June 7, 2022, authorizers are encouraged to send at least one staff member to the MDE conferences each year, but it is not a requirement to attend.

Figure 63. Authorizer Perceptions of MDE Conferences

Theme	Quotes
More Informational Than Educational	*I think in some ways those [MDE sessions] are a little bit more, I don't know if this is the right phrase—nuts and bolts—for how different divisions in MDE work and relate to the charter schools themselves. And so, it feels like it's very much informational, but does it transform the way in which I do my authorizing? No.* *I think, I would say the trainings have been helpful in terms of management and regulation. But I don't know that they've been that helpful to advance, in terms of content and substance, in the name of education.*
Differing Opinions on MDE Conference Purpose	*What I struggle with is, in Minnesota … there's the underlying tension of the state wanting to be the authorizer and do the authorizer work. And the authorizer doing the authorizer work. So, when they bring presentations in, it's almost as if we're … a school, which we're not. We provide oversight to schools but the information that was shared was applicable … if I was a school leader … So that shows a little bit of a lack of understanding.* *Primarily I'd say it's [MDE conferences are] bringing about an awareness of the expectations of our schools so that we understand, as authorizers—if they are or are not complying with things—we are able to understand that conversation. And MDE copies us in on quite a bit of that. I don't know in terms of authorizing practices, the topics are generally more about informing us of school practices, policies and things versus expected authorizing practices. Which is probably the way it should be because I don't know that the MDE really necessarily has that authority to lead that conversation. I don't think that would probably be well received by authorizers. These conferences have been very much more kind of technical topics about MDE's operations.*

Impact of Training on Authorizer Knowledge, Capacity and Practice

This section includes survey and interview findings related to authorizers' perceived impact of attending the MDE conferences. First, we describe authorizers' perceived impact on their knowledge and then we describe the extent to which MDE conferences have increased capacity and practice. Authorizers were also asked to rate the helpfulness of different MDE authorizer conferences topics for increasing knowledge or capacity as well as how helpful the MDE conferences were in building capacity in various areas. Although the survey questions explicitly asked about building capacity, it is possible that some authorizers may have thought about how MDE has impacted their practice in these areas as well. As a result, we have combined the capacity and practice sections to encompass the ways in which authorizers have noticed an impact in both areas.

Knowledge

Authorizers were asked in the survey how they would rate the MDE conferences, as far as increasing their level of knowledge as an authorizer. Nearly all (92%) reported that their knowledge increased in at least a few areas and most (77%) reported that their knowledge increased in at least some areas through MDE conference participation (Figure 64).

Figure 64. Authorizer-Reported Change in Knowledge Due to MDE Conference Participation (N = 13)

| Substantial increase in knowledge, 15% | Knowledge increased in some areas, 62% | Knowledge increased in few areas, 15% | 92% |

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

■ Substantial increase in knowledge   ■ Knowledge increased in some areas
■ Knowledge increased in few areas
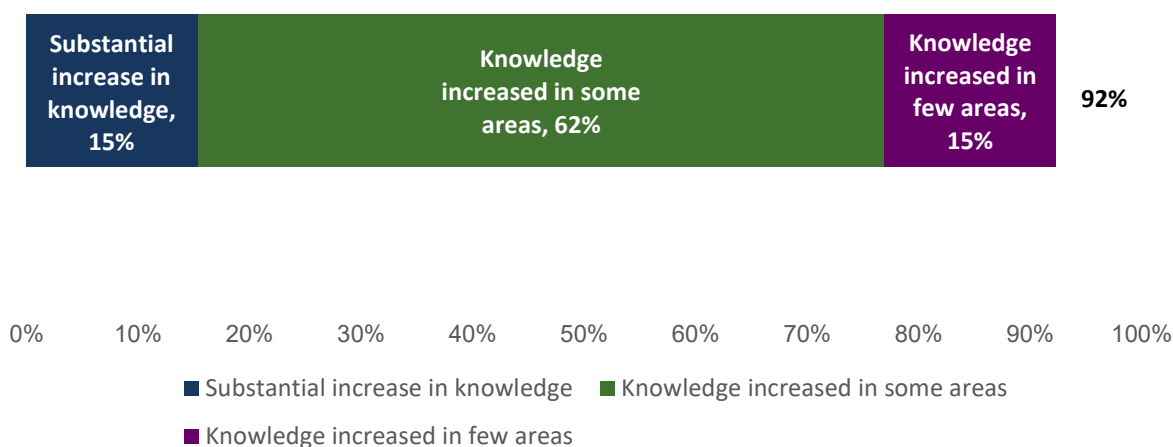
In addition to completing a survey, authorizers were asked during the interviews to describe the areas in which they had gained knowledge due to participating in MDE conference sessions. Responses fell into several categories, all of which relate to the Minnesota context or MDE regulations or requirements:

- Authorizer practices, including tracking school performance
- Information on auditing, reporting or financial systems
- MAPES-related information
- Understanding data, including using it to assess new school demand and examine equity
- Awareness of resources/content
- Support for navigating processes or resources

Each topic is discussed in the subsections below. A couple authorizers were unable to describe specific ways in which they had gained knowledge from MDE conferences

Performance Frameworks

Some authorizers stated that they learned about authorizer practices in various areas through attending MDE conferences, including authorizer performance frameworks and how school status is tracked, and learning concrete information that informed thinking about their own systems and practices (for example, renewal applications, how to approach contracts, licensing requirements). One authorizer

mentioned that the performance framework sessions were particularly helpful when they were rewriting their whole evaluation program:

> *I think one of the first sessions that I attended was a sharing out of the authorizer performance frameworks.[121] And that was really interesting. It was a point in time when our program was under corrective action and [we were] rewriting the whole program. It was very interesting to see the ways in which other authorizers approached their performance frameworks. Everything from charts and tables to narratives, the data that they were using, the way in which they rolled all the sections up into some sort of score or a color-coding system. I think that one was very helpful.*

Auditing and Financial Systems

More than half of authorizers commented on knowledge they had gained related to auditing or financial systems, and specific requirements within Minnesota (for example, the transition to using Ed-Fi software).[122] A few authorizers, quoted below, specifically mentioned a conference session that covered Ed-Fi information as helpful for them.

> *With Ed-Fi, we're all switching over, you know all federal schools are switching over to that new finance system and that was another [session] that was good for us to have a quick flash of what it [Ed-Fi] is.*

> *I do remember that finance one [at the MDE authorizer conference]. For me, a lot of the benefit of that is to be able to hear the questions that other authorizers ask that I may not have thought of or been aware of.*

> *One of the ones most recently [that] was very applicable for at least my role was Ed-Fi … at that authorizer conference, they gave us a lot of information about what that was going to look like, the purpose of Ed-Fi, the timeline for its implementation and the trainings that are upcoming. As that was the authorizer conference, having those dates, knowing that training, having that information is really good … for us to be able to impart on pre-operational leaders, making sure that the people who are going to have to be using these systems very shortly here have the dates of the trainings and get the information that they need about those things.*

MAPES

A few authorizers appreciated information about MAPES provided during MDE conferences, given the importance of the evaluation system for their own operations. One authorizer felt that a deep dive into how MAPES ratings are calculated would be helpful, even during years when they are not going through the process, to ensure they are doing everything they can to work towards higher ratings.

> *Anything with MAPES is super helpful because that's what we're being held accountable to … They did something at an authorizer conference, which I would like them to do at every authorizer conference every year, because as an authorizer I feel like we're all thinking about our MAPES scores. We want to make sure we pass and that we're doing … what we're supposed to. So, they took us through the rubric and we went literally category by category and they talked about what they're looking for and what would be evidence. And then they took our input on whether that's*

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[121] This may have been in reference to the Authorizer Portfolio School Performance Standards and Tracking session from the 2018 conference. Training content indicates that authorizers discussed academic and nonacademic outcomes, intervention strategies, adapting performance monitoring for charter school context and more.
[122] Ed-Fi is the technology used by MDE to support syncing of data systems.

fair or where that would be difficult as an authorizer to do, if it's an unfair standard they're doing. But it also really helped me prepare for MAPES because I was like, 'Okay this is exactly what we need to be doing.' And then we need to be able to prove that we're doing it. And so that helped me go back and look at our processes and clean up where we needed to.

Understanding Data

Some authorizers perceived useful takeaways from MDE sessions that covered student data related to better understanding the charter sector within the Minnesota educational context and reflecting on how they might examine data in their own school portfolios (Figure 65).

A few authorizers appreciated the session on data regarding new schools because it helped them get a better understanding of the issues the state is having with successful launch and opening of new schools.

Several authorizers spoke about how data-related sessions furthered their thinking on equity and using data to examine equitable outcomes (such as achievement) and equity in practices (such as disciplinary procedures). Some authorizers mentioned their appreciation of the focus on equity in their work context, given the importance and timeliness, specifically within the state. One authorizer perceived that even if equity-related discussions in the context of MDE conferences are surface-level, starting the conversation can promote a deeper dive into the topic in the future, with MDE or in authorizers' interactions amongst themselves.

Figure 65. Authorizer Usage of Data

Theme	Quotes
Academic Assessment Data	*We always review the state assessment data. That's always informative because then a part of our contract is also our charter contract is looking at the kids within the portfolio…how are they performing to the state, other schools, that have similar demographics and things like that. So that whole comparative analysis and how best to do that in a very reliable manner. So, I think that has been very helpful.* *I would say in general I've appreciated when we've had topics related to academic data and performance. A couple years ago we talked about these scores and growth implications that really aren't intentionally embedded and really aren't measurable through the [Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments] MCAs and the shift to NorthStar. So those are valuable to me in terms of trying to figure out how we can appropriately evaluate our portfolio.*

Theme	Quotes
Using Data to Assess New School Demand	*They've been a couple where they've [MDE] talked about new schools. Minnesota right now is having a real struggle with new schools not opening in a timely fashion or not being successful, so I think hearing some of that data and seeing it from MDE's perspective is helpful. So as a topic I think that was of interest.* *In December I thought the department did a great job presenting information about new charter school start-up and … the enrollment in new charter schools. They provided 5 years of data. And while that did not result in any change to fund of education procedures because … I'll just provide a little more background, a lot of schools are being approved. They get federal grant funds and then a number of them either fail to open because they can't get enrollment or they open with significantly less enrollment than they anticipated, like 50 kids, and kind of limp along. A few schools have opened and closed in the first months. So, the department presented this information over 5 years to demonstrate that this isn't a recent anomaly, but that this is an ongoing issue and did a really good job, I thought, of trying to get the authorizers to come to the conclusion that gee, maybe we should look at our authorizing procedures.* *[At] that most recent authorizer conference we had a very short conversation about looking … across authorizers in Minnesota; new schools that have opened and how they've opened with enrollment. In an effort to start talking about how well our new schools are being able to launch into serving students. Although I felt that that conversation didn't go far enough and it wasn't deep enough, I think the role of MDE and helping us as authorizers throughout Minnesota look at our processes and look at how successful schools are opening strong, actually opening at all. I think those are conversations that are really important. And it's nice to have somebody set the stage for that.*

Theme	Quotes
Using Data to Examine Equity	*They had a whole … presentation on discipline data. That was helpful because we're also trying to revamp our own accountability system … pre-COVID, they also had another training on discipline data and seeing the discrepancies and the [number] of students who were being suspended in district versus charter and things like that. Personally, I think it's always interesting when they look at equity-related issues. So those are usually my personal favorite of the sessions. I think even as a sector we are focusing a lot more on equity and how that shows up in schools. When MDE has the opportunity to really give us their own, their internal data, or the things that they're seeing from a high level from all of the schools, I think that's super helpful.* *In Minnesota we're very concerned about equity, well it's actually a nationwide emphasis but Minnesota has traditionally had one of the most stubborn achievement gaps between various subgroups. In almost all cases there have been at least one or two special sessions on the concept of equity. So, I would say that has been very helpful.* *We've been talking a lot about equity at our MACSA meetings, MDE starts every meeting about equity. Just … talking about it and discussing it. It has made us look at how do we know if our charter school … is equitable in their discipline, equitable in their enrollment, equitable in their hiring practices. We haven't really put the equity lens on any of that in our oversight. So, I feel like both the MACSA meetings and the MDE meetings—even NACSA had sessions on equity this year. They've all—that's the one that bubbled up the most this school year was that we need to do more in terms of accountability over equity with our charter school. And then eventually, if we ever got another charter school, to make it not just particular to our one charter school but how do we do it as a system.* *The one that jumped out at me was from the most recent authorizer conference. There was a conversation centered around suspension and suspension rates primarily as they relate to students of color across the state. And for me, even though it didn't necessarily get to what I think is the heart of the issue, I think what it did was hopefully push the envelope to allow schools to understand how are we, one, taking a look at this data. Is that data that we're looking at objective or subjective? And what are some of the … policies, procedures, training and development that staff need to understand to actually be able to mitigate some of those concerns. I think it brushed the surface of that, but I think the questions that came about because of that conversation have led to deeper conversations within authorizers for sure and hopefully within schools … So, could it have been deeper in that instance, I think so, but I was appreciative of the conversation.*

Awareness of Resources

Some authorizers perceived that their knowledge gains from MDE conferences were mostly related to understanding the variety of resources that are available for different content areas, such as school nutrition, special education compliance requirements or early learning programs (Figure 66). In some cases, authorizers felt that this information may be helpful in the future if they need to point school staff to information sources in these topic areas.

A few authorizers valued the MDE sessions as a general information source, for becoming more familiar with various processes and practices; they also appreciated guidance given during MDE sessions regarding how to access or navigate various MDE systems.

**Figure 66. Authorizer Awareness of MDE Resources**

Theme	Quotes
Availability of MDE Resources	*MDE has a ton of resources and things that at some particular point in time, I don't know exist, or are there. So, knowing that those online modules [related to school nutrition] are there and being able to reference those or direct people that are interested in information about school nutrition from that session … all those types of things are very useful.* *They did one, the one that sticks in my head is when they brought in someone from [the Minnesota Department of Human Services] basically to talk about daycare programs ... and help us understand the difference between if you have a program for children who are 33 months and under versus a preschool program. It was not what we had requested, but it did turn out to actually [be] pretty useful and is information that I have used since in navigating … with a couple of our schools.*
Guidance on Navigating MDE Systems	*There's been a number of topics related to compliance of … whether it be student data reporting, finance reporting, any time they update their systems—they've been helpful in bringing speakers in … to share a little bit about how that impacts the schools. So that's been really helpful. And I think that one of the other ones that sticks out to me is they've gone through the accountability system. And that's great because we not only see the ins and outs of the public report card, they call it, system on MDE's website. But they'll get into some of the weeds a little bit for us to help us understand how to navigate some of their other documentation that's available but just not quite as user friendly or upfront to access. So that's been really helpful too.*

Capacity and Practice

Authorizers were also asked how they would rate the MDE conferences for increasing their capacity to manage and support their schools. Nearly all (92%) reported that their capacity improved in at least a

few areas, and most (61%) reported that their capacity improved in at least some areas through MDE conference participation (Figure 67).

Figure 67. Perceived Changes in Capacity Due to MDE Conference Participation (N = 13)
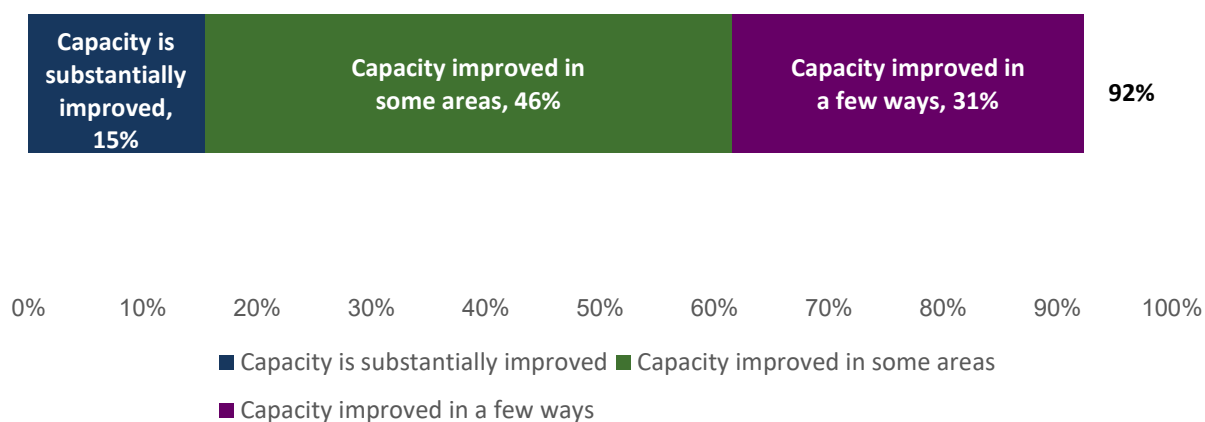
When authorizers were asked during the interviews to talk about how MDE conference sessions had increased their capacity, the overall sentiment was that the sessions helped them build awareness of MDE's expectations. Some authorizers reported that knowing MDE's expectations helped them be more effective with schools in terms of accountability and in some cases ensure they have adequate staff with appropriate training. A few of their comments follow.

> *I think part of it is just always being aware [of] what's expected of us. Because then for us to be doing our job of providing quality oversight, there's a ripple effect there. Then for us to be doing our jobs, we need to be providing better oversight of the charter school.*

> *There have been times at the authorizer conferences when they [MDE] would talk about a specific affidavit for example, or something specific that we had to do that they would share more insights or give us a little bit more information on. And that's been helpful because they do put out guidance every year. But sometimes the opportunity to hear more about it or see changes that are coming around the line around things that we have requirements on has been helpful, has built our capacity, made us more efficient or effective in responding to what the state needs us to do to be effective authorizers.*

> *I think it's important that we have these conferences and opportunities for training so that we can have a full understanding of all of the work and the impact of it. And so that we [authorizer staff] can be adequately staffed and trained.*

On the survey, authorizers were asked how helpful they found the MDE authorizer conference topics for increasing their knowledge or capacity. The topic rated most helpful was performance tracking and standards, with 85% of authorizers indicating they found this content at least somewhat helpful (Figure 68). Nearly three-quarters (72%) found the topic of early learning programs and leadership at least

somewhat helpful for their roles as authorizers, while 69% found the topics of school supports and regional center for excellence and designing accountability frameworks to be at least somewhat helpful. Compared to other topics, ready-to-open standards was considered the least helpful topic by authorizers; 60% of authorizers found this topic at least somewhat helpful.

Figure 68. Perceived Helpfulness of MDE Authorizer Conference Topics
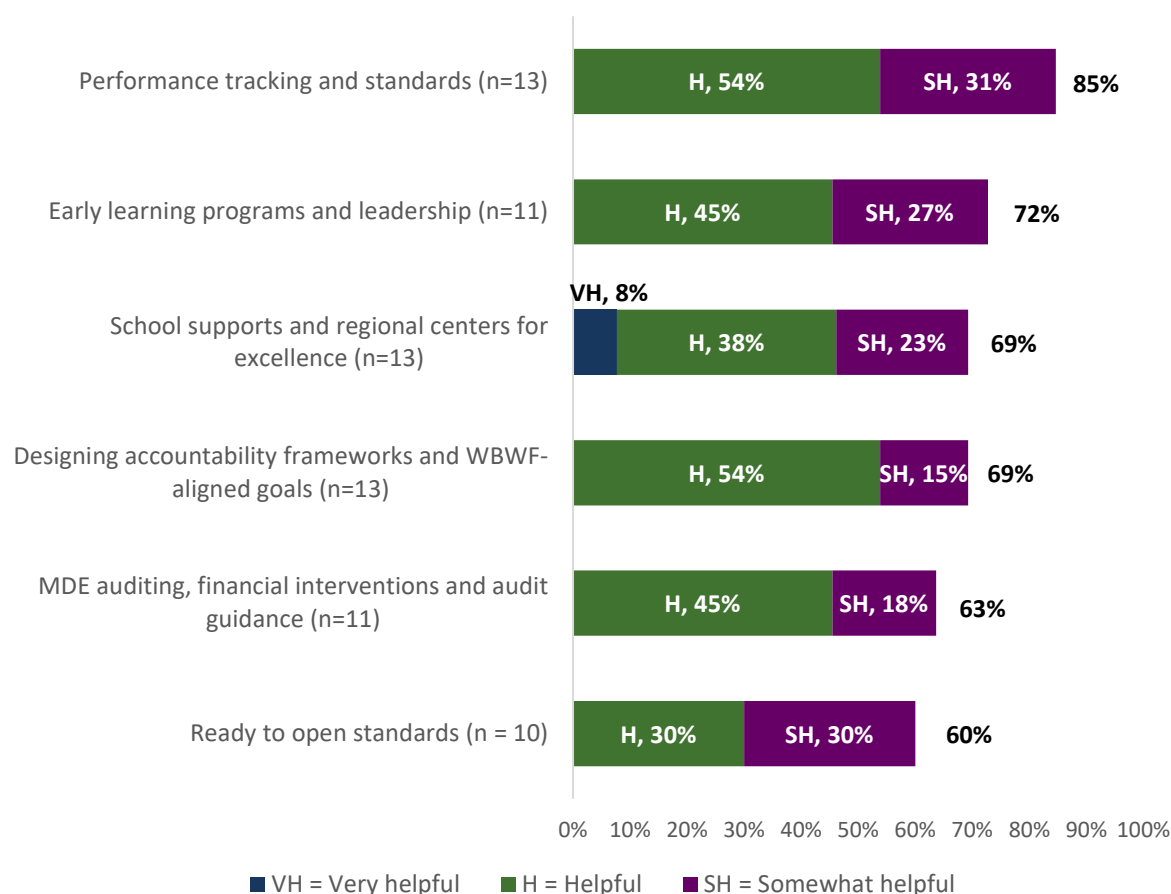
Note: The number of authorizers responding to each of these items varies in some instances as authorizers had the option to select N/A if the item was not relevant to them. Percentages are based on the total number of authorizers perceiving the item as applicable.

Authorizers were also asked to indicate how they perceived the MDE conferences with regard to building their capacity in different areas. Three quarters (75%) of responding authorizers found MDE conferences at least somewhat helpful for building capacity with financial management and providing TA and support to schools (Figure 69). Two-thirds (66%) of authorizers found MDE conferences at least somewhat helpful for improving capacity for fiscal oversight and communicating effectively with school leaders. Half of authorizers (50%) reported that MDE sessions were at least somewhat helpful at building capacity for making decisions related to opening or closing schools, and for effective management of a school portfolio.

Figure 69. Perceived Helpfulness of MDE Conferences for Building Capacity in Various Areas (N = 12)
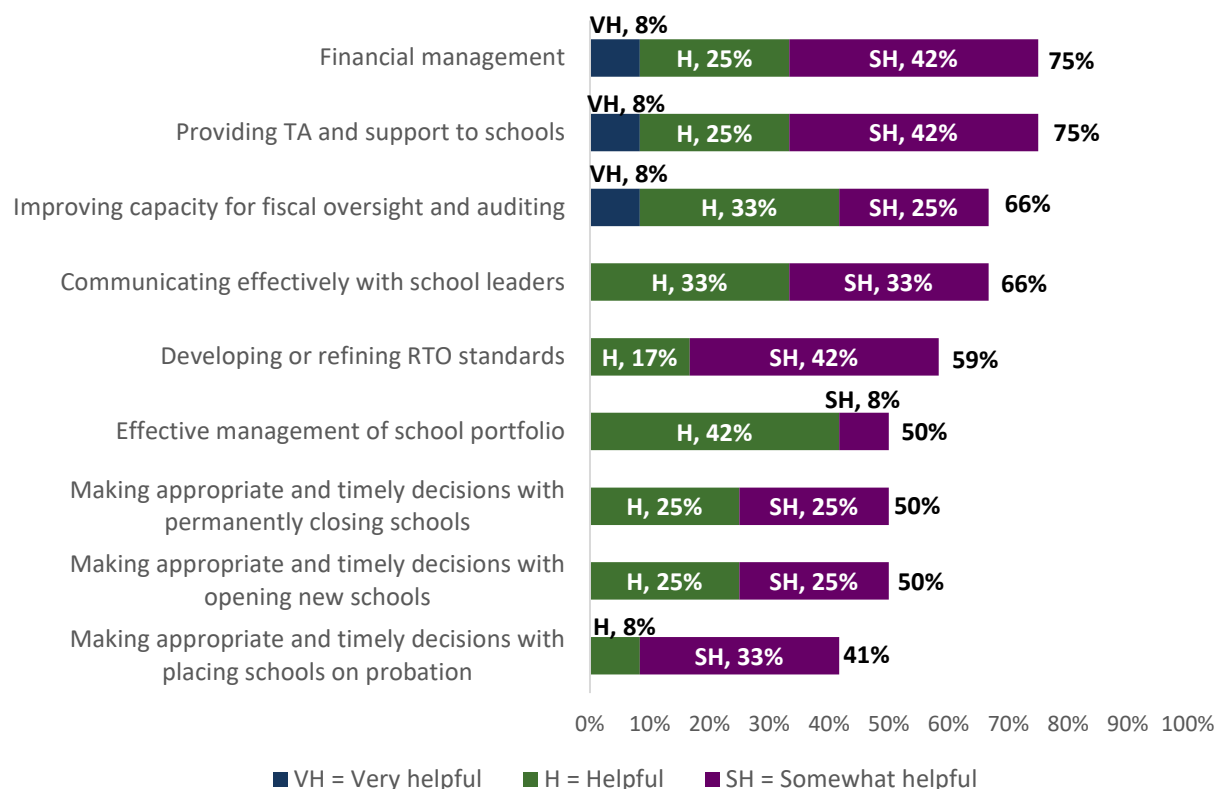
During authorizer interviews, participants had the opportunity to identify MDE conference topics that they felt impacted their capacity or practice. The specific content described by authorizer staff aligned primarily with the following topic categories in the survey: providing TA and support to schools and effective management of school portfolios. Each of these are discussed in more detail in the subsections below.

Providing TA and Support to Schools

Some authorizers felt that their ability to provide TA and support to their charter schools was impacted by attending and gaining knowledge from MDE sessions. For example, one authorizer felt that their relationship with schools was more structured or formalized, while others took action to connect schools with the resources shared by MDE, including presenters as well as content.

> Because we created systems from all those [MDE] trainings, I feel the charter schools see us now more as an authorizer. That's such a vague way to say it but it's just like … it's definitely more of a role. Like, we attend almost all their board meetings. We're there to make sure they're operating okay and that their kids are achieving. I think before it didn't feel—I guess it's that accountability—I don't know if they felt as accountable to what our role as an authorizer is and now I feel like they're much more aware of what we're looking for and what they need to be doing.

I think above all else, [MDE conference sessions] gave me a better sense of who to go to [at MDE] when I have specific questions. And I actually ended up referring her [the presenter] to a couple schools on content-specific stuff.

Effective Management of School Portfolio

Authorizers described proactive actions they planned to take based on information from MDE sessions related to the Minnesota Student Survey, such as revising new school and expansion application processes/renewals or enhancing site visit processes. One authorizer also described the issues they learned about through a food and nutrition session at an MDE conference related to licensing requirements and how this informed their readiness-to-open checklist with schools.

It was something that … MDE highlighted and something we were noticing. We put a lot of time and energy into making sure a school is ready to open and then we just trusted that our schools, because they go through a good expansion process, can expand without those check points. So, we created a ready-to-open [checklist] for expansions as well, just because we felt we needed those touch points around that. And looked to the work of our colleagues as well as stuff that we experienced with both our financial training but also in the conference.

After this last session, there was … information about the Minnesota Student Survey. So, our schools receive a quarterly newsletter that shares school success stories, technical assistance if it's available. Highlights from different charter organizations and what information they have that they're sharing out or learning opportunities. I was going to put in the next newsletter just about the MDE conference and some takeaways. One of the takeaways was the Minnesota Student Survey would be coming out, I think it is the next school year. The person that runs that division was going to proactively be reaching out to the charter sector, so just to give the schools a heads up that that was coming.

It's good for her [the presenter] to communicate [food and nutrition-related licensing requirements] to us because then in readiness to open on our checklist we have: provide evidence to us that you've verified that your kitchen—if you're planning to serve food—meets your city's inspection requirements to get a license to serve food. ... their [city] inspector might come out and just do a walkthrough and tell you, you might want to check those tiles for asbestos or whatever. So, it's helpful for us to also know what resources can we connect schools to, so let's put our heads around this problem that you're seeing occur. And then let's figure out on the front end what can we do on our ready-to-open checklist so that it doesn't become an issue. That's just a very tiny specific example, but if we looked at our ready-to-open checklist, I just glanced at it and that one just popped out at me but there's examples like that woven throughout.

Recommendations for MDE-led Conferences

Throughout the interviews, authorizers made several recommendations for how to improve the MDE-led conferences in the future. Recommendations include the following, each of which will be discussed individually throughout this section.

- Differentiating sessions/strands for staff of different experience levels or interests
- Making sessions applicable to authorizer roles (or more relevant to authorizers)
- Having more in-depth and interactive sessions

- More sessions related to equity
- Increased frequency of authorizer training sessions

Differentiating Conference Content

Multiple authorizers suggested differentiating or tailoring conference content to better suit the variety of needs within the Minnesota authorizing community (Figure 70). Several examples were shared, including training or onboarding new authorizing staff on authorizing in the Minnesota context, considering the variation in knowledge needs among different authorizer types and designing sessions that appeal to different types of authorizers (charity organizations, school districts, etc.), or providing authorizers with the flexibility to attend sessions based on different authorizing content areas (academic oversight, governance). One authorizer suggested how the conference structure could be revamped to allow for more content differentiation through a more flexible structure and breakout sessions based on role or interest.

Figure 70. Recommendations for Differentiating Conference Content

Theme	Quotes
More Support for New Authorizers	*NACSA does boot camps for new authorizers. And it's almost like taking a college course. So there were modules, you had to do work and you had to read and go for a live session and learn about it. That was really helpful for me, when we were looking at how to redo our processes, it was kind of like authorizing 101. And I feel like that would've been nicer to have right here within the state … I felt by taking over our authorizing duties that I was already supposed to have all the knowledge. That would be my biggest critique, I guess. is there's nothing here for new authorizers or even new staff members to authorizing. Your authorizing team better, on their own, take care of their people. And maybe that's … unique to us because we're so small, but there wasn't a real team that … there was nobody to train me in and teach me how to do authorizing. Like, I was on my own to learn it all. So, it's probably unique to us being so small and no knowing, but it was kind of lonely. I have no idea how to fix what we're doing wrong. It would've been nice to have some training on just basics of authorizing.*
Differentiated Content for New vs. Experienced Authorizers	*Having somebody come in and talk about the student survey that happens every 3 years and take an hour to talk about it, for a new authorizer it might be interesting. For those of us that have been around, it wasn't a good use of our time. So, they could maybe even have two strands. They could have a strand for new authorizers, which would be different items than those of us that have been around a long time. A lot of us have been around a long time.*

Theme	Quotes
More Flexibility to Attend Sessions that Align with Authorizing Content Areas	*It would be really nice if they had … it sectioned by academic oversight— here's two things you could be doing and looking for. And then that's where they can put in the stuff that I feel confident in already. Like when they were talking about the North Star report and [Every Student Succeeds Act] ESSA accountability. That was the most boring part for me, but I get it … that's what I live and breathe. But for other authorizers, that might be needed. And if there was another section on operational oversight, what does that even mean? What things are you looking for? Here's a couple ideas and things you should be looking for ... And then they could do board governance and they could do financial. Like here are the four areas you need to be providing oversight over a charter school, here's some best practices in a couple of those areas … as a structure that would be really nice. And maybe then team members that are bigger could send different people … if it's board of governance in the morning, the big authorizers could send the one person who does that on their team and then they don't have to stay for the afternoon or something. That flexibility would be nice.* *When we do our [authorizing] network conference [with schools], it's 2 days long. They can go to whatever sessions they feel are applicable to them. We don't require just everybody in your seats listening to what we think is important. They help develop the conference; they help facilitate … There's flexibility on if you're a board member—go here, if you're a school teacher—go there. A school leader of 20 years doesn't have to go to a new school leader session. If [MDE] operated like that and brought in more … peers to do sessions … and really tried to give people flexibility then, you will just attend from 9 a.m.–5 p.m. and please fill out the evaluation form. I think there has to be a better approach than that. That's what most conferences are now. If you're really going to have a conference, they're breakout sessions or chat sessions where people can ask questions of one another on different topics … so they can have breakout sessions where we're going to talk about renewal, how do each of you do it, and we have each other's documents in front of us. Or we're going to talk expansions.*

Sessions Applicable to Authorizer Roles

Although most authorizers found the content of the MDE conferences helpful, some authorizers expressed that presenters did not always understand the roles and responsibilities of authorizers, or presented content that was not always relevant (Figure 71). One recommendation made by these authorizers was for guest presenters to have a better understanding of authorizer roles, which would ideally enable presenters to tailor session content to be more relevant for authorizers' scope of work.

Figure 71. Recommendation's for Making Sessions applicable to Authorizer Roles

Theme	Quotes
Session Content Should be Relevant to Authorizers' Roles	*We've had a lot of great sessions in the past where different parts of the department will come and speak to us. But they often don't understand … what the role of the authorizer is. So … the food service folks will come but they'll give us a presentation as though we're working in the cafeteria. Or as though we are school staff. And … we don't have access to any of that. Like, we are not part of the school staff. We do not have access to private data. And so sometimes those presentations are great but only 30% of the content applies. Versus, I think if there was more clarity around the particular group that they're presenting to, maybe there could be 80% hits.* *It should be more, 'Here's what you should know and be seeing from your school' kind of thing versus getting into the weeds of [what] Ed-Fi is. So, I think it's the way the presentations are designed that is in need of improvement. Does that make sense? I don't have to know what Ed-Fi is. I need to know what my schools should be doing, what behavior I should be seeing from them. How do they want us to help them? Where are the resources I can send on to them if they need help. They really have to start relating to authorizers as authorizers.* *Another session was about assessment which could've been really good, because with COVID and the lack of academic data at high levels, this assessment conversation could've been really powerful. But instead, the conversation was … how to access and analyze data at the classroom level. Well, that's just not what authorizers do. We don't work with individual teachers the way that a school leader would. And we don't get down into classroom-level data. It would've been helpful and more impactful if that had shifted ever so slightly to say, 'Here's the types of assessments we're imagining happening in schools. How could we take this existing data, these existing results, and use it to support decision-making at an authorizer level when you don't have your MCA data.'*

Interactive, In-Depth Sessions

Several authorizers suggested that conference content could be more interactive, action-oriented or in-depth in the topics covered (Figure 72). Specifically, a few reflected on productive discussions they had participated in as part of previous MDE conferences or MACSA meetings and felt that recreating interactive peer-learning sessions during each conference, or devoting more time to these types of interactions, would enhance MDE conferences and potentially lead to more authorizer engagement in session content. Some authorizers suggested bringing in external presenters to cover conference material and one indicated that bringing in outside perspectives or guest speakers might help with making sessions "more vibrant and informational." Additionally, one authorizer mentioned that they are

only going to the conferences because they are a requirement, so bringing in an external presenter with thorough knowledge of the content would be helpful.

Figure 72. Authorizer Recommendations for Interactive, In-Depth Sessions

Theme	Quotes
More Depth	*I'd like to see more development, where we get into the depth of different topics … rather than doing what we need to do to keep authorizers informed. Or if we're changing a process, getting our input, helping us understand where the status is. I think there's a need for both. But it would be nice to see where [for us, as] authorizers, the conference could step out and get ahead of some topics.* *I feel there's no continuum. It's just basically a presentation unless somebody asks the questions then there might be a conversation around it, but they don't do full continuum for that subject. Like I said to go one step further after the presentation and talk about what can be used. And that's where it would be very valuable to have a panel maybe of authorizers. You've got several of us that have been around forever, and they usually don't go deep enough. It's usually more of an overview. You know we could have working sessions, where we could be looking at our data with somebody from the department helping us individualize it. There are so many ways that we could go a lot deeper … What's interesting is if you've got a whole day you might have six different speakers [but] they don't necessarily follow each other in any order. It's not consistent. Data wouldn't be followed by somebody who is going to present but is also going to incorporate that data … with the other speaker. Very isolated, very siloed, I guess the best way I can say it: very siloed.*
External Presenters to Increase Engagement	*I think they should engage people who do facilitation as a practice. Which is hard, because authorizing is very wonky work. It's very specific, it's very bureaucratic. It's a lot of statute and other regulations, so there's just an inherent dryness to it. But if they could work with somebody who understood content delivery a little bit better, that would probably be helpful.*

Theme	Quotes
Peer Sharing and Interactions	*One method that has been really helpful at NACSA and at MACSA … has been working through problems of practice. And I've even taken that idea and implemented that with the schools in our portfolio during our annual meeting to give them not only the opportunity to share best practices but to say here's this thing that I am trying to work through. Here's where I am at, now can we brainstorm multiple paths forward for it. At MACSA we had looked at new school openings. And if you were given whatever information about a school, would you and your portfolio have chosen to let that school open? Or would you have said you all need to pause, you're not ready to open? That was a really great way for all the authorizers whose internal work is so different from one another, to try and come together and figure out what are those key common points? What are the things we could all agree on and how does this decision-making then impact the whole ecosystem? And it could be very powerful, because I think the Charter Center and MDE see things in a different perspective. Or they sometimes have different information that they're bringing to things that authorizers just may not [be] privy to. So I think problems of practice would be helpful. I think supporting some sort of sharing best practices or letting that happen more would be helpful.* *MDE could focus on … creating opportunities for authorizers to present—and this doesn't cost money, that's the good thing—present on what they do for oversight. Because I doubt anyone is sitting down unless something comes up that's a concern and reading somebody else's authorizing manual, right?! But I would tune in to see what another Minnesota authorizer was doing and samples of the work. I find that intriguing and interesting. That is valuable to me, more than going and being with a group of authorizers from all over the country that do things ... their lives are all different. So, learning from one another I think is always the best in Minnesota. And we have some struggling authorizers, some of which now have been terminated. But maybe they wouldn't have been terminated had their training ... I don't know if it's training, had these sessions been made available. So, a chance for them to learn.*

Equity

Some authorizers shared that they want a greater focus on equity in MDE conference sessions, but also suggested covering this topic differently or from different perspectives (Figure 73). For example, having more in-depth discussions or having an outside facilitator.

Figure 73. Authorizer Recommendations Focused on Equity

Theme	Quotes
Discussions and Sharing Among Authorizers	*Even just the facilitation. Bringing the authorizers together and having a panel and having them talk. Because the authorizers will come up with some pretty incredible information and what they're doing with equity and inclusion.*
Equity in Curricula	*With what's going on right now in the country with equity … it would be great if we could take the lead or look at what's happening with curriculum. Can we then have something that would give us more knowledge of how we can perhaps look at how our schools are delivering that type of information. Or even requirements on a legislative level in terms of, is there area for improvement that we look at while other people have been marginalized and have been omitted from history and things like that. I think there's a need for both, but I would like to see more of that advancement because I think it's a missed opportunity.*
A Need for Outside Facilitators	*I believe on the front end they talked about how equity was supposed to be this big focus. But I think the general feeling was that they totally missed the mark on it. All the presenters were all white women within the department, so it felt like disconnected. And that's going back to the point that … they probably need to bring outside facilitators or people outside the department to do some of the sessions.*
More-in-depth discussions about equity practices	*Minnesota has these 10 equity commitments that they throw up on the screen every time we go to a workshop … they circle the ones we're going to talk about and then never return to it. And the rest of the presentation is not even a little bit related to equity or equitable outcomes.* *They sort of tried to get there at the last one but it was more about … Like, we looked at discipline data, but not really in the context of, 'Okay, how do you use this to draw conclusions to start investigating inequity at the school?' Or what some of the practices might be that are producing these outcomes at the school. It seems like they want to start down that road, but they never quite get far enough.*

Frequency of Sessions

A few authorizers suggested that more frequent, shorter sessions would be more effective than having all sessions in one day.

> *Any of those processes, they touched on ready to open, they touched on market saturation. Anything—they could pick a couple [of] topics and maybe have them more often. We're going to have a half-day workshop on closure or annual oversight procedures and bring in a few*

authorizers or allow authorizers to share their practices. Versus, we're going to have this one time a year because we're also checking off our box for the federal government.

Authorizer Changes in Practices and School Quality

This section of this report addresses the first subquestion under Evaluation Question 3: **What are authorizers' perceptions of how changes in their practices impact the quality of their charter schools?**

To answer this question, we asked authorizers to describe how changes in practice that may have resulted from the trainings and conferences have improved the quality of their schools. During the interviews, authorizers typically answered this question by mentioning ways in which they have changed their own practice that has improved their ability to support their schools and could potentially increase the quality of their schools in the future.[123] Some authorizers attributed these changes to specific CSP-funded trainings, some mentioned that they noticed these changes as a result of the trainings in general and some did not explicitly attribute these changes to trainings but still mentioned ways in which they have improved their authorizing capabilities.

The following section outlines a few of the ways in which authorizers improved their practices that increased their ability to support their schools, including more of a focus on finances, a better use of data to support student learning, increased accountability systems, and a more productive relationship with new and current charter schools.

Authorizer Improvements in Ability to Support Schools

Financial Management of Charter Schools

Several authorizers noted that they perceive that CSP-funded trainings and MDE conferences have impacted their awareness of schools' financial situations as well as how to interact with the schools with regard to their finances (Figure 74). These authorizers have also noticed that their schools have increased their financial management and awareness over time. Specifically, these authorizers noted that the CSP-funded trainings made them more aware of their schools' financial situations and gave them an understanding of how to create long-term sustainable finances for their schools. One authorizer mentioned that they have "more of an eye on finances" than they did previously, and specifically attributed that to the NACSA conference. Another authorizer noted that the trainings and conferences provided them with a "refresher" on how to look at things in different ways, which in turn helped the schools develop more suitable long-term finances.

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[123] Authorizers often had difficulty making a direct connection between a change in their practice that resulted from attendance at a conference and how that change has improved the quality of their schools.

Figure 74. Authorizer Changes Financial Management of Schools

Theme	Quotes
More Focus on School Finances	*I think as a department we have a little bit more of an eye on finances than we did once upon a time … There was a few year period where all of a sudden a handful of our schools were going into the statutory operating debt. We had to take a step back and [ask] how is this happening all of a sudden. Part of it was competition in the environment. Enrollment is the key driver of finances. And so competition for enrollment was there. So we had to do a pivot and say we need to have a sharper eye on finances and if we're seeing significant dips in fund balances or we're observing board meetings and it's clear that the board does not have a good grounding in school finance then we would intervene. We've been able to kind of flip that around.* *We look at compliance issues [the schools] have. We look at financial indicators, like audit findings and things like ... their fund balance and whether they receive various awards for their financial performance.* *We have participated in finance and governance trainings and we again try to pass that forward to our schools. I think that that is an area where some of our schools are still emerging. We were just reviewing data related to this yesterday. Our evaluation of school quality in those areas.* *That's a really good point because I do think the financial management training was helpful. And if we had had a school that we were wrestling with a very particular financial issue at that particular moment, I might say, 'Oh, yes, that training really impacted that particular school.' But as it happened we didn't have that scenario. So, it's not that that training wasn't that valuable. I just didn't link it directly to one school rising in quality at that time.*
Effort to Establish Sustainable Long-term Finances	*I think that obviously … and we are in a position where our schools really overall are in very strong financial positions. But I do think financial sustainability is central to charter schools from the aspect of money rather than the academic perspective. So us having just a refresher in grounding and a new way to look at things, I think is helpful. Even though we don't have anybody that's really in a risky financial situation right now, it allows us to continue to look and look at things in different ways potentially and have conversations that could, down the line, help lead to them being sustainable.* *… I think the only things that would've been different from this 4 years—or whatever compared to the previous—is the focus on academic performance. And really having long-term sustainable finances. Those are the areas in which we've kind of hit on in our evaluations.*

Data-Driven Toolkit

A couple of authorizers commented that both themselves and their schools have become more data-driven as a result of the CSP-funded trainings or MDE conferences, including using data to assess what students are learning, what are the contributing factors to their learning and in what ways can the schools better support the students (Figure 75). Another authorizer noted that using data to approach these topics has specifically helped schools in "their resource allocation and their hiring" decisions. One authorizer specifically talked about how the MDE conferences led them to become better program evaluators within their schools, specifically for environmental literacy.

Figure 75. Authorizer Perceptions of Schools' Use of Data

Theme	Quotes
Using Data to Better Support Student Learning	*I think one of the things that comes to mind would be, again ... how we look at data. And a simple example of that is are we disaggregating? Do we really know whether kids are learning in your school? And then we take it a step further and say if I've got a cohort of students that are not learning, then what are the contributing factors? I want to know as an authorizer what are you doing to better support these kids. So that gets into instruction, that gets into curriculum, that gets into teacher effectiveness. And all of these things, again, having opportunities to see how others have dealt with these or things you should look for I've found to be valuable.* *Probably not the MDE ones, but to some degree NACSA conferences I would imagine. Because I think our ... the thing that we point to a lot is that every school is independent but we also look at them as an aggregate portfolio. And so the important student subpopulations for us are Black students, EL students and students with [individualized education programs] IEPs or [special education] students. So, what we do is we pull out those subgroups and then aggregate the portfolio. So in the last 5 years, the results of those student groups has slowly gone up. And so for us we feel like that's ... an indication that we've been doing the right things. And that we focused on the right items in the last 5-plus years.*

Theme	Quotes
Schools Have Become More Data-driven	*I can say, this is actually related to sessions we've been to, is I can say that overall in Minnesota—because I've been working in education for years here—is we are not a very data-driven state in terms of if you look at the school level. People are adverse to testing; it's almost like data sucks everyone's energy. I've even tried to not use that word and just say information, you know what information we have. And what feedback do we have … But I will say that the schools we authorize have become much more data-driven. I don't know if they would like us to say those words but they've become much more attuned to what are their measures for climate, what are their measures for finance? What are their measures for academic performance. And how do they know that they're making progress towards their goals? And are they, and if now, what are they doing? Because of the touchpoint meetings we have, they're much more considering feedback and data when they are thinking about their resource allocation and their hiring and those kinds of things.*
Better Program Evaluation Knowledge and Skills	*I guess I would go back to environmental education. It feels like … We learn a lot at those conferences and I think we bring back and pass forward a lot to our schools, just in terms of resources that are available, professional development that's out there, grants that are out there. In addition to really beginning to develop for ourselves some evaluation tools that schools can use and helping them refine those for their own particular context. So I would say that that comes to mind really clearly. And the quality of schools, their ability to evaluate student's environmental literacy has increased a lot as we have become better at evaluating that.*

Increased Accountability Systems

Another authorizer-level change resulting from the training that can potentially improve the quality of charter schools is improved accountability systems. For example, one authorizer discussed how the trainings taught them about other accountability initiatives happening across the county, which helped initiate conversations to create a more balanced accountability system within their own schools (Figure 76). A couple of authorizers also expressed that there was value in establishing a more comprehensive system for tracking schools' progress in academic, finances, governance and oversight, beyond what one authorizer described as "just checking the box[es]."

Figure 76. Authorizers Perceptions of Increased Accountability Systems to Track School Progress

Theme	Quotes
Increased Accountability	*Kind of similar, just now that we're holding our charter schools to more accountability and we have a system for it, in general we learned that at our MDE meetings, we learned it at MACSA and then it was heightened at NACSA. I feel they definitely feel more accountability, I think our charter school, just filling out the annual assessment rubric. Having a formal site visit at least every year, we drop in more often with periodic—now we do more virtual drop-ins. But that way … I guess they're just more and more aware of [accountability] than they probably were in the past.*
More Balanced Accountability System	*I am going to go back to probably our multiple measurements project, that third initiative (the senior director) was talking about, of trying to create a more balanced accountability system for our schools to measure student learning. And I would say that these trainings where I've been able to network and kind of learn about other similar initiatives across the country, that's been helpful for us to bring back and have conversations.*

More Productive Relationships with New and Current Schools

In addition to better use of data, authorizers also reported on a better relationship with their schools' administrations based on CSP-funded or MDE authorizer trainings they have received (Figure 77). One authorizer noted that their relationship with their schools is an ongoing process and that there is "no question" that the skills developed as a result of attending the trainings have been transferred to their relationships with their schools. On a similar note, another authorizer said that they have established a rapport with schools with the understanding that they are there to help, leading to more involvement in the school's activities. As for their relationship with new schools, one authorizer mentioned that the topics covered at the conferences helped them realize the importance of the first few years of a new school, which led them to set up a "special cadre position" to provide ongoing support to new school leaders.

Figure 77. Authorizer Perceptions of Relationships with Current and New Schools

Theme	Quotes
More Productive Relationship with Current Schools	*I just know that the ... higher my performance as an authorizer, based on my skill set and development and learning, there's no question, [it] is transferred in my relationships and dealings with my school. And so I hope that as I continue to develop and learn, that I can share this and raise the bar for my schools. And better understand what should not be tolerated and what can be achieved. So it is constantly looking at expectations, being realistic. But I don't know that I can look at advancement if I am just sort of status quo. So I just think it's an ongoing process to be your very best.* *I think for the most part there's this relationship between our portfolio schools and we as authorizers that we were working in their best interest at all times and if we don't know the answer, we know how to find the answer. And I think there's a huge value in that, and whether that is due to training that we've attended or a good solid relationship with the MDE, I am not really sure. But I have to believe that part of it is due to the fact that we do participate and we are up to speed on what's going on and what affects our schools.* *Again, I can't trace this back to a specific training for which we received reimbursement, but I would say overall the fact that we've become more aware that transparency is very important in this work. And to have the ... we have the performance framework in a Google [document] and we share that with all board members and the school leader and [authorizer] board members and our staff and so at all times anybody can go and see ... what is the status of this school today when it comes to renewal. So are we on track? Are we not, what areas are we falling behind? And because of that, we can have discussions early about what are you doing to address the different areas so we can have those discussions with the schools and so that they have time to respond to the question themselves.*
Supporting New Schools	*One of the things we've implemented and I don't think this is necessarily prompted by a specific training but more along the lines of supporting new schools. The first few years of schools is so important in setting up a successful future. Opening new schools and supporting new schools is definitely a topic that has been discussed at NACSA conferences. But also it was just actually a recent topic with the MDE authorizer conference in December also. But one of the things we've done in recognizing that these first few years are so important is to set up a special cadre position who works as a mentor with new schools. So they meet at least once a month if not more often than that, just in a nonevaluative supportive role to try and help build connections and relationships and provide support and just be that … that role for our new school leaders.*

Key Takeaways

In this section we discuss authorizers' perceptions of how changes in their practices impact the quality of their charter schools. Although authorizers sometimes had trouble making the connection between the trainings/conferences and school quality during the interviews, some authorizers mentioned ways in which they have changed their own practice that has improved their ability to support their schools and could potentially increase the quality of their schools. This included better financial management of their schools, including more focus on school finances and the effort to develop long-term finances; more of a focus on using data to support student learning; an increased and more balanced accountability system for evaluating schools; and a better understanding of how to support new schools and build relationships with current schools.

Authorizer Quality

This section of this report addresses the second subquestion under Evaluation Question 3: **How has the quality of authorizers changed during the CSP grant term?**

To answer this question, we used the MAPES ratings to track progress over two points in time. The first time point was 2015–2016, prior to MDE's 2017 CSP grant award, and the second time point was 2020–2021, after the 2017 CSP grant award.[124] MAPES ratings are individual ratings on a 0–4 scale that authorizers receive every 5 years in various performance measures grouped within two categories: 1) authorizer capacity and infrastructure and 2) authorizer processes and decision-making. Overall, these ratings are meant to categorize an authorizer's performance in holding schools accountable for the terms of their charter and to "identify high-quality authorizing practices to promote authorizer excellence in Minnesota."[125] In this section, we discuss the MAPES ratings system and outcomes in more detail and analyze how authorizer MAPES ratings and MAPES performance measures have changed during the CSP grant term. We will also tie in some of these findings with the survey response and/or interview findings from earlier sections to provide a more comprehensive picture of how authorizer quality has changed.

MAPES Ratings and Outcomes

Figure 78 provides an overview of the MAPES ratings scale.[126] Authorizers who receive a MAPES overall rating of 3.60 or higher are considered "exemplary" and receive public recognition for their achievements. Any authorizer who receives a rating of "commendable" or higher (at least 2.80 MAPES overall rating) is eligible to be identified for best practices in authorizing. Those authorizers who receive

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[124] MDE partnered with a third party to conduct the review and assess each authorizer. ICF is not involved in the rating of the authorizers. In this section we are providing a summary of key findings.

[125] See MDE's web page on Authorizer Performance for more information.

[126] Data for Figure 77 was taken from *Minnesota Authorizer Performance Evaluation System (MAPES) Ratings and Outcomes* document found on the Authorizer Performance page of the MDE website.

an overall MAPES rating lower than 2.00 are ineligible to submit authorizing plans for the next 5 years and may need to undertake a corrective action plan to maintain their status as an authorizer.[127]

Figure 78. MAPES Ratings and Outcomes

Rating	Classification	Outcomes
3.60–4.00	Exemplary	• "Exemplary" authorizer performance recognition (certificate and publicity) • Expedited review of authorizing plan updates for the next 5 years • Expedited review of affidavits and other requests • Eligible to be identified for best practices in authorizing • Invited by commissioner to share authorizer practices at MDE • Other recognitions as determined by MDE
2.80–3.59	Commendable	• "Commendable" authorizer performance recognition (certificate) • Expedited review of authorizing plan updates for the next 5 years • Expedited review of affidavits and other requests • Eligible to be identified for best practices in authorizing • Other recognitions as determined by MDE
2.00–2.79	Satisfactory	• Eligible to submit authorizing plans for the next 5 years • Other recognitions as determined by MDE
1.00–1.99	Approaching Satisfactory	• Ineligible to submit authorizing plans for the next 5 years • May be subject to corrective action status • Does not have authority to charter new schools, accept transfers or initiate expansion requests while in corrective action
0.00–0.99	Unsatisfactory/ Incomplete	• Ineligible to submit authorizing plans for the next 5 years • May be subject to corrective action status • Does not have authority to charter new schools, accept transfers or initiate expansion requests while in corrective action

Source: Minnesota Authorizer Performance Evaluation System (MAPES) Ratings and Outcomes.

Authorizer MAPES Overall Ratings

Figure 79 displays authorizer MAPES overall ratings over two rounds, the first starting in 2015 and the second starting in 2020. In total, 12 of the 13 current authorizers received MAPES overall ratings for both rounds of evaluation. Overall, Friends of Education achieved the highest MAPES ratings at both points in time, receiving ratings of 3.90 and 3.99, respectively. Ten of the 12 authorizers increased their MAPES overall rating between Round 1 and Round 2, with Student Achievement Minnesota achieving the highest increase of 1.70 overall points. Three authorizers—Minnesota Guild of Public Charter

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[127] For more information on the MAPES review process, see MDE's web page on Authorizer Performance.

Schools, Pillsbury United Communities and Northfield Public School District—received an Approaching Satisfactory rating in 2021, making them subject to corrective action status.

Figure 79. MAPES Overall Ratings by Authorizer

Authorizer	Round 1 Overall Rating (2015–16)	Round 2 Overall Rating (2020–21)	Round 2 Rating	Change (+/-)
Friends of Education	3.90	3.99	Exemplary	+0.09
University of St. Thomas	3.70	3.86	Exemplary	+0.16
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center	3.44	3.81	Exemplary	+0.37
Student Achievement Minnesota	1.85	3.53	Commendable	+1.70
Novation Education Opportunities	2.39	3.25	Commendable	+0.86
Bethel University	1.60	3.06	Commendable	+1.46
Innovative Quality Schools	2.45	2.51	Satisfactory	+0.06
Volunteers of America – Minnesota	1.43	2.25	Satisfactory	+0.82
Chisago Lakes School District	0.88	2.18	Satisfactory	+1.30
Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools	1.15	1.63	Approaching Satisfactory	+0.48
Pillsbury United Communities	2.10	1.38	Approaching Satisfactory	-0.72
Northfield Public School District	1.37	1.30	Approaching Satisfactory	-0.07

Source: MAPES Round 1 and 2 final reports

Note: The overall rating is based on weighted scores received for each performance measure. Authorizers are sorted according to overall MAPES rating in Round 2. Three authorizers were included in Round 1 but are no longer authorizers. These authorizers, and their Round 1 overall ratings, were: Winona Area Public School District (1.50), Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center (1.57) and St. Catherine University (1.62). One authorizer, Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing was just approved in 2019, so they did not receive MAPES ratings during the first round. Where applicable, MAPES ratings are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

MAPES Performance Measures

Each authorizer's overall MAPES rating is calculated using a series of weighted individual ratings within two performance measures frameworks: 1) Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure, which accounts for 25% of the overall rating and 2) Authorizer Processes and Decision-Making, which accounts for 75% of the overall rating.[128] Figures 80 and 81 show the average rating of each performance measure across all authorizers that were evaluated in either Round 1 or Round 2.[129]

From Round 1 (2015) to Round 2 (2020), the average rating across authorizers increased in 17 performance measures, with B.8 High-Quality Charter School Replication and Dissemination of Best School Practices seeing the largest increase of 1.95 points. The second largest increase was performance measure B.6 Authorizer's Standards and Processes for Interventions, Corrective Action and Response to Complaints—which had an average increase of 1.80 points. That is consistent with the CSP-funded training survey results, from which 82% of authorizers indicated that they found the trainings to be at least somewhat helpful for "Making appropriate and timely decisions with placing schools on probation."

Two additional performance measures were supported by qualitative findings. A.5 Authorizer Knowledge and Skill Development of Authorizing Leadership and Staff, which had an average increase of 0.88 points over 5 years, was consistent with our qualitative findings that authorizers perceived an increase in knowledge as a result of the CSP-funded trainings and MDE conferences. Another performance measure that had an average increase of 1.21 points, A.10 Authorizer High-Quality Authorizing Dissemination, was supported throughout the interviews, during which some authorizers discussed how they often seek help from other authorizers for support and TA.

The average rating decreased in only two performance measures, A.3 Authorizer Structure of Operations and B.3 Contract Term, Negotiation and Execution, by 0.18 points and 0.05 points, respectively.

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[128] More information on the Performance Measures, as well as how rating is weighed, can be found on MDE's web page on Authorizer Performance.

[129] The MAPES Rubric changed between Round 1 and Round 2, so analysis between rounds may not be derived from the same source for comparison.

Figure 80. Average MAPES Ratings for Performance Measure A: Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure (25% of Overall Rating)

Performance Measure	Round 1 Average	Round 2 Average	Change (+/-)
A.1 Authorizing Mission	2.60	3.33	+0.73
A.2 Authorizer Organizational Goals	1.67	1.92	+0.25
A.3 Authorizer Structure of Operations	2.93	2.75	-0.18
A.4 Authorizing Staff Expertise	2.40	2.67	+0.27
A.5 Authorizer Knowledge and Skill Development of Authorizing Leadership and Staff	1.87	2.75	+0.88
A.6 Authorizer Operational Budget for Authorizing the Portfolio of Charter Schools	2.40	2.75	+0.35
A.7 Authorizer Operational Conflicts of Interest	2.13	2.75	+0.62
A.8 Ensuring Autonomy of the Charter Schools in the Portfolio	2.73	3.42	+0.69
A.9 Authorizer Self-Evaluation of Capacity, Infrastructure and Practices	1.60	1.92	+0.32
A.10 Authorizer High-Quality Authorizing Dissemination	1.87	3.08	+1.21
A.11 Authorizer Compliance to Responsibilities Stated in Statute	2.67	2.75	+0.08

Source: MAPES Round 1 and 2 final reports

Figure 81. Performance Measures B: Authorizer Processes and Decision-Making (75% of Overall Rating)

Performance Measure	Round 1 Average	Round 2 Average	Change (+/-)
B.1 New Charter School Decisions	2.40	2.75	+0.35
B.2 Interim Accountability Decisions[130]	1.73	2.61	+0.88
B.3 Contract Term, Negotiation and Execution	2.47	2.42	-0.05
B.4 Performance Outcomes and Standards	2.00	2.42	+0.42
B.5 Authorizer's Processes for Ongoing Oversight of the Portfolio of Charter Schools	2.40	2.67	+0.27
B.6 Authorizer's Standards and Processes for Interventions, Corrective Action and Response to Complaints	1.53	3.33	+1.80
B.7 Charter School Support, Development and Technical Assistance	2.20	3.17	+0.97
B.8 High-Quality Charter School Replication and Dissemination of Best School Practices	1.13	3.08	+1.95
B.9 Charter School Renewal and Termination Decisions	1.27	2.75	+1.48

Source: MAPES Round 1 and 2 final reports

Authorizers who completed the surveys also noted that "Providing TA and support to schools" was among the most helpful aspects of the trainings, with 81% indicating that it was at least somewhat helpful from the CSP-funded training and 75% indicating that it was at least somewhat helpful from the MDE conferences. This perceived helpfulness may be associated with the 0.97-point average increase in performance measure B.7 Charter School Support, Development and Technical Assistance.

Key Takeaways

In this section we used authorizer MAPES ratings to discuss how the quality of authorizers has changed throughout the CSP grant term. Twelve of the 13 current authorizers received a MAPES rating during both Round 1 and Round 2 of the CSP grant. Overall, 10 of these authorizers increased their MAPES ratings over time, with Friends of Education receiving the highest MAPES rating of 3.99 in Round 2. The majority of MAPES performance measures also increased between Round 1 and 2, with B.6 Authorizer's Standards and Processes for Interventions, Corrective Action and Response to Complaints and B.8 High-Quality Charter School Replication and Dissemination of Best School Practices having the largest increase of 1.80 and 1.95 points, respectively.

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[130] In Round 2, there were three submeasures for Performance Measure B.2. They were B.2a Expansion Requests (average rating 2.58), B.2b Ready to Open Standards (average rating 2.67) and B.2c Change in Authorizers (average rating 2.58). The average rating for B.2 in Round 2 was taken by averaging the ratings of these three submeasures

Some of these increases in authorizer MAPES ratings and performance measures align with the feedback provided during the interviews, during which authorizers categorized the CSP-funded trainings as helpful in improving various aspects of perceived knowledge, capacity and practice.

CSP Impact on Minnesota Authorizer Landscape

This section addresses the third subquestion under Evaluation Question 3: **How does the CSP grant impact changes in the authorizer landscape in Minnesota?**

We describe changes to the overall authorizer landscape during the CSP grant term (2017 to the present), including changes in the number of authorizers in the state and changes in the number of schools and high-quality schools in each authorizer's portfolio. Although CSP-funded training and MDE conferences may have impacted authorizers' ability to authorize and support schools, it is difficult to definitively make the connection that these trainings have directly impacted the authorizer landscape based on the information collected as part of this evaluation. However, by offering more context as to how the authorizer landscape has changed, we hope to add more clarity about how these trainings and conferences may have impacted authorizer capacity and practice.

Change in Number of Authorizers

As of June 2022, there are 13 approved authorizers in Minnesota, including a range of nonprofits, higher education institutions and school districts. Since MDE was awarded the CSP grant in 2017, two authorizers have withdrawn: St. Catherine University and Winona Area Public School District.[131] In 2019, the Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing was approved to become an authorizer.

Change in Number of Authorizer's Schools

One aspect of the authorizer landscape that has changed since the CSP grant began in 2017 is the number of operational schools that each authorizer has in their portfolio (Figure 82). Overall, just under half of the current authorizers saw an increase in the number of schools they authorize, with Innovative Quality Schools and Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools seeing the largest increase of five and four schools, respectively.[132] Three authorizers have the same number of schools in their portfolio, including Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center, which remains the largest authorizer overseeing 34 operational schools.

Four authorizers—Novation Education Opportunities, Friends of Education, Student Achievement Minnesota, and Volunteers of America – Minnesota—authorize one less operational school than they did at the beginning of the grant.

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[131] Information on withdrawn authorizers was updated as of June 2022.
[132] The number of schools in the figure refers to the number of *operational* charter schools authorized, and does not take into account the number of pre-operational charter schools that authorizers may have.

Figure 82. Change in Number of Operational Schools by Authorizer (2018-2021)

Authorizer Name	Number of Operational Charter Schools Authorized (2018)	Number of Operational Charter Schools Authorized (2021)	Change (2018–2021)
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center (formerly Audubon Center of the North Woods)	34	34	–
Innovative Quality Schools	25	30	+5
Novation Education Opportunities	21	20	-1
Pillsbury United Communities	17	20	+3
Volunteers of America – Minnesota	18	17	-1
Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools	11	15	+4
University of St. Thomas	12	13	+1
Friends of Education	13	12	-1
Bethel University	3	3	–
Student Achievement Minnesota	3	2	-1
Northfield Public School District	2	2	–
Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing*	–	1	+1
Chisago Lakes School District	1	1	–

Source: Data for 2021 came from MDE's *MAPES Round 2 Summary Report*

Note: Authorizers are sorted by number of schools authorized in 2021.

*Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing became an authorizer in 2019.

Change in Number of Authorizer's High-Quality Charter Schools

Another aspect of the authorizer landscape that has changed since the CSP grant began in 2017 is the number of high-quality charter schools that each authorizer has in their portfolio. We first describe MDE's process in identifying high-quality charter schools and then we report the number of high-quality schools for each authorizer at the beginning of the CSP grant term as well as the current number (as of June 2022).

Each year, MDE releases a list of high-quality charter schools that are eligible to compete for the replication/significant expansion grants that are a part of CSP. In order to be identified as a high-quality charter schools, the charter local educational agencies must meet certain criteria that are subject to change each year, including being in operation for at least the 3 most recent years; having testing records over the past few years; a testing participation rate and the ability to meet certain proficiency standards in math, science, and reading; growth in math and reading; having a 7-year graduate rate; and meeting financial and compliance checks.[133]

Figure 83 shows how the landscape of high-quality charter schools has changed since the beginning of the CSP grant. Two authorizers—Friends of Education and Novation Education Opportunities—saw an increase in the number of high-quality charter schools they served (gaining four schools and one school, respectively). All other authorizers saw either a decrease or no change in their number of high-quality charter schools, with Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center seeing the largest decrease of 9 schools.

The decrease in the number of high-quality charter schools may be attributable to the academic and emotional burdens the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on charter schools over the past few years. Additionally, since 2018, many schools that were considered eligible have been removed from the list for a variety of compliance issues, including testing incidents, late WBWF submissions and weaknesses in the audits. Finally, a change in methodology in 2021 to create a more equitable review process by shifting the focus to student performance and comparison amongst students resulted in fewer eligible schools. These factors all contributed to the decline in high-quality charter schools throughout the CSP grant application.[134]

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[133] *2022 High-Quality Charter School Comprehensive Performance Framework*
[134] This information was provided to ICF via email from MDE on May 6, 2022.

Figure 83. Change in Number of High-Quality Charter Schools by Authorizer (2018-2022)

Authorizer Name	Number of High-Quality Schools (2018)[135]	Number of High-Quality Schools (2022)[136]	Change (2018–2022)
Friends of Education	6	10	+4
University of St. Thomas	5	1	-4
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center (formerly Audubon Center of the North Woods)	11	2	-9
Student Achievement Minnesota	2	1	-1
Novation Education Opportunities	3	4	+1
Bethel University	1	0	-1
Innovative Quality Schools	4	3	-1
Volunteers of America – Minnesota	5	2	-3
Chisago Lakes School District	0	0	–
Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools	0	0	–
Pillsbury United Communities	2	1	-1
Northfield Public School District	1	0	-1
Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing*	–*	0	–

*Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing became an authorizer in 2019.

Key Takeaways

In this section, we discussed how the authorizer landscape in Minnesota changed throughout the CSP grant term. Overall, more than half of the current authorizers saw an increase in the number of schools they authorize, with Novation Education Opportunities and Innovative Quality Schools seeing the largest increase. Three authorizers—Friends of Education, Student Achievement Minnesota, and Volunteers of America – Minnesota—saw a decrease by one charter school. Additionally, most authorizers saw a decrease in the number of high-quality charter schools between 2018 and 2022, which can be attributed

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[135] See MDE's 2018 High-Quality Charter School List on its Districts, Schools and Educators web page.
[136] See MDE's 2022 Initial Eligibility List for Charter School Expansion/Replication on its Districts, Schools and Educators web page.

to a change in the methodology for identifying high-quality charter schools that was implemented in 2021, along with a number of schools that have been removed each year for compliance issues.

Summary

This section focused on how the CSP-funded trainings and MDE-led conferences affected authorizer knowledge, capacity and practice. To address this research question, we sent out a survey and conducted interviews with authorizers to gain perspective on how the trainings and conferences affected these three focus areas.

CSP-Funded Trainings

On the survey, all authorizers noted that the CSP-funded trainings increased their knowledge in at least "some areas." Specifically, authorizers mentioned that the trainings helped them better understand their roles and responsibilities with their schools and learn about school performance frameworks. Authorizers also noted an increase in capacity and practice, specifically regarding skills like communicating effectively with schools' leaders, managing their school portfolios, enhancing protocols for evaluating new schools and establishing systems for school accountability.

MDE Authorizer Conferences

Authorizers also noted an increase in knowledge as a result of the MDE-led conferences, with 92% of authorizers who took the survey reporting an increase in knowledge in at least "a few" areas. During the interviews, some authorizers mentioned that they gained a better understanding of performance frameworks, auditing and financial systems, MAPES and the usage of data. As for capacity and practice, some authorizers mentioned that they increased their ability to provide TA and support to schools, and to effectively manage their school portfolio.

Authorizer Changes in Practice and School Quality

Overall, many authorizers noted an increase in their ability to support their schools. Specifically, some authorizers mentioned that they have a better understanding of financial management as a result of the trainings and conferences, in addition to a more data-driven toolkit, increased accountability systems and a more productive overall relationship with new and current schools.

Authorizer Quality

During the CSP grant term, most authorizers increased their overall quality as measured by the MAPES ratings between Round 1 (prior to MDE's 2017 CSP grant) and Round 2 (during MDE's 2017 CSP grant). Additionally, all but two average MAPES ratings for Performance Measure A: Authorizer Capacity and Infrastructure and Performance Measure B: Authorizer Processes and Decision-Making increased, which may have been associated with the trainings and conferences that the authorizers attended.

CSP Impact on Minnesota Authorizer Landscape

Since the start of the CSP grant, seven of the 13 current authorizers increased the number of operational schools in their portfolio, and only three authorizers decreased their number of operational schools. Most authorizers saw a decline in the number of high-quality charter schools they authorize; however, much of this decline was attributable to compliance issues for which authorizers are not directly responsible.

Evaluation Question 4

How has the charter school landscape in Minnesota changed over the CSP grant period?

To address this evaluation question and understand the extent to which MDE reached relevant performance objectives, we reviewed MDE's annual progress reports submitted to the U.S. Department of Education and consulted MDE resources that tracked changes in the charter school landscape since the start of the CSP grant. We broke this topic into four subquestions:

4.1 How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones and outcomes related to increasing high-quality charter schools that serve students who are disadvantaged and the overall number of students served by charter schools in Minnesota?

4.2 How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones and outcomes related to increasing proficiency of charter school students in ELA and math?

4.3 How has the quality of Minnesota charter schools increased?

4.4 To what extent has there been an increase in the sustainability of Minnesota charter schools?

Number of Charter Schools and Number of Students Served

This section addresses the first subquestion: **How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones and outcomes related to increasing high-quality charter schools that serve students who are disadvantaged and the overall number of students served by charter schools in Minnesota?**

Number of CSP Grants Awarded

In order to increase the number of charter school students served, MDE awarded CSP grants to start-up, expanding, or replicating schools. MDE's target was to increase the number of grants awarded to these schools each year, totaling at least 55 grants by the end of the project period. Since the start of the grant in 2017, MDE has awarded a total of 38 grants, and has increased the number of grants awarded each year (Figure 84). Of these 38 grants, 32 were for start-up schools, five were for significant expansion, and one was for replication.

Figure 84. Number of Grants Awarded Annually Since the Start of the CSP Grant

School Year	Cumulative Number of Total Grants Awarded	New Grants Awarded
2021–2022	38	+9
2020–2021	29	+7
2019–2020	22	+6
2018–2019	16	+16

Student Enrollment in Minnesota Charter Schools

According to MDE's performance measures, its goal was to increase the percentage of K–12 students enrolled in charter schools in Minnesota to at least 6% by the end of the grant. MDE achieved this target in the first year of the grant and has increased or maintained this targeted enrollment in Minnesota charter schools in each subsequent year (Figure 85). As of the 2021–2022 school year, Minnesota has achieved a charter school enrollment of 8%. This increase in the percentage of students enrolled reflects both an increase in the total number of K–12 students enrolled in charter schools across Minnesota (from 54,211 in 2017–18 to 65,971 in 2021–22) and a decrease in the number of K–12 students enrolled in Minnesota's schools overall (from 856,687 in 2017–18 to 848,619 in 2021–22).

Figure 85. Percent of K–12 Students Enrolled in MN Charter Schools[137]

Year	Percent of K–12 students	Year-by-Year Change
2021–2022	8%	0%
2020–2021	8%	+1%
2019–2020	7%	0%
2018–2019	7%	+1%
2017–2018	6%	–

CSP Subgrantees Serving Priority Students

Another of MDE's goals was to increase the number of CSP subgrantees that serve priority students, which include student groups such as early learners, postsecondary, low-income, rural and/or racially diverse. Since the start of the CSP grant, 29 out of the 32 operational subgrantees have served priority students, with this number nearly doubling over the past 2 years (Figure 86). According to the 2022 annual report, the remaining schools are pre-operational but have indicated they intend to serve priority students when they open.

Figure 86. Number of CSP Subgrantees that Have Served Priority Students

Year	Number of CSP grantees	Year-by-Year Change
2022	29	+7
2021	22	+7
2020	15	-1
2019	16	–

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[137] All percentages in the figures in this section are rounded to the nearest percentage.

Math and Reading Proficiency

One of MDE's goals is to increase math and reading proficiency scores over the course of the grant. In this section, we analyzed changes in proficiency scores to answer the following research question: **How well is Minnesota meeting its goals, objectives, milestones and outcomes related to increasing proficiency of charter school students in ELA and math?**

Figures 87–90 show the percentage of 4th- or 8th-grade students who are proficient in math or reading since the start of the CSP grant. MDE's goal by the end of the grant was to increase:

- 4th-grade reading proficiency to 45% (in other words, 45% of 4th-graders would be proficient in reading by the end of the grant),
- 4th-grade math proficiency to 56%,
- 8th-grade reading proficiency to 53%, and
- 8th-grade math proficiency to 48%.

In the first two years of the grant (2017-18, 2018-19), MDE either met or was on pace to meet its proficiency targets. However, standardized assessments were not administered during the 2019-2020 due to pandemic-related school closures. Minnesota students across all school types (e.g. charter and traditional public schools) and in all grades experienced a substantial decrease in proficiency levels during the 2020-21 school year, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[138] Therefore, while MDE did not meet its target proficiency levels in 2020-21, one possible explanation for the drops in proficiency shown in these figures may be the learning disruptions and socio-emotional barriers that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced over the past few years.

Figure 87. Percentage of 4th-Grade Students Proficient in Reading

Year	Percentage	Year-by-Year Change
2020–2021	36%	-10%
2019–2020[139]	–	–
2018–2019	46%	+1%
2017–2018	45%	-1%
2016–2017[140]	46%	–

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[138] For comparison, the percent of students in Grade 4 in all public schools (charter and traditional) who were proficient in Reading fell from 57.0% in 2017 to 49.3% in 2021 and dropped from 66.8% in 2017 to 53.8% in 2021 in Mathematics. For 8th graders, statewide performance in Reading for all public school students (charter and traditional) dipped from 58.9% in 2017 to 49.7% in 2021, and declined in Math from 58.2% in 2017 to 39.8% in 2021.

[139] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota cancelled its statewide assessments for a portion of the 2019–2020 schools year per Governor Tim Walz's Executive Order. Minnesota was granted a waiver from the federal government for the federal reporting requirements and therefore did not have data to report for any proficiency levels during the 2019–2020 school year.

[140] Data for 2016–17 are baseline data from before the CSP grant began.

Figure 88. Percentage 4th-Grade Students Proficient in Math

Year	Percentage	Year-by-Year Change
2020–2021	34%	-19%
2019–2020	–	–
2018–2019	53%	-1%
2017–2018	54%	+1%
2016–2017	53%	–

Figure 89. Percentage of 8th-Grade Students Proficient in Reading

Year	Percentage	Year-by-Year Change
2020–2021	44%	-8%
2019–2020	–	–
2018–2019	52%	-3%
2017–2018	55%	+2%
2016–2017	53%	–

Figure 90. Percentage of 8th-Grade Students Proficient in Math

Year	Percentage	Year-by-Year Change
2020–2021	29%	-18%
2019–2020	–	–
2018–2019	47%	-1%
2017–2018	48%	+1%
2016–2017	47%	–

Quality of Minnesota Charter Schools

The following section addresses the third subquestion: **How has the quality of Minnesota charter schools increased?** It includes a discussion on how the number of High-Quality Charter Schools (HQCS) has changed throughout the CSP grant, along with how many charters have attended boot camps related to improving charter school quality throughout the state.

Number of High-Quality Charter Schools

In the previous section on charter school authorizers, we tracked how the number of High-Quality Charter Schools by authorizer has changed throughout the course of the CSP grant.[141] In this section, we discuss the overall number of High-Quality Charter Schools. Figure 91 represents the number of charter schools that made the HQCS list after compliance checks. Since 2018, the number of charter schools who qualified to be a HQCS remained relatively steady,[142] however, a significant number of schools have been eliminated each year due to compliance issues, such as material weaknesses in their audit, not having submitted the WBWF report on time or significant testing issues.

Figure 91. Number of High-Quality Charter Schools During Each Year of CSP Grant

School Year	Number of High Quality Charter Schools	Year-by-Year Change	Percentage of Charter Schools that were Considered High Quality
2021–2022	24	+10	13%
2020–2021	14	-9	8%
2019–2020	23	-7	14%
2018–2019	30	-10	18%
2017–2018	40	–	24%

Charter School Technical Assistance Boot Camps

Increasing the quality of charter schools in Minnesota requires investing in resources that provide ongoing support to existing charters. One way the state is accomplishing this is by offering TA sessions, or boot camps, related to charter school operation in Minnesota. Figure 92 below represents the percentage of operational schools that attended at least one boot camp in Minnesota since 2018. Nearly half of all operational charter schools have participated in a boot camp as of 2022, and the percentage has steadily increased since the start of the grant. Additionally, over two-thirds of developing/pre-operational charter schools have also participated in a boot camp throughout the CSP grant term.

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[141] An explanation of high-quality charter schools, including qualifications for eligibility and an explanation for the change in methodology, can be found on page 136 of the report.
[142] Number of schools eligible for the high-quality charter schools list each year: 2018 – 53; 2019 – 52; 2020 – 54; 2021 – 40; and 2022 – 34.

Figure 92. Percentage of Charter Schools Participating in Technical Assistance Sessions

School Year	Percentage	Year-by-Year Change
2021–2022	48%	+4%
2020–2021	44%	+7%
2019–2020	37%	+9%
2018–2019	28%	+13%
2017–2018	15%	–

Sustainability of Charter Schools

The fourth subquestion is: **To what extent has there been an increase in the sustainability of Minnesota charter schools?** Sustainability is an integral aspect of the CSP grant and a long-term goal of MDE. To address this subquestion, we utilized information included in MDE's grant performance reports as well as qualitative feedback from interviewees on the various components of the CSP grant that have promoted charter school sustainability throughout the state.

Total Number of Charter Schools in Operation

One of MDE's goals was to increase the number of charter schools in operation annually (Figure 93). This measure refers to the number of charter schools that have served students at any point in a given school year, including any charter schools that closed halfway through the year. As of the 2021–2022 school year, there were 180 operational schools in Minnesota. Despite a few charter schools closing each year, the total number of charter schools has increased every year since the start of the CSP grant.

Figure 93. Number of Charter Schools in Operation Each Year of the CSP Grant

Year	Number of Charter Schools	Year-by-Year Change
2021–2022	180	+7
2020–2021	173	+4
2019–2020	169	+5
2018–2019	164	–

Number of Charter Schools Opened and Closed

Since the start of the grant, the number of new charter schools opened each year has increased each year except 2020–2021. As of June 2022, 14 charter schools are proposing to open during the 2022-2023 school year.

Additionally, since the start of the CSP grant, only eight charter schools in operation have been closed (Figure 94).[143] The reasons for these closures varied by school, but common reasons included merging with other schools or not having enough staff available for operation. Since the beginning of the CSP grant in 2017, there were 10 other charter schools that were planning to operate but never fully opened.

Figure 94. Number of Charter Schools Opened and Closed During Each Year of the CSP Grant

School Year	Number of New Charter Schools Opened	Number of Charter Schools Closed	Net Change
2022–2023 (expected)	14	–	+14
2021–2022	10	1	+9
2020–2021	6	3	+3
2019–2020	7	2	+5
2018–2019	5	2	–

Other Components Related to Sustainability

Although opening new charter schools is a key to longevity, consistently improving existing schools is equally important. Throughout the CSP grant, MDE has worked to provide various professional development and training opportunities for future or existing charter school leaders seeking to improve the charter school landscape in Minnesota. These initiatives included the Charter School Boot Camp and Charter School Leadership Program (CSLP) that trained future charter school leaders; the Charter School Leadership Network which supported current charter leaders; the board development and trainings initiative for which NEO provided training and development courses for charter school boards; and various CSP-led trainings and MDE conferences for authorizers to improve their knowledge, capacity, and practice.

These programs, which are discussed in more detail earlier in this report, increased the sustainability of charter schools in Minnesota because they sought to improve the "infrastructure" around the schools themselves—that is, they recognized that charter school sustainability requires investing in supports that take place outside of the classroom, namely with school leadership, school boards and authorizers. By offering these programs to populations that create, lead, and hold accountable charter schools, MDE is ensuring that charter schools have the balanced support systems needed to open more schools and improve existing ones.

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[143] Information on number of charter schools opened and closed was updated as of June 2022.