CYBER SCHOOLS
Recognized Best Practice

Regulatory Framework

An authorizing body may issue a contract for a school of excellence that is a cyber school. A cyber school provides full-time instruction through online learning or otherwise on a computer or other technology, and this instruction and learning may occur remote from a school facility (MCL 380.553a). A cyber school must follow all applicable law prescribed to a school of excellence as found in MCL 380.551-380.561 of the Revised School Code.

Guiding Principles and Standards

MCCSA's Guiding Principles and Standards (Standards) apply to all schools including cyber schools. NACSA and the National Charter School Resource Center have provided additional guidance related to cyber schools through their Principles and Standards as well as guides that outline specific areas of authorizer oversight.

It is essential for the authorizer to have the performance expectations for cyber schools outlined in the charter agreement and to ensure the staff has the capacity to fully evaluate and oversee the additional nuances of cyber schools.

In addition to MCCSA standards and NACSA guidance, The Auror Institute has provided National Standards for Quality Online Teaching. The standards can be utilized by the authorizer to develop review protocols and inform oversight practices.

Cyber Schools and Authorizer Responsibilities

Cyber schools offer virtual learning to students. With the growing number of cyber schools in Michigan, authorizers have the responsibly to ensure that students and families served in these schools are receiving a quality education. Charter agreements for cyber schools should include high standard performance expectations just as any charter public school contract would.

In addition to annual oversight and renewal practices, authorizers accepting applications for new cyber schools should have a specific application or additional questions in their existing application. The application for a new cyber school should be designed to address the key differences in the program model.

Performance Standards

Cyber school charter contracts, like all charter public school contracts, must include performance standards focused on academic, financial, and compliance expectations. Authorizers should specifically outline additional standards for cyber schools in the charter contract. Any additional standards should be developed to ensure that the monitoring of the cyber school is aligned with national best practice and accommodate for the difference between a traditional brick and mortar school and a cyber school. While the oversight practices provided in other MCCSA Best Practice Guides apply to cyber schools, an authorizer should provide oversight on testing and adjust qualitative reviews and surveys accordingly.

Testing Formats and Timing

Authorizers should have a full understanding and monitor testing for cyber schools to ensure they are meeting the state and authorizer expectations. The authorizer should examine the annual testing plans for all students to ensure they are in compliance. The authorizer also may choose to monitor virtual and on-site testing throughout the year.

Qualitative Reviews and Surveys

Authorizers should perform a qualitative review of all schools it oversees including cyber schools. The authorizer should have a protocol in place that addresses the differences of the model. A protocol should include classroom observations, document reviews, and interviews of staff, students, and families.

Classroom observations should be completed by a qualified individual using a classroom observation protocol. This protocol should be used consistently and observe the quality of instruction including student engagement. The charter application and charter contract should outline what engagement will look like between the teachers and the student as well as with families. The authorizer should look for evidence of class participation, student assignments, teacher-student contact, participation in webinars, and support sessions. Documentation such as lesson plans, assignments, and supports should be examined to ensure all students including students with special needs are being served.

The authorizer should be able to see evidence of engagement with parents, including conferences and learning and progress reports. These reports should clearly communicate how the student is doing and the progress toward completion of a course or grade level.

In addition to classroom observations and document reviews, authorizers should review surveys of students and families, and conduct interviews with staff, students and families to gain a more complete understanding of the educational quality of the school. Another form of document review could consist of surveys completed by students and families supplied by the school. Interviews should focus on the quality of the educational program, engagement, and overall satisfaction of the school. These interviews, when conducted effectively, can provide important information beyond data that reflects the quality of the school.

What if a cyber school is underperforming?

If a cyber school is underperforming, an authorizer might consider additional oversight as explained below:

Attendance and Instructional Time

While attendance monitoring is the responsibility of the local ISD and pupil auditor, the authorizer may consider monitoring attendance according to the state requirements especially if there have been issues in the past. The cyber school should have clear and concise documentation of their method for tracking and reporting attendance.

Given the attendance and instructional time are the focus of the pupil auditor, and authorizer should minimize any duplication in this area, however, the authorizer should be involved when an issue arises and set expectations for remaining informed.

Graduation Rates and Cohorts

Authorizers may closely monitor graduation rates according to the population being served. The authorizer should understand the population of the cyber school. If a cyber school has a population that is under credited, the authorizer and school can examine the data together and set expectations that align with the population and monitor accordingly. Examining cohorts of students across years will allow the authorizer to determine whether the school is on-track to meeting or has met the graduation requirements.

Educational Development Plans

The authorizer may also ensure that the cyber school has Educational Development Plans in compliance with MDE Requirements. These plans will help guide the student's academic courses and career experiences during high school that will prepare them for the career that they have identified.

Student Retention and Attrition

The authorizer should work with the cyber school to understand student retention and attrition. The authorizer should set expectations that the cyber school carefully track student retention and attrition and implements strategies to maximize retention and minimize attrition, leading to improved rates over time.

Summary

With a growing number of students enrolling in cyber schools, the authorizer of a cyber charter public school has the obligation to ensure that all students are receiving a quality education. Cyber school charter contracts, like all charter public school contracts, must include performance standards focused on academic, financial, and compliance expectations. Taking a deeper look into the quantitative data and qualitative nature of the cyber school can provide insight into the quality of the school.

Ensuring that the new school application, annual oversight, and renewal processes differ from traditional in-person model of teaching and learning.

Reflective Questions:

Does your new school application include additional questions that are unique for applicants proposing to open a cyber school?

How do your annual oversight and renewal processes consider nuances of cyber charter public schools?

Does your team have the knowledge and protocols in place to monitor quantitative and qualitative quality of cyber charter public schools?

Resources

NACSA Virtual Charter School Accountability – What We Can Do Now
MDE EDP Requirements