

Building Shared Responsibility

How Douglas County School District Partners with Charter Schools to Support Students



THE CENTRAL IDEA DCSD's model begins with a simple commitment: charter students are district students. That shared-ownership mindset is reinforced through integrated leadership, clear roles, common systems, accessible professional learning, and relationship-based oversight.

Why this practice matters

Authorizers must hold charter schools accountable while also ensuring that students receive legally compliant, coherent support. Those responsibilities are especially complex in special education, Section 504, gifted education, multilingual learner services, health, wellness, discipline, and Title IX. When authorizer oversight and district support operate in separate lanes, schools can receive mixed messages, staff can miss critical information, and students can experience fragmented services.

Douglas County School District (DCSD) offers a different model: charter schools are included in the district's leadership, learning, communication, and student-support infrastructure while remaining responsible for the duties assigned to them. The result is not blurred accountability. It is clearer accountability supported by stronger relationships and shared tools.

DCSD at a glance

Focus	Collaborative student supports across district-run and charter schools
Core areas	Special education, 504, gifted education, multilingual learners, nursing, wellness, prevention, discipline, attendance, and Title IX
Operating stance	"All students are our students"
Key mechanism	Charter inclusion in district leadership structures, systems, professional learning, and annual role clarification

The model: five reinforcing practices

1. Start with shared ownership

What DCSD does. District leaders consistently frame charter students as members of the DCSD community—not as students belonging to a separate system. DCSD also uses student transition patterns to reinforce that decisions made in charter schools affect district schools and families over time.

Why it matters. A shared identity changes the posture of central-office teams. Charter implications are considered during planning, not after a compliance problem emerges.

Adapt it. Use local enrollment and transition data to make the shared responsibility visible. Ask the superintendent and cabinet to communicate explicitly that district commitments to students apply across school types.

2. Integrate charter leadership into the district structure

What DCSD does. The choice/charter function works alongside school leadership, student support services, and curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Charter perspectives are represented in regular cross-department conversations rather than being raised only during conflict.

Why it matters. Student-support, professional-learning, and compliance decisions are more likely to account for charter implementation needs from the beginning. Department leaders also understand charter support as part of their work—not an optional add-on.

Adapt it. Place the charter lead in recurring leadership meetings with principal supervisors, student services, and instructional leaders. Add one standing design question to new initiatives: “What does this require of—and provide to—charter schools?”

3. Clarify roles every year

What DCSD does. DCSD pairs charter contract language with internal annual compliance forms for gifted education, English language development (ELD), and special education. The forms clarify legal requirements, district supports, charter obligations, and optional or fee-based services. When requirements change, schools re-acknowledge the updated expectations.

Why it matters. Written clarification reduces dependence on institutional memory and gives district and charter staff a common reference point when questions arise.

Adapt it. Create one plain-language annual document organized by program area. Review it during an annual site visit or leadership meeting, record acknowledgment, and update it whenever law, policy, or district process changes.

4. Provide access to common learning, tools, and systems

What DCSD does. Charter staff are included in major professional-development opportunities, particularly in compliance-sensitive areas. New charter special education teachers attend district essentials training; charter gifted-education facilitators participate in the same support structures as district staff; and nurses, counselors, registrars, and other key roles receive department communications and shared resources. Where appropriate, district credentials and job-role profiles connect charter staff to distribution lists, data systems, and protected content.

Why it matters. Shared training and access improve consistency in student services, communication, discipline and attendance coding, health responses, and record continuity.

Adapt it. Open existing compliance-related professional learning to charter staff. Identify the few charter roles that need district credentials or distribution-list access. Provide adaptable templates, letters, presentations, and process guides before asking schools to create their own.

5. Pair support with firm guardrails

What DCSD does. DCSD provides consultation and technical assistance while maintaining clear boundaries. The district insists on appropriate IEP and due-process steps, supports 504 implementation without displacing charter responsibility, offers consultative Title IX guidance while requiring schools to maintain their own teams and procedures, and routes complaints to the correct level of authority.

Why it matters. Accessible support makes candid accountability conversations more possible. Clear boundaries also prevent assistance from quietly becoming district ownership of charter responsibilities.

Adapt it. Map district and charter responsibilities in high-risk areas. Develop scripts for routing complaints and explaining boundaries. Discuss recurring gray areas in charter leadership meetings before they become individual crises.

What makes the model work

The visible practices above depend on three enabling conditions.

- **Leadership modeling:** Senior leaders use inclusive language and expect departments to account for charter schools in planning and implementation.
- **Intentional onboarding:** New central-office leaders receive orientation to the district's charter relationships, legal responsibilities, communication pathways, and collaborative norms.
- **Mutual participation:** Charter schools engage in shared professional learning, leadership conversations, data expectations, and established processes. Access to district support comes with shared norms and responsibilities.

FIELD INSIGHT The model is relationship-based, but it is not informal. Trust is reinforced by written expectations, common routines, consistent access, and visible follow-through.

A practical starting point for authorizers with limited staff and resources

DCSD benefits from scale, including multiple departments, deeper professional-learning infrastructure, and layered support roles. Smaller and rural authorizers can still reproduce the core architecture without reproducing the full staffing model.

Start here	Minimum viable practice	Evidence to look for
1. Name ownership	Adopt shared language about responsibility for all students and reinforce it with local data.	Messages and meeting norms consistently include charter students.
2. Assign a connector	Designate one staff member to bridge charter oversight and student-support departments.	Questions reach the right owner quickly; charter impacts appear on leadership agendas.

Start here	Minimum viable practice	Evidence to look for
3. Write the map	Create a one-page annual roles-and-responsibilities matrix for high-risk programs.	Schools acknowledge expectations; staff use the same reference when issues arise.
4. Share what exists	Invite charter staff to current district trainings and distribute adaptable tools and templates.	Charter staff attend; recurring errors and rework decline.
5. Build a routine	Hold a quarterly cross-functional check-in focused on emerging needs, legal changes, and recurring implementation questions.	Issues are identified earlier and assigned a clear next step.

Questions for authorizer teams

- Where are charter schools currently missing from district leadership, communication, or professional-learning systems?
- Which student-support responsibilities are least clear to district and charter staff?
- What existing training, template, or system access could be shared at little or no additional cost?
- Where does district assistance risk displacing charter responsibility—and where does a lack of assistance put students or the LEA at risk?
- What routine would help the district identify and resolve cross-department issues before they become compliance concerns?

Evidence of practice

DCSD Open Enrollment Data show that 79% of DCSD eighth-grade charter students matriculate to a DCSD neighborhood high school. The pattern underscores why coordination across school types matters for services, records, supports, and continuity.

Key takeaway

FOR AUTHORIZERS Moving from a completely hands-off approach to student-centered partnership does not require authorizers to weaken accountability or absorb school-level responsibilities. It requires shared ownership of student outcomes, explicit role boundaries, inclusive systems, and enough trust to solve problems early.

About this field brief

The Colorado Association of Charter School Authorizers (CACSA) gratefully acknowledges the Colorado League of Charter Schools for its partnership and support in developing the Field Brief Series. Created through a grant-funded initiative to strengthen authorizing practices statewide, the series highlights practical approaches used by Colorado authorizers and translates them into adaptable strategies for other districts and authorizing teams.

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