



INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS GUIDEBOOK

CREATING SPACE FOR BOLD
IDEAS & NEW APPROACHES



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INTRODUCTION

Defining Innovation in Education

Innovation in education involves rethinking traditional approaches to teaching, learning, and school operations. At the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI), innovation is not limited to new technologies or teaching methods; it encompasses any strategy that significantly improves student outcomes, particularly for underserved populations.

Whether within or outside of the existing state accountability framework, innovative models push the boundaries of conventional education, offering new pathways for student achievement. This guide encourages schools and applicant teams to define and pursue their unique goals, supported by CSI's commitment to fostering an environment where innovation can thrive.

Purpose of the Guidebook

CSI is dedicated to fostering a diverse range of high-quality public school options that meet the unique needs of students across the state.

The *Innovative Schools Guidebook* serves as a resource for schools and applicant teams interested in pursuing innovative educational models. This guide outlines the support CSI provides, including its flexible application processes, personalized consultation, as well as governance and facilities support.

In addition, CSI has established a comprehensive pilot process for evaluating innovative measures. Schools that opt into this process are responsible for proposing, implementing, and demonstrating the effectiveness of non-traditional measures as part of their overall body of evidence. These innovative measures will then receive greater attention and weighting during staff evaluations, board deliberations, and decision-making around applications and renewals.



Dear Educators, School Leaders, and Innovators,

At the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI), we believe that innovation is the driving force behind meaningful and lasting change in education. Our commitment to supporting schools in exploring bold, creative, and forward-thinking approaches is key to our work as a charter public school authorizer. As education evolves, we see an opportunity to break down barriers and empower schools to develop models that meet the unique needs of their students and communities.

This *Innovative Schools Guidebook* was created in response to the CSI Board's call to action: to signal to the field that CSI not only welcomes innovation but actively encourages it. We recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach does not suit every school or learner, and this guidebook serves as a resource to help applicant teams and existing schools bring their visionary ideas to life.

While we prioritize innovative and non-traditional measures of success, we also value the role of traditional academic indicators as part of a comprehensive evaluation framework. Standardized assessments and other well-established measures remain essential in understanding school performance. Together, these traditional and non-traditional approaches create a richer, more balanced body of evidence to assess outcomes and ensure accountability.

Whether through customized application processes, unique staffing and leadership structures, or mission-specific performance measures, CSI is here to champion schools and applicant teams that are reimagining education and demonstrating the ability to deliver promising outcomes for their students.

As you explore this guidebook, we invite you to think creatively about how your applicant team or school can innovate, and how we might serve as a thought partner in the process. Together, we can build a future where schools are empowered to take bold steps, community needs are addressed, and students are inspired and supported to reach their fullest potential.

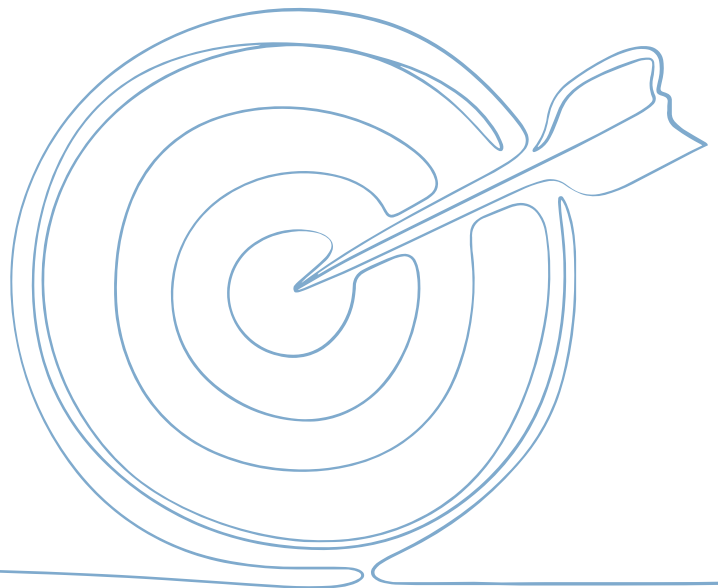
Thank you for your commitment to shaping the future of education. We are excited to walk alongside you on this journey of innovation as we continue to foster high-quality public school choices in Colorado.

Sincerely,

The Colorado Charter School Institute Board

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to foster high-quality charter public school choices for all students.



FLEXIBLE APPLICATION PROCESSES



“Recognizing that no two school proposals are alike, CSI designed its application processes to reflect and honor this diversity.”

Applicant Orientation

CSI provides extensive pre-application orientation sessions. These sessions help potential applicants understand the requirements, process, and expectations, allowing them to prepare more effectively. CSI tailors its consultations to the specific needs of each applicant, ensuring that they receive the support necessary to develop a strong application. Applicants that have participated in these sessions often report that the guidance they received was instrumental in their successful application and eventual launch.

Model-Agnostic Application Process

Recognizing that no two school proposals are alike, CSI designed its application processes to reflect and honor this diversity. CSI regularly reviews and refines its application materials to eliminate barriers and ensure equitable access for each applicant, whether they are proposing a small, standalone school in a rural part of the state or whether they are proposing to expand an existing network in a new region.

Expert Application Review Team

One of the key strengths of CSI’s approach to charter authorizing is the use of an expert review team. We believe that rigorous, specialized evaluation is essential to fostering high-quality schools. CSI’s team of external and internal reviewers have access to reviewer training, related research, and similar-school outcomes. The review team engages in in-depth analysis and site visits and offers tailored feedback to ensure that each application aligns with CSI’s standards of excellence. This expert-driven approach has been critical in the successful approval and oversight of diverse, innovative school models across the state.

Learn more about CSI’s flexible application processes:

[Flexible Application Processes](#)



Innovation in Practice

When CSI received an application for a multi-district online school – which, if approved, would be the only online school operating in the CSI portfolio – CSI proactively built upon its comprehensive review process.

CSI hired an external reviewer with deep experience in online education to join the application review team. CSI facilitated an online education training, led by the Colorado Department of Education's Office of Online and Blended Learning, providing critical context on state statutes, the current landscapes, performance standards, and the state certification process for online schools. Additionally, CSI's data analyst conducted a comprehensive market analysis of online schools in Colorado to assess demand and inform the decision-making process.

This layered approach ensured CSI had the knowledge and data necessary to evaluate the application thoroughly. CSI has replicated this approach on several additional unique applications it has received over the years.



Innovation in Practice

When the Kwiyyagat Community Academy applicant team expressed interest in opening a new school on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation in southwest Colorado, CSI took proactive steps to ensure that its application process was free of barriers. Understanding the unique context of the school being located on tribal land, CSI visited the applicant team to learn about the community and the specific challenges they faced.

CSI provided a comprehensive orientation to help the applicant team navigate the application requirements and review process. To better evaluate the application, CSI hired an external reviewer with tribal experience to serve on the review team.

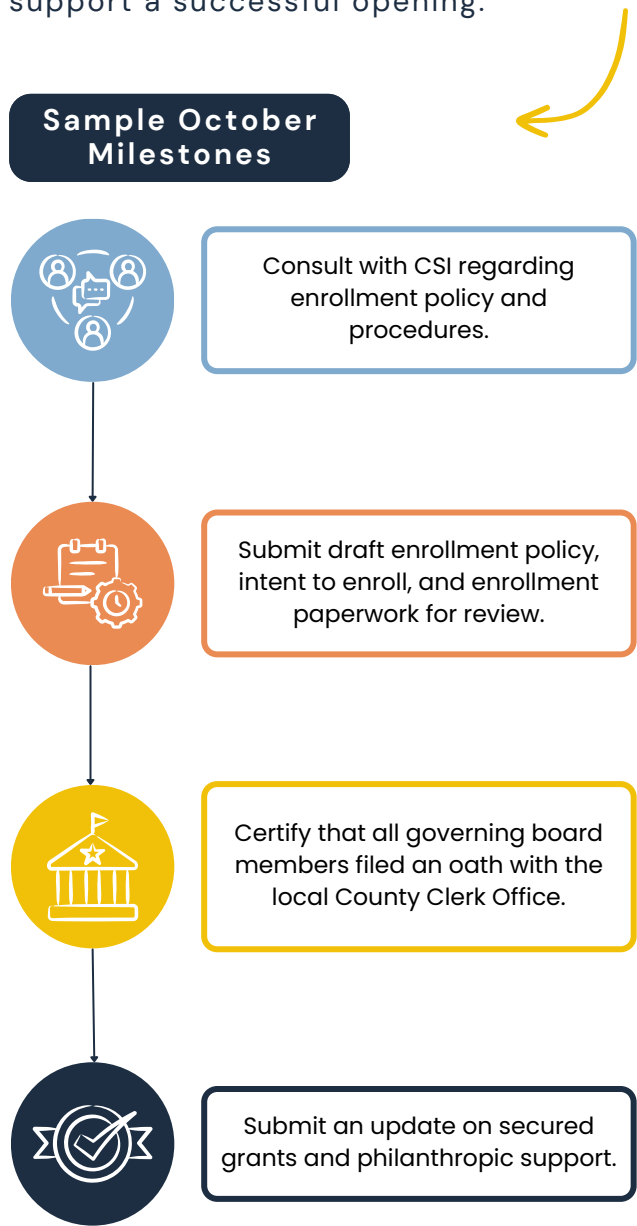
The application was ultimately approved by the CSI Board, and CSI continued to provide support, working closely with the applicant team to craft a charter contract and state waiver request that respected tribal sovereignty while meeting necessary legal and educational standards.

YEAR ZERO SUPPORTS

Once the CSI Board approves an application and executes a charter contract, the newly approved school enters CSI's Year Zero planning phase. The purpose of Year Zero is to establish and execute a plan for successful school opening. This planning year focuses on taking the applicant's proposal as outlined in the charter application and transforming it into a school that is ready to serve students on day one.

Contract Milestones

After approving the charter school, CSI staff and the Board set milestones for Year Zero to address standard tasks and any risks identified in the application. The founding team must complete these milestones in the following months to support a successful opening.



Monthly Check-Ins

One of the keys to a successful school is having a comprehensive plan to maximize your Year Zero. CSI encourages schools to use the application approved by the CSI Board and map out a plan to complete all Year Zero tasks prior to opening.

Prior to welcoming students into the school building, school leadership attends regular meetings (virtual or in-person) throughout Year Zero with CSI staff. This ensures the school team is making progress towards school opening tasks with support from CSI staff or other partners.

Learn more about CSI's Year Zero process:

[**Year Zero Process**](#)

Governance, Finance, and Facilities Support

In addition to consultation, CSI provides extensive support in the areas of governance, finance, and facilities. Innovative schools often require unique governance structures and facility arrangements to support their models. CSI assists schools in navigating these challenges, ensuring that they have the necessary infrastructure in place to succeed. Whether it is helping schools secure facilities that align with their educational model or providing guidance on effective governance practices, CSI's support is tailored to meet the specific needs of each school.



Innovation in Practice

One of the greatest challenges faced by newly approved schools receiving federal charter school startup grants is securing a line of credit to cover approved activities. In response, CSI explored solutions to ease this burden and developed an interest-free line of credit process for Year 0 schools, utilizing its Emergency Assistance Fund. Through this initiative, CSI bridges the gap between the grant drawdown approval and the receipt of funds from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), which historically had taken 6 to 8 weeks.



Innovation in Practice

When a new school delays its opening, it is most likely due to construction or permitting delays. Recognizing this common barrier to an on-time opening, CSI contracted with a facility consultant to support new schools in Year Zero in monitoring progress on construction timelines and provide consultation and advocacy when appropriate.



Learn more about the library of resources CSI has curated to support new and established school governing boards:

[**School Board Governance Library**](#)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXISTING SCHOOLS

Tailored Applications

Just as CSI seeks to reduce barriers by continually refining its new school application, CSI offers customized and streamlined expansion, transfer, and replication applications that cater to the specific needs of innovative schools. For example, CSI utilizes a tailored expansion application that limits application questions to those outside of the existing body of evidence that CSI maintains through its standard authorization practices, including its annual school review.

Piloting Innovative Ideas

CSI schools have had the unique opportunity to pilot innovative ideas within their models. Whether it be transitioning to a competency-based model or interest in expanding to offer an online program, schools can partner with CSI in the development and implementation of pilots. This allows them to test their theories of action before moving forward.



Innovation in Practice

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to adapt, many shifted to online learning. Colorado Early Colleges (CEC) saw this as an opportunity to further innovate by expanding its reach through online education.

CEC, known for its postsecondary performance—including strong graduation rates and students earning both a high school diploma and postsecondary credentials—saw an opportunity to innovate further. Post-pandemic, CEC launched single-district online programs at each of its campuses to assess the effectiveness of online education for the early college model. Building on these insights and successes, CEC sought to expand access to early college offerings through a multi-district online school.

CSI streamlined the application process by combining the network's narrative from its establishment of single-district online programs, existing performance data, and the CDE requirements for multi-district online schools. With the early indicators of success from its single-district online programs and flexibility and support provided by CSI, CEC submitted its multi-district online school application. The application was unanimously approved by the CSI Board and the Colorado State Board of Education, paving the way for broader access to quality education across the state.

Of the traditional online schools in Colorado (excluding Alternative Education Campuses, or AECs), CEC's online school is one of the highest-performing online schools in the state.

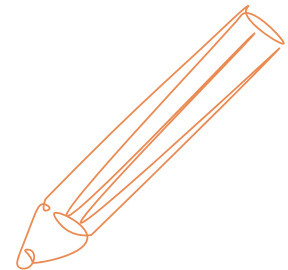


CSI PILOT PROCESS FOR EVALUATING INNOVATIVE MEASURES

In line with CSI’s commitment to innovation and the integration of traditional and non-traditional measures in authorization decisions, CSI has established a comprehensive pilot process for evaluating innovative measures. Schools choosing to opt into this process are responsible for proposing, implementing, and demonstrating the effectiveness of non-traditional measures as part of their overall body of evidence. The pilot process outlined below provides a structured pathway for schools to define and achieve their unique goals, with CSI offering oversight and support throughout.



NEW SCHOOL APPLICANT ORIENTATION



New School Application

In addition to providing goals for achieving results on state measures, pilot participants are expected to outline proposed mission-aligned measures and submit them as part of their new school application.



Board Action

CSI staff will include any proposed unique measures from participating schools in its new school application recommendation report for the CSI Board’s consideration. The CSI Board considers the staff recommendation and body of evidence and takes action on the application.



Year Zero

Should the application and charter contract be approved by the CSI Board, CSI staff and the participating school will work together on further developing or refining the proposed measures during the Year Zero process as necessary. Additionally, participating schools will develop a detailed plan to implement their innovative measures.



Year 1

New schools—particularly those where small enrollment does not allow for public reporting of student assessment results and those where grades do not have state assessments administered (i.e., K-2)—will be expected to present at the end of their first year on student outcomes using the identified non-traditional measures.

Learn more about CSI's Annual Review of Schools (CARS):

[CSI Annual Review of Schools](#)

Annually in CARS

CSI employs a rigorous standard annual school evaluation process known as the CSI Annual Review of Schools (CARS), which assesses academic, financial, and organizational performance.

Participating schools are required to include their unique measures in the optional School portion of the CARS report. School narratives should focus on measurable outputs and outcomes, supported by supplemental evidence that CSI can verify.

At Renewal

At renewal, schools undergo a comprehensive review process, where CSI staff and board consider: the existing body of evidence from CARS reports, a renewal narrative, site visits, panels of students, families, and staff, and a presentation to the CSI Board. This is used to evaluate a school's performance and to inform the renewal contract and term. Participating schools going through renewal will be expected to include unique measures in their renewal narrative. CSI Staff will ensure details on unique measures are incorporated into the body of evidence.

Staff Recommendations and Board Decision Making

CSI staff and the CSI Board then use the body of evidence and professional judgment, incorporating both traditional and school-specific measures, to inform their recommendations and final decisions.

For participating schools, these innovative measures will receive greater attention and weighting during staff review, board deliberations, and the decision-making process.

FINISH



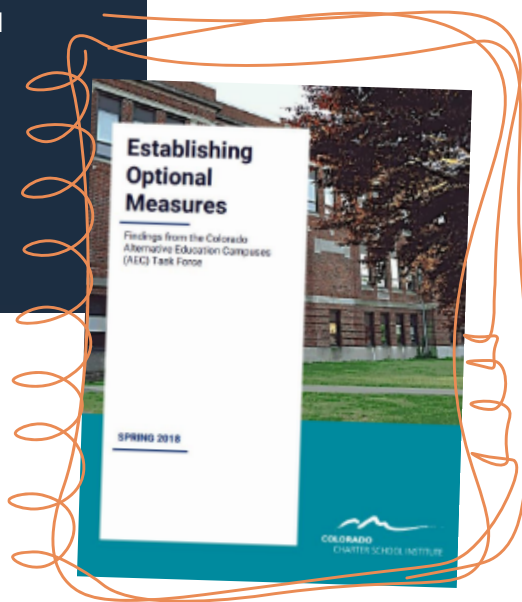
Innovation in Practice

When Kwiyyagat Community Academy opened to provide an Indigenous-inspired program for elementary-aged students on the Ute Mountain Ute reservation and when Prospect Academy opened in the Denver metro area to serve middle school and junior high students who learn differently, both school teams planned to evaluate success using non-traditional measures. To support, CSI had these schools present to the CSI Board at the end of their first year of operation sharing those unique measures. Additionally, CSI has encouraged these schools to include additional measures in their annual CARS reports.



Innovation in Practice

CSI collaborates closely with Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) to develop and implement mission-specific measures that reflect the unique needs and goals of these schools. Understanding that AECs serve high-risk student populations with varied challenges, CSI works in partnership with each school to identify meaningful performance metrics beyond traditional accountability measures. By focusing on measures that align with the school's mission, such as socio-emotional growth or workforce readiness, CSI ensures that AECs can accurately demonstrate their impact on student success. This collaborative process allows AECs to highlight their achievements in areas that truly matter to their communities, while also fulfilling state accountability requirements.





“Let’s remember something that’s at the very heart of what we do – **innovation and accountability**.”

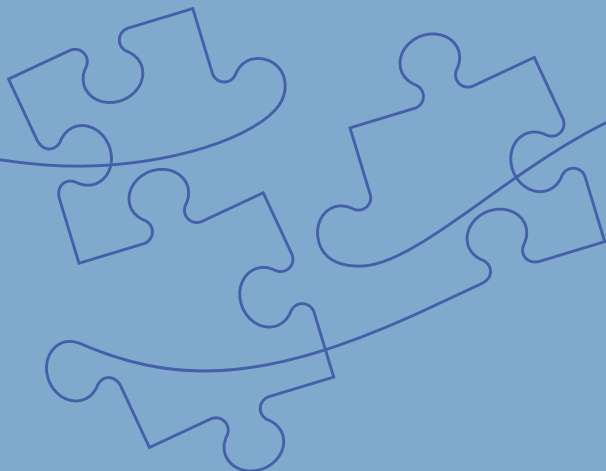
These two ideas aren’t just buzzwords; they are the driving forces behind our efforts to create and sustain great charter schools.

Without innovation, we aren’t pushing the boundaries of what education can be. But without accountability, we aren’t ensuring that all students are receiving the outcomes they deserve.

It’s not ‘either/or’ – rather, it’s ‘both/and’.”



NACSA President & CEO, M. Karega Rausch



INNOVATION IN PRACTICE

Innovations Within the State Accountability System

Currently, innovating within the existing state accountability framework is limited to Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) and through a Request to Reconsider process for schools that may have additional performance data to support a different state rating. For example, schools focused on workforce readiness and competency attainment have developed new measures that align with state standards while also reflecting their unique educational goals. These schools serve as examples of how innovation can thrive within established systems, offering new pathways for student success.



Innovation in Practice

New Legacy Charter School serves pregnant and parenting students and their children in Aurora. When school leadership identified that a competency-based approach might work better for its high school students, the CSI team worked with the school to address questions and concerns related to state graduation guidelines and state accountability. The school had historically reported a credit completion rate as an optional measure for the state accountability system, but with the elimination of credits, the school leader and CSI staff partnered to explore how to continue to report a similar measure using the new competency-based approach.

Additionally, CSI provided the school with the necessary autonomy to develop a new competency-based report card. Through partnership with CSI, CDE, and others, the school has now had two graduating classes use the competency-based report card and has received positive feedback from four-year colleges and universities as well as employers.



Additionally, as CSI authorizes more small schools and schools that adopt the slow-growth approach after their initial approval, CSI has found ways to continue to provide public transparency of school performance and accredit schools using academic data. In 2023-24, CSI's portfolio included seven schools serving 150 students or less, and fourteen schools serving under 250 students.



Innovation in Practice

Coperni 2, a small charter school in Colorado Springs, implemented a personalized learning model. Shortly after founding, the school experienced significant challenges and merged with another charter school halfway through the first year.

The initial state accountability data placed the school on Turnaround. The charter school went to work to implement necessary changes to improve academic outcomes. However, these changes coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. While the state froze all state accountability ratings, once testing resumed, it was clear that the school had significantly improved academic outcomes that did not match the Turnaround rating.

When state ratings resumed, all schools saw fewer students with growth scores because of changes to the state assessment during the pandemic. Despite the school seeing a sustained increase in student performance, the school received an Insufficient State Data rating. CSI worked with the school and CDE to address this mismatch through the Request to Reconsider process, successfully increasing the rating to Improvement (the state's second-highest rating).



Learn more about CSI schools, the models they offer and the communities they serve:

[CSI Schools](#)

Innovations Outside the State Accountability System

In addition to innovations within the accountability framework, CSI encourages schools to pursue outcomes outside traditional metrics that align with their missions and strategic plans. For example, schools that emphasize social-emotional learning, community engagement, or other non-academic goals have developed unique measures to track their progress and share results with their communities. These innovations demonstrate the broad spectrum of possibilities for schools looking to redefine what success looks like.



Innovation in Practice

The Colorado Early Colleges Network and The Academy of Charter Schools track credits and certificates earned by graduates, along with cost savings for families. They use this data to measure progress toward strategic goals and publicly share it on their websites to enhance accountability and communication with their communities. This transparent approach underscores the schools' commitment to fostering academic achievement and supporting post-secondary success, while also minimizing financial burdens on families.



Innovation in Practice

Prospect Academy, a school dedicated to serving students with disabilities, prioritizes high-quality academic instruction alongside a safe, engaging, and inclusive community. The school employs multiple measures to assess both academic progress and student well-being, integrating key indicators of student engagement into its internal accountability framework. Grounded in research highlighting the significance of engagement and relationships—particularly for students with disabilities—Prospect Academy monitors the increase in students reporting at least one close friend throughout the academic year. This comprehensive approach underscores the school's commitment to fostering both academic success and meaningful social connections.

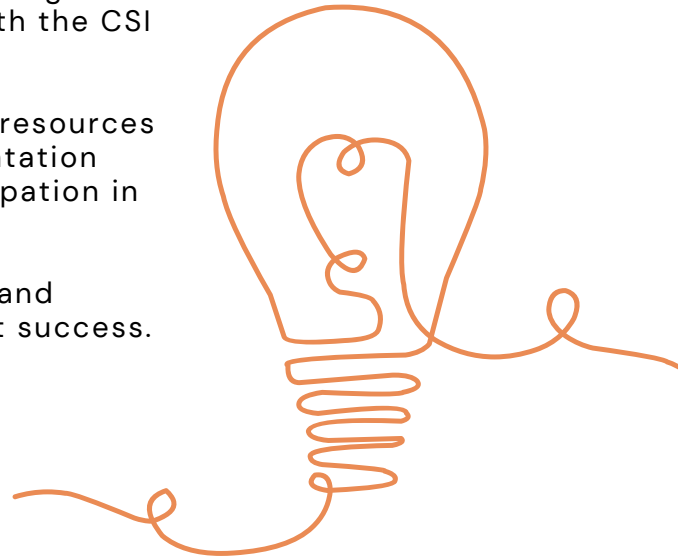


NEXT STEPS

For schools or applicant teams interested in pursuing innovative models, the next step is to connect with the CSI Team.

CSI encourages schools to take advantage of the resources and support outlined in this guide, including orientation sessions, individualized consultations, and participation in the pilot process.

By working closely with CSI, schools can develop and implement innovative solutions that drive student success.



Contact Information

For more information or to begin the application process, visit our Applicants webpage:

[Applicants Webpage](#)



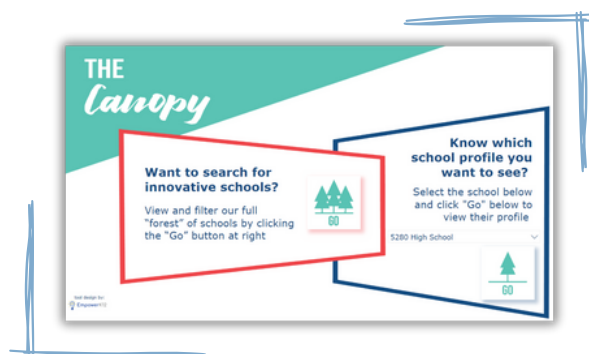
The CSI Team is here to support you every step of the way as you embark on your journey toward educational innovation.

FURTHER READING

The following is a selection of online resources that highlight and/or evaluate innovative practices in K-12 education.

The Canopy Project

[The Canopy Project](#) shares details about innovative schools that are designed to advance equity and student-centered learning.

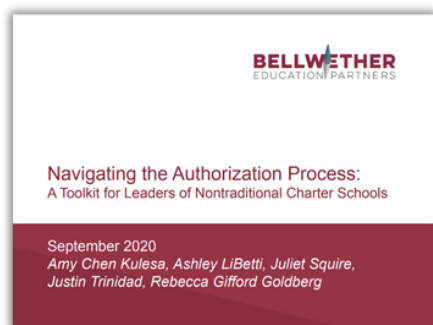
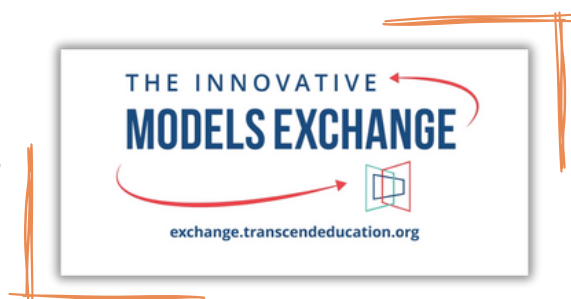


Building Better Schools: Insights From Innovative Public Schools by NewSchools

A [collaborative study between Bellwether and NewSchools](#) focuses on schools where leaders are implementing innovative practices. The study identified four essential design strategies that were present across the innovative models.

Transcend – The Innovative Models Exchange

[Transcend's Innovative Model Exchange](#) allows users to search for and share compelling programs that fundamentally reshape the educational experience.



Navigating the Authorization Process: A Toolkit for Leaders of Nontraditional Charter Schools

The [school leader toolkit](#) outlines potential strategies for the leaders of nontraditional schools to use when they work with authorizers.