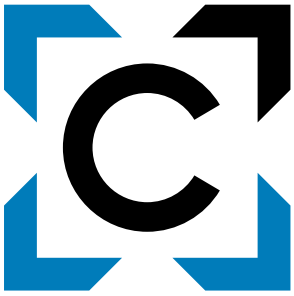

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The Impact of Rhode Island's Charter School Performance Review System on the Education Landscape

Policy Review

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CREDO, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, was established to improve empirical evidence about education reform and student performance at the primary and secondary levels. It supports education organizations and policymakers in using reliable research and program evaluation to assess the performance of education initiatives. CREDO's valuable insights help educators and policymakers strengthen their focus on the results of innovative programs, curricula, policies, and accountability practices.

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Executive Summary

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University undertook this work at the request of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to **review the changes in the charter school landscape following the adoption of the 2017 updated Charter School Performance Review System**. ‡

The primary questions we considered were: 1. How was the new performance framework developed and implemented? 2. How has the adoption of the new performance framework changed the charter school authorization process and quality standards in Rhode Island? 3. What impact has the new performance framework had on the performance and quality of charter schools in Rhode Island?

We interviewed **key officials, including RIDE staff, Council on Elementary and Secondary Education members, Governor's Office personnel, and charter school leaders** from September to November 2024, to elicit their perspectives on the new performance framework and address the questions above.

Key officials indicated that the new performance framework was intentionally designed and implemented to improve the quality of charter school education in Rhode Island and achieved the intended aim by:

- **Raising Quality Standards and Transparency**: The new performance framework altered the authorization process and established higher quality standards and a transparent, data-driven system with consistent, annual performance reviews aligned with national best practices focused on student outcomes. Key officials shared a commitment to transparency, accountability, collaboration, and equity, particularly for underserved communities.
- **Reducing Political Influence**: The new performance framework has reduced political interference by utilizing standardized, transparent data and consistent processes. Clear metrics have alleviated tensions and increased the credibility of the authorization system.
- **Shifting Toward Improvement and Collaboration**: Key officials noted a move away from a punitive, top-down "gotcha" approach to a more constructive, collaborative and improvement-focused model. Under the present leadership, RIDE engages with schools in a more supportive and responsive manner.

- **Improving Relationships and Communication**: This culture shift has fostered trust, respect, and open communication among stakeholders. Rhode Island's small size, where many people know each other, further supports strong working relationships.
- **Creating Opportunities for System Strengthening**: The focus on continuous improvement encourages open feedback to identify and address challenges, including those stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, capacity constraints, equity concerns, lingering trust issues from past administrations, and divergent views on what appropriate quality benchmarks should resemble.

* For simplicity and convenience, the updated 2017 Charter School Review System will henceforth be referred to as the "new performance framework" throughout this report.

We acknowledge that the sample size is small, and given that the discussions covered events spanning two decades, the recall may not be perfect. To address these limitations, we gathered insights from a diverse group of key officials and cross-referenced their accounts with established timelines to verify key events.

The key findings from this policy review are presented below.

Project Overview

Project Background

Charter schools in Rhode Island originated in 1995 with the enactment of the Charter Public School Act, which paved the way for establishing charter schools throughout the state. Over time, the state's charter policies transformed from permitting only district-based charters to including independent charter schools and mayoral academies.[1] As the landscape of charter schools became more diverse and complex, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) created the Charter School Performance Review System (Performance Framework) in 2010 to define the processes for approving, renewing, and revoking charter schools. In 2016, the framework underwent revisions to enhance clarity and accountability and simplify the evaluation process while upholding high standards for schools and engaging community stakeholders.[2]

Rhode Island's charter schools have shown consistent academic improvement. National studies conducted in 2013[3] and 2023[4] indicate that charter students in the state outperformed their peers in traditional public schools (TPS), achieving several additional weeks of learning each year in reading and math.

Policy Review Activities

In light of the historical context and findings from national studies, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) team conducted a policy review to understand how the updated performance framework was developed, adopted, and implemented, as well as how these factors impacted charter school quality and outcomes. The specific research questions were: 1. How was the new performance framework developed and put into action? 2. How has the adoption of the new performance framework changed the charter school authorization process and quality standards in Rhode Island? 3. What impact has the new performance framework had on the performance and quality of charter schools in Rhode Island?

We conducted 12 in-depth interviews with 14 key officials between September and November 2024. Then, we analyzed transcripts and post-interview notes to identify key themes and domains of interest.[5] Detailed research questions and a focus group guide have been attached in the appendices for reference.

Key Officials

The sample included a diverse pool of key officials with direct experience related to Rhode Island's charter schools and the new performance framework. Based on their current or most recent roles, key officials were categorized as RIDE staff (five people), Council on Elementary and Secondary Education members or Governor's Office personnel (four people), and charter school leaders (five people). As many key officials had previously held other, sometimes multiple, roles within the charter school sector, they could offer a multidimensional perspective on the new performance framework. For instance, it was not uncommon for a current school leader to have previously worked at RIDE or in another official capacity. Additionally, it is important to note that key officials engaged with the performance framework at different times. Nearly all had been part of the charter school landscape during 2016–2017, when the new framework was developed and implemented, while at least five had been involved as early as the pre-2010 period, before the launch of the first performance framework. This range of experiences enriched this policy review by providing diverse insights into the evolution and impact of the performance framework over time.

Policy Review Findings

We contextualized feedback within the broader timeline of the framework's evolution feedback. The timeline of key charter school milestones in Rhode Island, as provided by RIDE, has been attached in the appendices for reference.

Pre-Framework Era (Before 2010)

Some key officials involved in the Rhode Island charter school ecosystem before 2010 described it as chaotic and disorganized, with policies and regulations still under development. They recalled that early charter approvals often lacked rigorous, standardized criteria and were frequently influenced by local politics. Accountability measures were poorly defined, leaving stakeholders uncertain about the quality standards for charter schools, which resulted in confusion and inconsistent expectations. Moreover, data reporting during this period was limited, relying heavily on anecdotes or periodic tests, making it difficult to objectively assess school quality.

While charter school leaders expressed enthusiasm for creating innovative schools to provide quality education to the most underserved youth, key officials noted that public opinion was mixed. They emphasized that due to a lack of information about charter school operations, the public tended to view them with skepticism, perceiving them as competitors to traditional public schools and as entities that diverted resources away from district schools. Key officials also remarked on the strained relationships among stakeholders, highlighting ineffective communication channels and frequent personal and politically charged disputes. The atmosphere was described as highly politicized, with charter schools often seen as political adversaries, primarily due to the strong presence of teacher unions in Rhode Island**.**

Old Performance Framework (2010–2016)

Challenges with the Old Performance Framework

In 2010, RIDE introduced the first formal performance framework to standardize authorization and renewal processes. Key officials noted that while the framework provided some structure, it did not resolve existing tensions. Authorizations and renewals occurred only once every five years, leaving schools without regular insights into their performance or areas needing improvement. Key officials shared that schools often felt "in the dark" between reviews, and the overall atmosphere was viewed as punitive rather than supportive. Evaluations lacked clear feedback, causing schools to feel unsupported and anxious about unexpected assessments.

Key officials described the accountability system as top-down, with little consideration for school-specific missions or for providing timely, actionable feedback. They noted that RIDE attempted to hold schools accountable without clear expectations, standards, or benchmarks. The system felt imposed on schools, leaving them without a voice to express concerns or suggest improvements. Evaluation criteria were often unclear, lacking in transparency, and prone to subjective judgments, which allowed political interests to influence some decisions.

Trust between charter schools, RIDE, and the Council did not improve with the first formal performance framework. Schools felt blindsided by the reviews, and the process was often seen as politically influenced. This further strained relations, with key officials describing the framework as a "gotcha approach," where they felt RIDE was trying to catch them making mistakes rather than provide support. Many key officials expressed feelings of being undervalued and unsupported during this period, reinforcing the perception of an adversarial relationship.

Transitioning to the New Performance Framework

Key officials indicated that the new performance framework was developed in response to the weaknesses found in the 2010 framework. One of the main goals was to establish a system based on objective measures, transparency, and freedom from political influences, as schools required clear performance indicators to monitor progress and prepare for renewal decisions. Ensuring accountability was at the heart of this initiative, emphasizing rigorous and transparent processes to maintain high educational standards in line with best practices from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

The new performance framework's development was led by RIDE in partnership with local stakeholders. RIDE collected feedback from parents, community members, advocacy groups, and school leaders to ensure the framework addressed local priorities. School leaders shared their experiences regarding the previous system's shortcomings and contributed ideas for improvement, which helped tailor the framework to meet schools' needs and align with their unique missions. RIDE organized meetings and professional development sessions to discuss the framework's components. Key officials agreed that RIDE's efforts to incorporate feedback from the community ensured stakeholder buy-in and facilitated the framework's implementation.

New Performance Framework (After 2016–2017)

Core Characteristics of the New Performance Framework

Key officials emphasized that the new performance framework features several key advancements and improvements that foster a more structured, transparent, and collaborative charter school system focused on continuous improvement, equity, and accountability. They especially valued that the system has been built on the following foundations:

- **Data-Driven and Transparent Reviews**: Authorization decisions are now founded on comprehensive, data-driven evaluations that rely on objective and standardized criteria measures.
- **High-Quality Standards**: The high-quality standards begin with the application to open a charter school. Key officials emphasized that applicants must meet very rigorous criteria to be authorized to open a new charter in Rhode Island. Moreover, the framework sets rigorous, multidimensional quality standards on existing schools, including the following. 1. Academic Achievement and Growth: Schools are required to demonstrate strong academic gains, measured through standardized assessments, and are expected to match or exceed the performance of sending district schools. 2. Organizational and Governance Health: Governing boards are accountable for providing school oversight, maintaining a healthy school culture, and ensuring consistent governance. 3. Financial Stability and Resource Management: Schools must demonstrate long-term financial viability and responsible fiscal management. 4. Mission Alignment and Community Engagement: Schools are evaluated on how well they fulfill their missions, reflect community needs, and serve diverse student populations, including English learners and students with disabilities.
- **Accountability**: The new performance framework enforces stricter accountability standards, which key officials view as "tough" and "complex but clear." Schools are held to consistent (and predictable) criteria, creating a sense of fairness as each is treated equally. The interviews clearly show that school leaders do not resist high expectations, provided they understand what is expected of them. They value having clear, consistent, and well-communicated expectations and standards.
- **Ongoing Communication and Annual Performance Dashboards**: Key officials noted that with the new performance framework, schools receive ongoing performance indicators and annual dashboards, which allow them to understand expectations and focus on continuous quality improvement rather than simply reacting to crises.

- **Engaging Stakeholders**: The new performance framework promotes collaboration by encouraging input from schools, governing boards, and families. This engagement has enhanced communication and strengthened relationships throughout the charter school community. Additionally, as many key officials noted, the new system fosters collaboration and exchanges of best practices between charter and TPS, benefiting the broader community.
- **Supportive Role of RIDE**: RIDE has adopted a more supportive, customer-service approach when engaging with charter schools. Key officials reported that the present leadership and recent hires at RIDE are individuals with charter school experience who understand the nuances of operating a charter. This change has strengthened the relationship between RIDE and charter schools, with the schools now perceiving RIDE more as a partner in this endeavor which shares the same goals.

Ongoing Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

Key officials highlighted several challenges associated with the new performance framework as well as opportunities to improve it:

- **Ongoing Recovery from COVID-19**: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted charter school operations, interrupted students' learning experiences, and affected processes related to school authorization, renewal, and oversight. The pandemic created abrupt changes that may have led to perceptions of a nonlinear evolution in the performance framework's development and impact.
- **Increased Demand for Charter Schools:** As the Rhode Island charter sector has become recognized for its high standards and quality instruction, demand for charter school seats has surged. For example, for the 2024–2025 school year, 30,000 applications were submitted for only 2,500 available seats. This growing demand means that only a fraction of interested families can access charter schools, leaving the needs of many unmet.
- **Low-Performing School Closures:** Key officials acknowledged the benefits of the high benchmarks established by the new framework, which improve the quality of both charter and district public schools. However, they expressed concerns about the impact of strict accountability measures, particularly when low-performing charter schools are closed, as was the case with the Academy for Career Exploration 2020, and there are no better alternatives. When alternative district schools perform even worse, students from closed charters are not better served, raising questions about equitable outcomes.

- **Lingering Distrust:** Although relations between RIDE and school leaders have improved in recent years, key officials noted that the community has not yet fully recovered from a period of distrust during previous administrations. That era was marked by a sense of bias in school evaluations, and although trust has gradually been restored, complete restoration will require more time.
- **Capacity Challenges at RIDE:** While RIDE has adopted a more supportive and collaborative approach in recent years, key officials have pointed out that high staff turnover has left RIDE understaffed. This situation limits its ability to provide the level of support that schools need and value.
- **Concerns About Accountability Measures:** Some charter school leaders expressed skepticism about how academic outcomes are measured under the current framework. For instance, they argued that using the SAT to evaluate schools focused on career and technical education (CTE) is not an adequate measure of success. Instead, key officials suggested that postsecondary outcomes, mission-based goals, and attendance data would better reflect the value and real-life benefits these schools provide to their students. They recommended creating more flexible, alternative accountability frameworks tailored to schools' missions and the unique value they provide to their communities. RIDE employees confirmed that efforts to develop such alternative models are underway.

Perceived Impact of the New Performance Framework on Charter Quality

Key officials acknowledged that the new system improves performance and quality with the impact spread across several areas. The new system:

- **Reduced Surprise and Stress:** The new performance framework offers transparency and predictability, which clarifies evaluation criteria and delivers continuous performance data. This reduces stress and enables schools to focus on continuous improvement rather than last-minute fixes.
- **Fostered a Supportive, Improvement-Focused Culture:** A collaborative and constructive tone has gradually restored trust among stakeholders, fostering productive dialogue.
- **Strengthened Collaboration and Sector-Wide Learning**: Transparent reporting encourages schools to learn from each other's data and best practices. High-performing schools serve as models, helping underperforming schools improve and elevating overall sector quality over time.

- **Strengthened Governance and Leadership:** The new performance framework has shifted accountability to governing boards, clarifying their roles and responsibilities. Boards are now better informed and more proactive, which creates more stable school environments.
- **Reduced Political Interference:** Objective, standardized criteria make decisions fairer and less susceptible to political influence. While some political tensions persist (e.g., teacher union resistance), the data-driven, transparent approach has increased credibility and reduced political noise.
- **Integrated Multiple Quality Dimensions:** The new performance framework expanded the definition of quality beyond test scores to encompass organizational health, financial stability, mission alignment, and engagement with underserved communities. This holistic approach encourages the development of alternative evaluation frameworks and broader improvement strategies.
- **Elevated Expectations and Benchmarks:** Clear, data-driven quality standards set higher goals for charter schools. Schools now strive to improve quality beyond defined targets, shifting focus from merely meeting minimum requirements to pursuing higher-quality outcomes, which, in turn, cultivates a culture of continuous improvement.

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The table below presents excerpts from interviews highlighting key officials' insights on the new performance framework.

Table 1. Key Officials' Insights on the New Performance Framework

Aspect	Direct Quotations
Overall Environment	• "The system has transformed, where they are consultative … When a charter school is doing a good job, everybody wins." *(School, Leader)* • "RIDE itself has transitioned from being the accountability police to how are we going to support schools to achieve." *(Council/Gov's Office)* • "RIDE acknowledged criticisms and made updates to improve transparency and rigor." *(Council/Gov's Office)*
Authorization & Renewal	• "Part of our success … is that you had to jump through lots more hoops than in other states where they were letting charters just open …" *(School Leader)* • "The performance framework has resulted in stronger schools being authorized, like wholeheartedly." *(Council/Gov's Office)* • "We used to engage in these all-or-nothing renewals … it was with relief that RIDE undertook a whole program to revamp this reauthorization process." *(Council/Gov's Office)*
Accountability & Standards	• "The process worked … it … allowed for us to pinpoint what the problems were and to put in place a corrective action plan." *(School Leader)* • "Charter schools want accountability … being able to get that understanding from them has helped us." (*RIDE*) • "Applicants are given feedback to understand what they did well and where they fell short." *(Council/Gov's Office)*
Transparency & Data Use	• "We have intentional conversations at the board level … none of this should be a surprise because you know how you're being held accountable." (*RIDE*) • "Transparency … all applications are posted online, public hearings are held, and stakeholders can provide feedback." *(Council/Gov's Office)* • "RIDE gives us excellent data … their process is bulletproof." *(Council/Gov's Office)*
Stakeholder Collaboration	• "Stakeholders were engaged throughout the process … increasing buy-in and confidence in the framework." *(Council/Gov's Office)* • "We have sessions with the sending districts and the charter schools together so that they can learn from one another." (*RIDE*) • "EnrollRI is an example of the collaborative will of the charter school community in our willingness to partner with RIDE as a partner." *(School Leader)*
Political Climate	• "RIDE has almost developed a firewall … to de-politicize the process." *(Council/Gov's Office)* • "I don't hear as many complaints as I used to hear." *(Council/Gov's Office)*

Note. *School Leader* – Current Charter School Leader; *Council/Gov's Office* – Current Council Member or Current/Former Governor's Office Staff Member; *RIDE* – Current or Former RIDE Employee.

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Appendix I. Research Questions

Area	Research Questions
Development	**Q1** How was the new performance framework developed and implemented? • What led to the decision about updating the 2010 framework? • Who were the key officials engaged in the creation of the 2017 performance framework, and what were their respective roles? • What resources and data were used to inform the creation of the 2017 performance framework?
Adoption	**Q2** How has the adoption of the new performance framework changed the charter school authorization process and quality standards in Rhode Island? • What does the current charter school authorization process look like under the 2017 performance framework? • What specific quality standards are outlined for charter schools in the 2017 performance framework? • In what ways did the quality standards differ prior to and following the implementation of the 2017 performance framework?
Impact	**Q3** What impact has the new performance framework had on the performance and quality of charter schools in Rhode Island? • In what ways has the implementation of the new framework influenced the academic and operational quality of charter schools? • Has the adoption of the new performance framework mitigated political tensions surrounding charter school regulation? If so, how has this manifested? • To what extent did explicit articulation of the new standards alter discussion surrounding charter school quality?

Appendix II. Focus Group Interview Guide

Topics	Questions
Background and Role in the Process	**Q1** At what point did you get involved with the new performance review system? Was it during the development phase, or later in the process? • *PROMPT*: What was your specific role?
Development of the New Performance Review System	**Q2** What challenges with the previous system prompted this update? **Q3** How did the process of developing and implementing the new performance review system unfold? • *PROMPT*: Who were the key stakeholders involved? What roles did they play? • *PROMPT*: How were decisions made? Was the process collaborative or more top-down? • *PROMPT*: Were there any disagreements between stakeholders? • *PROMPT*: What resources or expertise did the stakeholders rely on? Who or what did they learn from? • *PROMPT*: What were the main challenges during the process?
Adoption of the New Performance Review System	**Q4** In your current role, how do you interact with the performance review system? **Q5** How would you describe the current performance review system in terms of performance and quality? • *PROMPT*: How is performance measured? • *PROMPT*: What quality metrics that are used matter the most? • *PROMPT*: What parts of the system are working well? Is there anything that stands out to you? • *PROMPT*: What are the challenges with the current system?
Changes in the Process Over Time	**Q6** How does the current performance review system compare to the one used before 2016? • *PROMPT*: What significant differences stand out to you? • *PROMPT*: Have the standards for evaluating charter school quality changed? • *PROMPT*: How have these new quality thresholds impacted school authorizations or closures?
Impact on School Performance and Quality	**Q7** How has the updated performance review system affected overall school quality? • *PROMPT*: What positive/negative outcomes have you seen? • *PROMPT*: Has the new system helped ease political tensions around charter school regulations? • *PROMPT*: How has the conversation around charter school quality changed since the new standards were implemented?
Future Improvements	**Q8** If you could implement the performance review system again, what changes would you suggest?

Appendix III. Timeline of Key Charter School Milestones in Rhode Island Related to Charter School Authorizing

Year & Milestone	Event Description
1995: Charter School Law Enacted	Rhode Island enacted the "Charter Public School Act," allowing the creation of district charter schools by existing public schools, personnel, or districts.
1998: State Charter School Law Expanded to Include Independent Charters	The state's charter school law was expanded to include independent charter schools established by Rhode Island colleges, universities, or nonprofit organizations that have been in existence for at least two years prior to applying for a charter and "exist[s] for a substantial reason other than to operate a school."
2004: State Cap on Charter Schools Raised	Rhode Island raised the cap on charter schools, allowing more to open and to address parents' and communities' demand for alternative public education.
2008: State Charter School Law Expanded to Include Mayoral Academies	The Rhode Island General Assembly approved mayoral academies, a new category of charter schools established by a mayor or elected town administrator acting through a nonprofit.
2010: Race to the Top Initiative Received	Rhode Island received $75 million from the federal Race to the Top grant, which included provisions supporting the expansion of charter schools. The state committed to ensuring high-quality charter schools as part of its broader educational reforms.
2010: Initial Charter School Performance Review System Developed	RIDE developed its initial charter school performance framework
2016: The State Statue Amended to Adjust the Funding Formula	The Rhode Island General Assembly amended the funding formula to address costs unique to traditional school districts, which charter schools don't typically incur. This change allowed districts to keep funds for specific expenses like nonpublic school textbooks, transportation for nonpublic students, retiree health benefits, and out-of-district special education services. As a result, charter schools faced reduced funding, while traditional districts gained additional resources to support students educated through charter schools.
2016: Updated Charter School Performance Review System Launched	Rhode Island updated the Charter School Performance Review System after a year of research with charter school practitioners. This committee, including RIDE staff and representatives from the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools and Mayoral Academies, aimed to revise the performance review framework by: • Increasing transparency for stakeholders • Analyzing objective criteria for annual evaluations and renewal decisions

Year & Milestone	Event Description
	• Incorporating best practices and ensuring consistency with state policies for an efficient review process
2017: Shortened Renewal Issued by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE)	The K–12 Council approved three-year renewal conditions for three charter schools. Since the creation of the renewal framework, the K–12 Council has approved all shortened renewal as recommended by RIDE.
2019: Providence Public School District Taken Over by RIDE	RIDE took control of Providence Public School District (PPSD), the state's largest with nearly 24,000 students and home to most of Rhode Island's charter schools.
2020: The First Charter School in the History of Rhode Island Closed	In response to the charter school renewal process, the Academy for Career Exploration closed due to low academic performance.
2020: EnrollRI Launched	To support Rhode Island families, RIDE launched EnrollRI, a statewide platform for charter school enrollment. In four years, applications increased by over 50%. The state will adopt a single best offer approach for the 2026–27 school year.

Note. The list of milestones was provided by the Rhode Island Department of Education.

[1] "Rhode Island's Charter Public Schools," State of Rhode Island Department of Education, https://ride.ri.gov/students-families/ri-public-schools/charter-schools.

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