

**Colorado Charter School Institute**  
Pre-Opening Annual Review of Schools (PCARS) Report  
2023

**Ascent Classical Academy – North Denver**



## CSI HISTORY

In response to the growing desire for charter schools, the lack of school options for at-risk students, and the interest in an alternate mode of authorizing charter schools that could assist districts in implementing authorizing best practices, the State Legislature created the Charter School Institute (CSI).

## OUR MISSION

The mission of the Charter School Institute is to foster high-quality public school choices offered through Institute charter schools, including particularly schools that are focused on closing the achievement gap for at-risk students.

## OUR VISION

Our vision is to be a national leader as a highly effective charter school authorizer by building a portfolio of high performing public charter schools through authorizing practices that promote a variety of successful and innovative educational designs, including an emphasis on schools that serve at-risk youth.

Colorado Charter School Institute  
1525 Sherman St., B76  
Denver, CO 80203  
P: (303) 866-3299 | [www.csi.state.co.us](http://www.csi.state.co.us)

## Contents

Pre-Opening CSI Review of Schools (PCARS) Summary .....	1
How to Use the PCARS Report .....	2
PCARS Rating .....	3
Body of Evidence.....	<a href="#">Error! Bookmark not defined.</a>
Organizational Performance .....	5
Financial Performance .....	8
Readiness & Onboarding Tasks Performance .....	8

## Pre-Opening CSI Review of Schools (PCARS) Summary

The Pre-Opening CSI Review of Schools (PCARS) is a system to evaluate a school's performance in Year 0 (the year between application approval and school opening) and ultimately leads to the determination of a school's Year 1 accreditation rating. The PCARS evaluation system provides evaluative information about a school's performance prior to the availability of academic assessment data. PCARS evaluates a school's Body of Evidence as determined by the CSI Application Review Team, as well as performance against specific indicators and metrics from Year 0 including Organizational Performance, Financial Performance, and Readiness and Onboarding task Performance.

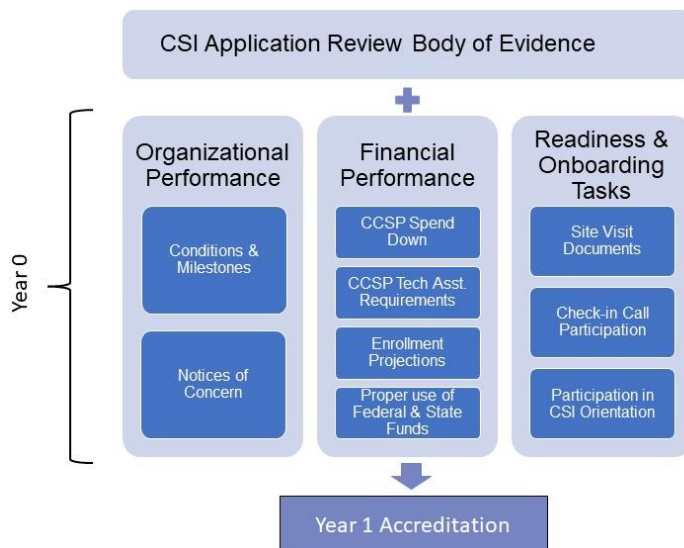
Commented [MM1]: Word Choice?

### PCARS Report

The PCARS Report takes both the school's Body of Evidence Rating from the application and its Year 0 performance data into consideration in determining a school's accreditation rating. These quantitative and qualitative analyses provide guidance and direction for the school throughout its lifespan by highlighting areas of performance and areas of needed improvement. Further, the report process includes a feedback loop, which allows schools to request clarifying information where necessary, as well as provide additional, school-specific information to CSI for consideration in its evaluation process.

### Accreditation Ratings

Each school's accreditation rating will be determined annually by the CSI Board. In Year 1, in the absence of academic data, the school's accreditation rating is determined by PCARS. CSI is committed to authorizing high-quality charter schools, therefore the default accreditation rating given to Year 1 schools is a Performance rating. This accreditation rating may be lowered to "Improvement" or "Priority Improvement" based on the indicators and metrics collected in the Pre-Opening CSI Review of Schools report. The severity and quantity of concerns identified in the PCARS report will determine the school's Year 1 accreditation rating. In subsequent years, ratings are determined through the CARS accreditation system, which builds upon the state's lens of evaluation and includes additional indicators within the CSI Performance Frameworks in Academics, Finance, and Organization.



## How to Use the PCARS Report

This **PCARS Report** summarizes the school's Body of Evidence and Year 0 performance and compliance data, as collected by CSI prior to the school's opening year. The data collected and presented within this report reflect outcomes of Year 0 tasks in the areas of Organizational Performance, Financial Performance, and Readiness and Onboarding Task Performance.

In order to summarize each section, the Institute will include a brief narrative providing feedback on the school's progress within the indicators and/or metrics where applicable. Schools have the opportunity to provide a brief narrative for each section as well. Any additional claims within the school narrative must be substantiated with supplemental evidence that can be verified by CSI. The school narrative should focus on outputs and outcomes. Factors such as culture, curriculum, and PD, for example, are important in your internal evaluations and root cause analyses, but are not considered by CSI as part of your evaluation.

Schools should be looking at trends in performance and using the feedback provided within the report as evidence of success, as well as to identify areas that may need the allocation of additional resources and attention.

A majority of the metrics within this report are collected by CSI during the school's Year 0, spanning from approval of the charter contract to the opening day of school. The draft PCARS report will be shared with the school on November 28. As this is the preliminary draft, please review all data collected for accuracy. Should you find any incorrect or inaccurate data (as opposed to findings or conclusions that you simply disagree with), please contact Michael McManus, CSI Authorization and Accountability Manager.

If you wish to supplement any area of your report with additional evidence, these proposed changes or additions must be returned to CSI **no later than December 4<sup>th</sup>**.

Once all data have been reviewed (and where applicable incorporated into the report), CSI will send each school a final report by **December 8<sup>th</sup>**.

Commented [MR2]: Copy over from WF-A to match.

## PCARS Rating

The PCARS Framework serves to hold schools accountable for performance during their pre-opening year and determine an appropriate accreditation rating. These indicators were selected because of their role in predicting a charter school's viability.

Indicators	Rating
Body of Evidence	Low Risk
Organizational Performance	Meets
Financial Performance	Does Not Meet
Readiness & Onboarding Task Performance	Meets
<b>Overall Rating</b>	Improvement

### *Rating Narrative:*

Based on the indicators and metrics, Ascent Classical Academy - North Denver will be accredited with an **Improvement** rating.

## Body of Evidence

The Body of Evidence for a replication school is determined by the CSI Review Team based on comprehensive and rigorous analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. The Review Team focuses on the viability of the proposed school and the question of whether to authorize the proposal in accordance with Colorado law C.R.S § 22-30.5-509, et seq., as amended.

Based on these evaluations, the CSI Review Team determined that the new school application submitted by Ascent Classical Academy - 27J represented a Low Risk.

### Body of Evidence Summary




**School & Network Quality**

- Both existing schools received a Performance rating in 2022.
- Limited academic data is available due to COVID but generally the schools meet state expectations.
- Enrollment has increased every year since opening for both network schools.



**Organizational Capacity**

- While ACA is an emerging EMP with a limited track record, the school governing board and the EMP demonstrate the capacity to expand the current program and implement the mission with fidelity.
- The network board has demonstrated appropriate oversight of the schools and the EMP.
- The school leader has not yet been formally identified.



**EMP Capacity**

- The primary employees of the EMP have assisted in the founding of the two model schools.
- The EMP is planning to grow to support the additional schools and has developed a national network of resources and supports.
- There have been some concerns related to grant spend down and missed deadlines that the EMP is working to remedy.



**Facility Capacity & Viability**

- The application identified options for both a short-term and long-term facility.
- The school proposes to open temporarily in the Brighton Boys and Girls Club.
- The school is in discussions with the local district to purchase land in order to construct a long-term facility.



**Financial Viability**

- A balanced budget was provided.
- Enrollment projections are robust for Year 1 and grow steadily.
- ACACS currently operates two schools in Colorado with fiscal stability.
- Finances are managed with internal staff and contracted services.



**Community Need & Support**

- The applicant offers a clear rationale for proposing the school in the 27J school district.
- The applicant provides strong evidence of student and family demand.
- While the team seeks to serve a student body reflective of the community, it is unclear whether outreach and supports will result in the intended enrollment.

## Organizational Performance

### Conditions & Milestones Attainment

In order to mitigate the identified areas of risk, CSI staff incorporates conditions into the conditional application approval and/or milestones into the charter contract. The adequate and timely submission of these materials are critical to the success of the school prior to complete application approval and in Year 0 and demonstrate a founding team's capacity to meet Organizational requirements.

#### CSI Narrative:

The school demonstrated a pattern of timely and quality submissions of Contract Condition and Milestone items. Network leadership team consistently submitted Milestone items on or before their due dates and timely corrected and resubmitted on the rare occasions when the submission was deemed incomplete or required revisions. The school communicated with CSI staff in advance when additional time was needed on a milestone submission.

### Notices of Concern

When CSI has reason to believe that a CSI school is out of compliance with any applicable law, rule, policy, or contract provision, CSI, in its sole discretion, will issue a Notice to the school in addition to implementing any remedial action deemed necessary in accordance with the remedies described in [CSI's School Compliance Policy](#).

#### CSI Narrative:

The school received zero Notices of Concern during Year 0.

Indicator	Rating
Contract Conditions	Meets
Milestones	Meets
Notice of Concern	Meets
<b>Organizational Performance Rating</b>	Meets

Organizational Performance Narrative (School observations):

*\*OPTIONAL\* To be populated by the school and provided to CSI for review and possible inclusion prior to the distribution of the final PCARS Report in December.*

Commented [AS3]: Are we going to comment on the current situation with the ESP?

Commented [MR4R3]: I'd lean towards no. That's more a Year 1 issue rather than a Year 0 issue.

Commented [AS5]: @McManus, Michael I don't believe any of the Year Zero schools struggled with milestone submissions. I dropped the language we used for CEC Online last year here, but you are the project lead on the milestone tracking, so feel free to adjust as needed!

Commented [MM6R5]: Yup. I feel they were on time and in communication however, Andi might have some feedback in this space there were some late financial pieces.

## Financial Performance

A school's Financial Performance rating is based on several measures of financial viability in Year 0. The successful spend down of the Colorado Charter Schools Program (CCSP) start-up grant funds and ability to meet all technical assistance requirements for the grant, is considered, as well as the school's ability to accurately project enrollment and a school's overall ability to demonstrate proper use of Federal and State funds.

### CCSP Spend Down & TA Requirements

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) is the recipient of the Federal Charter Schools Program grant and uses the Colorado Charter Schools Program (CCSP) to provide sub-grants to qualified charter school developers for the planning phase and/or early years of implementation of new charter schools through the CCSP grant and assists new and existing charter schools within Colorado to support and improve their performance through coordinating and facilitating quality technical assistance. Given the nature of the grant, there are stringent requirements and processes that must be met to stay in compliance with the grant program. Schools that fail to spend down the amount awarded to them and meet requirements may have their award amount reduced and jeopardize their ability to apply for and access this funding source in the future for expansion or replication purposes. More information on CCSP requirements can be found in the [CCSP Guidebook](#).

### Technical Assistance Requirements

Support Category	Completion Details
Sub-Grantee Support	Met 4 of 4
Governing Board Support	Met 1 of 4
Administrator Support	Met 1 of 4
Business Operations Support	Met 1 of 2
Overall Rating	Partially Meets

**Commented [MM7]:** From AD: The rating system was changed this year and is difficult to interpret. I was going to talk through this at the meeting. I think we should just pull off the ratings and color coding rather than try to read tea leaves.

Does that work? And we can just add a \*note: due to changes in the CDE rating system CSI is reporting completion details only. Or similar?

### *CSI Narrative:*

The school demonstrated a pattern of late, missing, or incomplete submissions for the CCSP grant. In addition, Requests for Funds (RFFs) were submitted without any documentation at times and were incomplete others. The school applied for and were granted milestone exception requests on the basis that activities had not taken place. It was discovered upon final review that activities had taken place and milestone exceptions were later revoked as a result. Partial and incomplete submissions were often made.

CSI had to insist on clear documentation of inventory received for year-end review and funds disbursement for 2+ months after the final deadline, which negatively impacted the school's audit. The school submitted a late Annual Financial Report (AFR) to CSI as a result of missed deadlines creating a missed deadline to CDE grants fiscal.

Generally, schools in Year 0 have a period of adjustment with the CCSP and the requirements of drawing down federal funding however, the challenges exhibited by Ascent, an established school network, are outside the norm of previous CSI schools in Year 0.

### Enrollment Projections

Enrollment is the primary driver of a school's budget, therefore the ability to accurately forecast enrollment is a critical skill in the development and maintenance of a healthy school budget. Schools who fail to reasonably project their Year 1 enrollment may experience financial hardship that places the viability of the school at risk.

*CSI Narrative:*

The school did not meet expectations for accurate enrollment projections in Year 1. The projected enrollment for the application was 420. Oct Count for year 1 is 222, or 53% of the original application.

Use of Federal & State Funds

As public institutions, charter schools are recipients of both Federal and State funding sources which are subject to various regulations. CSI expects all its schools to be good stewards of public funds and take the misuse of Federal and State funds very seriously and considers this a key indicator when evaluating the Financial Performance of schools in Year 0.

*CSI Narrative:*

The school seems to have an understanding of Federal and State fund requirements at times but did not follow the deadlines associated with them and had to be reminded of what is required to receive reimbursement.

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Rating</b>
CCSP	
Spend down	Does Not Meet
Technical Assistance Requirements	Partially Meets
Enrollment Projections	Does Not Meet
Use of Federal & State Funds	Partially Meets
<b>Financial Performance Rating</b>	Does Not Meet

Financial Performance Narrative (School observations):

*\*OPTIONAL\* To be populated by the school and provided to CSI for review and possible inclusion prior to the distribution of the final PCARS Report in December.*

## **Readiness & Onboarding Tasks Performance**

The primary goal of Year 0 is to establish and execute a plan for a successful school opening. This planning year focuses on taking the proposal for the school outlined in the application and transforming it into a school that is ready to serve students on day one. Throughout Year 0, the founding team will participate in Readiness and Onboarding Tasks to ensure the team is making progress towards a successful school opening.

### Preparedness Visit

CSI Staff will conduct a formal Preparedness Visit at the end of Year 0, prior to the start of school. The Preparedness visit is an on-site review by CSI personnel that gauges overall readiness for school opening, with a focus on the school facility. Additional preparedness reviews may be completed informally through document reviews of and interviews with board and staff members of the proposed charter school to assess organizational readiness. The school may be required to submit material prior to the visit to support CSI staff in evaluating the preparedness of the school.

### *CSI Narrative:*

Prior to opening, Ascent-North Denver's leased a facility different than their original facility plan. The facility in which the school opened is located in a church, which also houses a privately-run preschool. The Preparedness Visit occurred on 08/10/2023, and included a tour of all spaces in the church for Ascent-North Denver's educational program. During the visit the school produced evidence of a Certificate of Occupancy that indicated the building is appropriately E Rated. The Preparedness Visit team also observed appropriate furniture and equipment in classrooms. Safety plans were not yet posted in all classrooms and offices as of the visit on 08/10/2023. A follow-up site visit was conducted on 08/24/2023, to check on progress of posting of safety plans. Not all safety plans were posted at this time. Confirmation of safety plans posted in appropriate classrooms and offices was received on 09/09/2023. The school has been working with the church's Director of Safety to coordinate safety plans related to security and evacuations. Appropriate signage was posted at entrances to the building notifying visitors that armed personnel were on site.

### Check-In Call Participation

Beginning the first July of Year 0 (one year out from opening), approved applicant teams will participate in monthly readiness check-ins with the Director of Student Services and applicable CSI staff to monitor progress towards opening readiness tasks and support the founding teams with resources and technical assistance.

### *CSI Narrative:*

The school met expectations for consistent and transparent communication with CSI staff during Year 0, as evidenced by regular participation in Check-In Calls. The school kept CSI staff up to date on their progress throughout Year 0.

### CSI Orientation Participation

Each summer, CSI hosts an Orientation for New Leaders that provides an opportunity for leaders to learn more about each department at CSI and how they will interact with staff throughout the course of the year. This orientation is an important aspect of Year 0 and a key to establishing a positive working relationship with CSI staff and having a clear understanding of the expectations of School Leaders. If leaders are not able to attend the event, individual orientation opportunities can be scheduled.

CSI Narrative:

The school participated in a CSI Orientation prior to the opening of school.

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Preparedness Visit Documents	Partially Meets
Check-in Call Participation	Meets
CSI Orientation Participation	Meets
<b>Readiness &amp; Onboarding Tasks Performance</b>	Meets

Readiness & Onboarding Tasks Narrative (School observations):

*\*OPTIONAL\* To be populated by the school and provided to CSI for review and possible inclusion prior to the distribution of the final PCARS Report in December.*