

Scott Pearson
Remarks at 2017 NACSA Leadership Conference
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It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2017 NACSA Leadership Conference. I am Scott Pearson, the executive director of the DC Public Charter School Board and Chair of NACSA's Board of Directors.

What an inspiring introduction we just saw – hearing directly from the people whose choices are making a difference. And from Miguel whose life was changed because of a decision made by an authorizer just like you.

Our choices matter for the millions of students who deserve better. Who deserve a school that will be bold and creative and prepare them for a life of unlimited opportunity.

I want to thank Greg Richmond, who has made NACSA a tremendous resource to all of us. It's a pleasure to work with Greg on the NACSA board, and it's a pleasure to work with Greg in my capacity as the authorizer in DC.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, the primary authorizer here in Arizona. Ashley Berg and her team provide oversight to more than 500 charter schools across the state. They are working hard to fulfill their mission to provide quality educational choices to students and families across this great state. Let's give them a round of applause.

This is my favorite professional event of the year. I, like all of you, wrestle every day with some really tough issues as an authorizer. And sometimes I feel alone. Sometimes I feel like these are issues with no right answer – where every choice feels wrong in some way. And then I come to NACSA and I am reminded that I'm not alone – that we are a community, all struggling to find the best way forward, all here to learn from each other, all here to shape the evolution of charter school authorizing.

I talk about the challenges of being an authorizer, but don't get me wrong. This is hands-down the best job I have ever had. I have NEVER had such

an opportunity to make a difference for kids, for my city, and for my country. My choices have a direct impact ...

- on the kind of schools children go to;
- on whether incredible entrepreneurial school leaders feel supported or burdened;
- on whether public schools in DC get better or worse;
- on whether we make progress closing the achievement gap, integrating our schools, and building confidence in public schooling.

Ultimately, my choices as an authorizer will determine whether most people see charter schools in my community as a good thing or a bad thing.

You see, charter schools are the single most significant innovation in public education in fifty years. But their story is still being written.

Will they improve student outcomes, close achievement gaps, spur improvements in traditional schools, and draw more families into public schools?

Despite pathbreaking analysis by CREDO and Mathematica and others, the ultimate answers aren't yet known. But I'll tell you what is absolutely certain: the choices all of us in this room make will have a huge impact – maybe the biggest impact – on the ultimate outcome.

We, the authorizers, are the levers of change. We can stifle this movement with overregulation. We can squelch promising new ideas and leaders. We can let this movement sink into mediocrity by tolerating poor performers. Or we can nurture promising leaders; grow our best schools; find smart, low-burden ways to monitor our schools without distracting them; and have the moral courage to do our hardest job – closing low-performing schools.

We, more than anybody else, can determine whether charter schools in our communities and in our nation realize their extraordinary potential. And that's why I love my job – I have never felt such a sense of potential and possibility as I do as a charter school authorizer.

I've talked about choices. And each of us has to make them every day. Some are easy, some are devilishly hard – pitting competing values that have compelling claims.

All of these choices add up, and you can actually see the results. You can see the result of your choices in the portfolio of schools you oversee. Their quality, their compliance with the law, their openness to all kids, their dynamism, their relationships with you – it's all there, and it's all the sum of your authorizing choices, both formal and informal. Because our job is more than just to “follow the law”; our job is to build the strongest possible portfolio of schools. I'll put it simply: you cannot be a good authorizer with a portfolio of bad schools. You just can't.

NACSA's new strategic plan is built on this basic truth, and it focuses on better outcomes. Because, after all, none of us got into this work just to check the box and follow the law. We got into this work because we want the children of our great nation to have a better chance at realizing their potential. We got into this work so that our schools offer poor children a path to the middle class. We got into this work to chip away at the achievement gap – which is, more than anything else, the legacy of racism and slavery that is our nation's original sin. We got into this work to re-imagine what public schools are, and to show everyone just how good they can be.

That's our promise. That's our potential. That's why we are authorizers. We have the power to do good. And we have to choose to use that power.

One woman who is using her power to change lives is Mashea Ashton. I'm fortunate to know Mashea as a friend and a colleague. She's the vice chair of the NACSA board. And she recently completed service as the CEO of the Newark Charter School Fund, where she cultivated the growth of one of the best charter school sectors in the country. I'm particularly happy that Mashea's next mission is to launch a new charter school – Digital Pioneers Academy – in my home of Washington, D.C.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mashea Ashton.