

New Jersey Charter School Advocacy Project Proposal

Introduction:

Since 1996 when New Jersey passed its charter school law, founders, operators and parents of children who attend the state's now 50 charter schools have seen a larger share of struggles than any other state. Among them:

- Funding disparities due to changes in formula interpretation
- Three state supreme court level lawsuits
- Additional oversight and extension of regulation

Internally, the charter movement also faced challenges. Early activists who were heavily involved in building the new movement drifted from some of the central legislative efforts. Each year, a new generation of charter founders finds a very different set of circumstances. As each school has evolved, the founders lost overall group cohesiveness.

The two groups that were created to support charter schools – the New Jersey Public Charter School Association and the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center – have proven ill-equipped to address the challenges charters in the Garden State face.

Today, nine New Jersey schools lost their independence when they became unionized. Observers consider this to be because of a lack of perceived political strength today among charter schools.

Conspicuous by its absence in the Garden State, is any meaningful grassroots outreach program designed to educate, stimulate and motivate citizens to become more active politically, in their communities and in the state halls.

All of this adds up to an environment that is hostile at best to the notion of charter schools and the operations they attempt to advance on behalf of New Jersey children.

The Proposal:

E3 seeks to undertake a statewide advocacy program that develops and sustains a real grassroots presence in New Jersey for charter schools. Its already successful community outreach efforts for school choice prove that when time is spent where people are most likely to congregate, successful alliances and supporters can be readily developed and successfully called into action.

Bringing charter school reforms into the E3 program are consistent with its mission and direction. While some groups perform research and technical assistance well, such activities are not sufficient for a movement that currently risks extinction without additional activity.

E3 has partnered with the national Center for Education Reform, whose multi-state program has, for years, included New Jersey in its portfolio. CER first helped then-State

Senator Jack Ewing to develop charter school language for his proposal. After initial work to educate lawmakers, CER also worked with charter leaders to testify, challenge lawsuits, and organize parents. Throughout the charter law's tenure, CER has stayed close to leaders and as such, is uniquely positioned to help E3 launch and sustain its new effort. In addition, CER manages a multi-state communications and capacity building effort for charter school organizations and is heavily engaged in grassroots development and advocacy in those states, while counseling teams in others.

In addition to creating a major grassroots organization for charter schools in the state, E3 and CER together will launch a major communications project aimed at improving understanding and support for charter schools.

Charter schools are challenged by misperceptions, which recent research has revealed is much deeper than commonly understood. At the same time, support for charters and what they offer runs much deeper in inner city communities than anywhere else, and NJ's inner cities (the Abbott districts) are prime locations for implementing a ground -strategy.

Goals:

The primary goal of the two-year effort is to increase awareness of and support for charter schools by at least 15 percent.

The secondary goal is to demonstrate public support to lawmakers to ensure that parents and citizens' voices are heard.

A third goal that is a byproduct of both is the improvement of the charter school law. Working with other charter-based groups and the new parent and community networks created by this plan, we are confident that we can enact meaningful changes to ensure a better law that is more conducive to quality charter school development.

Finally, the project will yield an increase in high quality, autonomous charter schools, which, while hard to quantify currently, can be, part of a longer proposal.

Detailed Communications Program:

Together CER and E3 will utilize their strong relationships with community coalitions to forge an effective, on the ground, grassroots communications strategy. The strategy was designed in consultation with public relations and polling experts who are intimately familiar with the state and the issues.

CER will employ local people to educate and engage specific demographic groups who respond positively to most aspects of charter schools but hold nagging doubts or misperceptions that keep them from supporting charters, and therefore, keep them from helping to advance charter schools with their elected representatives. This unprecedented education effort will employ several levels outreach and communication:

- Community-based, personal outreach at popular business establishments and influential community stores
- Strategic advertising in non-traditional media
- Guerilla advertising that involves high-impact, low cost billboard, and public transportation signs and placards
- Ongoing media outreach

Evaluation:

The success of the campaign will be measured by the following:

- An increase in charter support by 15%, determined through pre- and post-polling and survey data
- A 15% increase in parent and citizen communication to lawmakers about support for charter schools: measured by increased traffic through the Grassroots Action Center and more participation among parents and lawmakers at events.
- Improvement of Charter School Law: measured by improving at least two aspects of the law, from more authorizers to equitable funding among others.