

Target States Initiative Action Plan

To advance the charter and choice movement (in some cases) into solid, well-organized, politically sound territory, the following steps have been taken to create a state action plan that provides a tactical game plan for achieving the goal of advancing charter schools. The following objectives are pursued specifically in the action plan that follows.

Objectives

- Identify states where charter/choice potential is high or highly desirable and where CER's partnerships and contacts are substantial and respect is high

Those seven states are:

Indiana
Maine
Maryland
Michigan
New York
Tennessee
Washington, DC

- Craft a "campaign" strategy to secure a strong law and in-state infrastructure to sustain it
- Map out CER activities, tactics and involvement at various stages, and provide a plan for sustainability

The State Template

Each state always has a unique set of circumstances — by virtue of culture, people, geography and politics — that make systematizing difficult and often resented. However, there are many things that can be "bottled and sold" from state to state with little or no modification. The difference as we've learned from business is that the spin might be different, the sale might be specific, but the item itself does not have to change to meet the needs and desires of the customer. In this case, that customer is parents primarily and good schools need to exist everywhere.

- There are three major areas of focus that transcend state differences:
 - a. Communications

- b. Information and Research
- c. Grassroots Development

- There are four major audience categories that require our focus

- a. Parents
- b. Policymakers
- c. Media
- d. Business/Foundations/Civic

- There are four major obstacles to overcome/deficiencies to correct

- a. Lack of strong, well-networked support structure
- b. Knowledge and support base lacking
- c. Groups/materials lack sophistication and readability
- d. No ongoing game plan that runs year to year with firm goals and objectives

The following plan runs from generic to specific, and will provide specific — *though not exhaustive* — tactical approaches to achieve the following necessary objectives:

- Well-informed supportive majority among the public at large, particularly parents
- Strong grassroots (i.e. local groups advocating for charters)
- Active legislature
- Cognizant, attentive media
- Strong support network
- A good law that yields a large number of high quality charter schools and
- A demand for choices

Communications

Communications is more than talk or print advertising. It is the art of promoting a cause and having it recognized and accepted as fact. The only good communications plan is one that results in improved acceptance of an issue. Good communications are simple but savvy and clear. They yield measurable results. The following strategies involve not just forging communication but creating new communication among vastly uninformed audiences.

Strategy 1: Create Demand

- Contract with the Public Agenda Foundation to determine what the public/policymakers know about charters. Public Agenda is well-regarded for their non-ideological, ongoing surveys of American attitudes and understanding of education issues that surpass any existing survey/focus group work.
- Use finding to launch media campaign in partnership with BAEO in selected cities across the six states.
- E.g. Assume one finding is that few parents know that charters are an option of public school choice available under NCLB. One possible ad strategy could be crafted as such:

“Take advantage of your rights under NCLB; Call now for your free guide to your choices

Possible outlets for this message are:

- Billboard ads
- Special non-profit offers from metropolitan bus service

Strategy 2: Develop a set of messages/themes generic to all states

- Market these messages to groups, opinion leaders, and across all materials
- Give solid, standard language to key benefits of charter schools
- E.g. Ripple effect, teacher satisfaction, accountability, An answer to NCLB

Strategy 3: Pursue the Media with consistent program

- Analyze editorial board views and reporter coverage toward charters
- Using themes, pitch specific stories, results of focus groups, etc
- Provide media training for all likely and potentially strong spokespeople
- Connect legislators/business people to editorial board meetings once people are organized
- Identify new, non-traditional media in minority communities and make direct pitches to these media with minority spokespeople identified with partnership organizations

Information and Research

More than just paper, information and research is a broad category that refers to the need to create useful, factual, compelling and desirable materials and tools that educate and inform, and spark change. Most state groups reinvent the wheel across borders daily because they don't believe that much of the information that can be produced will work across state lines. They are forced into creating it from scratch, or more often than not, not creating it at all amidst the heat of battle. These strategies are aimed assessing and delivering up front the majority of information and research that any state will need 80 percent of the time to advance its cause.

Strategy 1: Create new systemized storehouse of charter information on the web

- Create massive index on specific research about and data points on charter schools
- Tailor information and links by audience and need

Eg. Policymakers click here for best components of a charter law, what to avoid etc and evidence to back it up; Click here for latest research on bricks and mortar advances, etc

- Create charter specific, members only extranet that would serve as a place where designated state leaders only can go to exchange updates, ideas and get information from colleagues pursuing similar battles

Strategy 2: Identify and analyze all existing education groups, academicians, think tanks etc and their stands on charter schools

- Publish and regularly update their positions and index the findings by state
- Make available a clear list of detractors and common criticisms

Eg. Most people assume that the League of Women Voters are neutral at worst or pro-charter at best. In reality, the League puts itself into negotiations and acts as a seemingly neutral buffer between the unions and the legislators, winning the latter over for the former, with that reality not being exposed until it's too late

Strategy 3: Legislative Research and analysis

- Publish voting records relevant to charter schools
- Provide systematic, ongoing communications via locally distributed newsletter (with local group imprimatur) to all policymakers, staff and legislative councils

Strategy 4: Create a set of user friendly tools to distribute widely and aggressively to target audiences

- Information materials would include

“How to choose your school?”

What is a charter school? And myths and realities material

Generic statistics

Success stories about charters
Profiles on what makes a great school
Compelling human stories

- Create and market a special electronic Parent Power that communicates specific, tangible benefits to parents as well as routes them to new resources during the life of the campaign and beyond

Grassroots

The piece that ties the information with communications and results in a tangible enterprise is what we call Grassroots. Activities which are designed to and result in agitation, cogitation, controversy and thus movement are grassroots in nature. As Frederick Douglas once said, "Without controversy there can be no progress." The grassroots are a ticket to controversy, and must be seeded, stirred and let to grow in well-directed ways.

Strategy 1: Parents, parents, parents

- Market short, compelling information through special, family friendly channels:
 - * Booths at fairs and community events
 - * Willing PTAs, PTOs that get identified and nurtured
 - * Family magazines and weekly newspapers which parents read to identify local events and school-related news, ETC
- Create parent listserv for ongoing communications among parents fostered by in-state network
- Provide parent-only tools to use, distribute and write:
 - Letters to the editor
 - Questions for policymakers
 - School checklists (making your school good, how to choose, etc)
 - Information that addresses deficiencies identified by Public Agenda
- A national 800# to service parent/lay person calls that provides immediate information feedback that has been produced on the most Frequently-asked questions on choice-related issues, and route callers back to in-house infrastructure (when created)
- Parent activist training: Hold in-depth introductory and advanced training programs for parents who are identified in several different ways (calls, emails, volunteers, NCLB hotlines, partners, etc)

In states with pre-existing charters:

Parents and wait-list parents activist and leadership training
Lobby Day at the Capitol
Regular, monthly testimonials about children successes to lawmakers

Strategy 2: Removing the political obstacles

- Identify the legislators, their votes, their supporters and their touch-points and spheres of influence (including contributors)
- Develop strategies for individual legislators who can be targeted.
- Provide parent activist activities during district-office visits to lay ground work for building support

- Create calendar for dropping specific news items, letters, etc in and around legislative calendar
- Track all legislation, activity, receptions
- Hold fact finding missions (i.e. road trips) to states with compelling charter successes

Strategy 3: Outreach to diverse populations

- Identify institutions that serve minorities the best by region
- Coordinate outreach efforts with local, state and national BAEO efforts
- Address minority-owned/staffed media with specific themes and responses to key issues facing minority communities
- Develop program connecting supportive minority individuals with legislators
- Provide national "cover" for choice-friendly legislators

Eg. A Tenn. State rep went out on the limb and against her Black caucus to push charters in Tennessee. Weeks went by before she could step out. A push may have been to get her covered in the Wall Street Journal for standing tall against special interests, or more modestly, a pat on the back from a nationally recognized colleague (i.e. Dwight Evans, who did call at our request)

Strategy 4: Identifying and recruiting the institutions that can influence state policymakers

- Assess civic and cultural institutions and connect them actively with legislators who share their interests

Eg. The museums which are host to many charter schools often have education programs they want to grow. There are always legislators who have a fondness for museums and the various aspects they represent. Connect them.

- Sponsor "road trips" to states where these institutions have existing charter partnerships. Create interstate links with these groups where they are present in several states.

Eg. The architects associations have begun to learn about charters from Philadelphia's Architectural and Design charter school. Many have sent money. They need to see it and return to their states ready to act.

Strategy 5: Create special business networks for charter schools and related education issues (businesses and foundations treated alike here) *

- Identify existing legislative relationships
- Conduct special luncheons/receptions with key out of state business leaders to influence in the state leaders
- Lay the seeds for long-term education efforts among business councils/networks of business leaders
- Accompany willing business leaders to legislative hearings and meetings with policymakers
- Provide in-depth, special one on one briefings with highly regarded academics/authors

- Road trips

Strategy 6: Build a support base for reform-minded educators

- Identify and create coalition around public school educators for charters
- Conduct workshops for teachers, school board members, and superintendents

State Infrastructure

Create a state based NETWORK for charter schools (a new model of "X") that unites all the functions of resource center, association and parent network under one umbrella.

Rationale: We asked ourselves what are the things that people in states — no matter where — always want and seem to need. What are those things they most often call about, and to whom to they direct their calls? Do charter schools really only call their association? Or do they call that person or entity made most familiar to them? Does a resource center really know how -- or want to -- counsel a parent on a choice they made. Where do legislators call for help if they're supportive?

Here is just a partial – but extensive – list of items that a state needs to be able to do/service:

- Parent information
- Bricks and Mortar guidance
- Application guidelines/advice
- Money sources
- Advocacy
 - Political outreach
 - PR
 - Lobbying for all charter issues
- Help charters with problems
- Guides to how to choose
- Resource info – where to go for this or that
- Listserve
- Newsletters
- Up to the minute info
- Success stories, obstacles
- DATA
- Central state charter website
- Ongoing technical assistance workshops
- Back to school/charter week PR and celebrations
- Legal support/outourcing
- Back room nuts and bolts
- Teacher training
- Board training
- Curriculum Specialist
- A PAC?

We propose that states strongly consider as part of their plan the idea of uniting the resource, association and parent functions under one roof and one dynamic leader with a board that spans the three areas of influence, plus one: business. Each functional area would have its own department head, but the Indiana charter school network or the New York charter school network, etc would begin to breed the familiarity that exists among the this or that state Teacher's Association, as the one-stop shopping necessary to know all things charter.

CER would help create the entity, staff it, co-brand and co-sponsor tools and workshops depending upon political climate, or stay in the background as partner or consultant.. We would assimilate on a regular basis the research, the influence points, and the tools that apply to all states, as well as craft plans for individual states. CER would utilize its national and federal contacts to create relationships with these networks and help other organizations recognize and support these networks.

By having one main point of reference per state for any charter issues, the movement would be advancing in sophistication, efficiency and effectiveness within and to the outside world that must locate its communication points at every step of the way.

2) New York

Goal: Build capacity and discourage/prevent roll backs. Raise visibility of all forms of school choice in big 5 cities, Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester New York City, Albany

- Engage business and civic leaders

Use Governor to help coalesce and use someone of status nationally to drive message home to business

Bring Secretary Paige to NY to help support Governor's charter effort

- Identify and cultivate friendly legislators

New legislators in November pose opportunities for charters.

Be at the ready with a barrage of home-district messages and communication from parents and grassroots about charter, after election and before Christmas

- Conduct PR aimed at specific New York-popular themes

i.e. Charters benefit teachers

Importance of neighborhood schools

Strong schools build communities and drive crime away

- Start interconnecting resource center and association around delivering consistent themes, messages

Help create NY-only list serve

Help with March 03 conference and possible new tributes to legislative and business reform leaders (awards always solidify support)

And more....