

Charter School Communications Playbook

The how-to guide for charter support organizations raising public awareness and support for public charter schools



National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools

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Dear Charter Advocate,

The charter school movement has experienced significant growth since the first charter school opened its doors in St. Paul, Minnesota 16 years ago. Now, more than 1.3 million students across the country attend public charter schools. For an increasingly large number of families, public charter schools provide educational options that were previously unavailable. Thousands of students are on the waitlists of charters, and parents cheer when their children win a space in a charter school through an open-enrollment lottery.

Despite the history of success, and the consistently high demand for quality educational options, charter schools have not been embraced by all. The movement has its critics. Additionally, although there are charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, a large portion of the population knows very little about charter schools or does not fully understand what a charter school is. While those of us in the movement know that charter schools are independent public schools that are free to innovate and accountable for improved student achievement, many still believe that charter schools are either private, selective, or religious schools. It falls to us in the charter movement to ensure that the public knows the truth.

This playbook is intended to provide you with the tools needed to improve your communication with the public. The playbook will explain how to develop a strategic communications plan, identify your key messages, work with the media, deal with a crisis, and create an effective media calendar. In addition, this playbook will help you understand the strategic importance of communications and public relations to your organization and the movement.

This playbook is the fifth in our series, and builds upon the Alliance Master Class on the topic of **Communications and Public Relations**. We created these playbooks and Master Classes as a resource for you, and we hope that you continue to find them both helpful and engaging as you work to drive academic achievement for all children in your home states.

Sincerely,

Nelson Smith
President and CEO
The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

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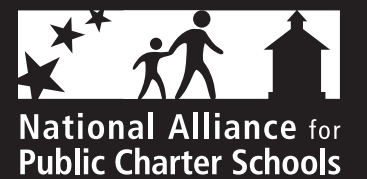
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Prepared for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools by Gary L. Larson, founder of Larson Communications. December 2008. Susan Wolf and Naush Boghossian, senior media consultants at Larson Communications, and David Cantor, Senior Vice President at the Glover Park Group also contributed to this playbook.

Introduction

Raising Public Awareness of And Support
for Charter Schools





National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools

Introduction

Raising Public Awareness of And Support for Charter Schools

“It doesn’t take a majority to make a rebellion; it takes only a few determined leaders and a sound cause.”
- H.L. Mencken

The sustainability and success of any public movement or organization depends in large measure on how well the public understands and supports its mission and goals.

Charter school advocates, from leaders in state Charter Support Organizations (CSOs) to educators in individual charter schools, can’t naturally assume that the amazing work that charter schools do each and every day will be noticed by the general public. Therefore, a thorough, well-planned strategy for communicating with the public is critical to gaining public support and building a successful charter school movement.

Almost two decades into the movement, charter schools are still introducing a major paradigm shift in public education. Many educators, journalists and community members do not yet fully understand the value of the charter school movement or how it is reshaping the educational landscape. In most states, the general public does not even comprehend that charter schools are public schools. With a 3% national market share, public charter schools are still in their infancy.

In order for the charter school movement to succeed, it is essential that the public understand what charter schools are and have a favorable opinion of them. Public opinion influences legislators, school boards and community groups, all of which can help or harm the charter school movement. For the charter school movement, news media coverage is the single most important influencer of public opinion. Additionally important is communication with so-called “key influencers” and direct communication from state associations and from individual charter schools. These three levels of communications enable a sustained cadence of visibility that formulates and drives public opinion.

This playbook is designed to help charter school advocates, particularly at the state level, improve communication with the public via the news media and through other communications avenues.

1

Creating A Communications Strategic Plan



1

Creating A Communications Strategic Plan

What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.

- Herbert Simon

Creating a masterful communications and public relations plan requires a lot of work and a high level of skill. Don't worry. While effective communications can be a mix of art and science, creating a successful communications strategic plan means following a series of steps and then applying these steps to your own CSO's situation and needs.

Today, we live in an over-communicated society. Corporations, non-profits and even public agencies spend billions of dollars per year attempting to brand themselves through marketing and paid advertising. The Internet has only increased the level of this existing noise. So how do we raise the level of awareness of charter schools to a public that's increasingly bombarded with information? The answer is through generating effective publicity – public relations – that penetrates this noise through independent, earned media.

As stated in *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, “What others say about your brand is much more powerful than what you say about it yourself. That is why publicity is more effective than advertising. And why, over the course of the past two decades, public relations

has eclipsed advertising as the most effective force in branding.”¹ In order to build the charter school brand in the minds of an uninformed public, charter school advocates must garner positive news coverage from the news media, which is considered by the broader public as independent and credible.

“Earned media” is how we achieve positive news coverage by creating and then pitching newsworthy events, announcements and stories to a wide spectrum of news outlets. The challenge is that this takes a lot of work. The benefit to the charter school movement, always desperate for additional resources, is that it is the most cost-effective and credible way to get your message across.

Planning Phase

Prior to developing your communications plan, it is necessary to take a step back and ask yourself why communications is important and how you plan to use it strategically to reach your goals. Perhaps you want to use communications to drive favorable policy changes for charter schools. That would require a plan of action to communicate to statewide elected officials. Maybe you’re having a challenge getting local school boards to authorize charter schools. That would require a communications strategy that is designed to tell the successes of charter schools to a more local audience. Perhaps your state’s charter schools’ biggest challenge is enrollment. In that case, you will want to design a communications campaign that reaches parents and local communities. Most likely, though, it’s a combination of these, and many other goals. Whatever your challenge, it’s important to begin your planning by thinking through the following points.

1. Define Your Objective – Strategically Position Your CSO

Start by asking: What role do you want your CSO to play within the charter school movement? While your mission may be to advocate for the expansion of charter schools throughout your state, the real question is: What is the communications path that you will follow to further achieve this mission? Your number one role may need to be defined as advocating for charter schools within the halls of state government. Perhaps you are there to enforce quality on behalf of the movement. Do you wish to increase charter school funding? Increase local and statewide recognition? Increase student enrollment and quality hires? Perhaps it’s increased authorizer and policymaker relations. Whatever these goals are, you should put together a clearly-defined communications strategy that allows you to achieve them. Everything that you do must be tailored to further your defined mission and the role you will play on behalf of the movement.

¹“The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding,” Al Reis and Laura Reis, Harper Collins Publishing, 2002 pg. 15-16.

2. Be Clear about Your Offering

How is what you are doing beneficial to the broader world? In essence: Why should the public care? If you believe that your CSO can play a strong role in improving the broader public school system, then be clear about this as an offering. If you can’t articulate why the broader public should care, then don’t be surprised when the media ignores your phone calls and press releases.

3. Conduct a Situational Analysis

Define the context of where you are. Are you in an ideal environment where everyone in the state wants to see charter schools expand? Perhaps charter schools have a bad name – for example, there may exist a perception that charter schools represent scandal and an effort to undermine public education. You must do a situational analysis to be clear about how previous events have impacted your movement and how they will continue to be used for or against the movement. How will prior and current trends, issues and events affect you? How can you capitalize on opportunities presented by the current environment?

4. Targeted Audiences

Who are the audiences that you will want to communicate to relative to the strategic positioning/mission of your CSO (e.g., statewide, national policymakers, the research community, foundations, the education community, local school boards, parents and the broader public)? There are many different audiences that you will want to reach. Prioritizing those audiences by listing all of them and comparing them with your overall goal will help you think through how best to reach them.

5. Message Development

What are the overarching messages that will most effectively impact your targeted audiences in terms of advancing your CSO’s strategic position? Make sure that you spend the time to determine what key charter school messages resonate with the broader public. Here you’ll want to develop a boilerplate description of your organization. This will be used under the “about us” section on your web site and as the ending description on all your press releases.

6. A Competitive Analysis

The fact is, charter schools are in a competitive market, with several other status quo organizations both seeking to raise their own level of visibility, and potentially even undermining yours. Some organizations that do not like charter schools are actively seeking to influence the education policy landscape. How would you differentiate yourself from these organizations?

7. Preempting Critics' Attacks

Face it: Charter schools have critics. And oftentimes the best defense is a good offense. This means that the most successful crisis situations are mitigated before they happen. You'll need to identify and catalog whether opposition or vulnerabilities exist (they do), and if an opposition will attempt to come after you (they will). You'll need to devise comprehensive strategies to defuse or neutralize these thorny issues.

8. Team Strategy Session

After you have determined your targeted audiences, you will want to determine how you wish to tell your story, and by whom. Inherent in this process is effort at the front end to guarantee that there is complete buy-in from all stakeholders within your CSO on your defined public position and strategy. Effective communications is an organizational effort.

9. Action Plan and Strategy

What are the specific steps that should be taken to execute an effective communication message to your targeted audiences? You'll want to create an action plan where you are developing a series of milestone announcements, planned over the course of at least a year, which allows you to create news on your own terms that drives your agenda.

10. Evaluation

What tangible goals do you wish to set out for your communications plan? An increased media presence is important, which can be measured by the number of news stories, quotes and announcements you make. In addition, conducting an annual series of polls can effectively gauge the results of your efforts. But these measurements are tactical. A successful campaign is one that focuses on the long term, and your strategy and tactics need to hone in with a laser-like focus on your goals.

Ten Components of a Successful Communications Strategic Plan

Based on the outcomes of your planning objectives, you should have a clear sense of the direction in which your CSO wants to head. Now you can begin the process of applying these goals to develop your strategic plan. Each CSO's communications strategic plan will be different. It is important that you tailor your plan to meet your individual state's policy challenges and internal staff capacity. Keep in mind that your plan should be a living document to be reviewed annually, with revisions made accordingly to refine your objectives.

By incorporating these 10 components as outlined below, you will be well on your way to establishing a highly-effective and credible CSO in the minds of your stakeholders and targeted audiences. Your communications campaign should be based on the following 10 components:

1. Conduct a Positive Charter School Information Campaign

Even with busy news cycles, there always exists a news vacuum which presents an opportunity for you to get your message out. Get your message out through a steady stream of well-positioned, positive news announcements geared toward impacting the broader public on the successes of charter schools and your CSO. Take advantage of the diverse media options and outreach tools available to you in order to reach your target audience.

- Each month, pick one positive charter school success story to pitch to members of the media through timely, statewide press releases. Use this proactive approach to establish relationships with your state's education reporters and to build momentum for future announcements.
- Focus your outreach efforts on generating positive news in your state's top newspapers – placing three-to-five positive news stories per month.
- Each quarter, aim to generate at least one editorial from a charter school spokesperson to be placed in a major state newspaper and one placement on major radio, television or local cable access shows.
- Initiate twice-per-year media tours, or editorial board meetings at large newspapers, with the goal of enhancing the editorial board's understanding of charter school successes and challenges.
- Each quarter, aim to develop and place public service announcements on an ongoing basis tied to conferences, job fairs, enrollment opportunities and other items of interest.

- Consider creating a documentary on the successes of the charter school movement in your state.

2. Implement a Crisis Management Plan

By regularly interacting with the media, and requesting input from the National Alliance, your CSO should, on an ongoing basis, identify issues facing the charter school community that can be addressed via public relations efforts. How do you do this?

- Monitor the news each day and stay in close contact with high-profile media. This will help you to identify issues facing the charter school community such as fiscal concerns, facility inequities, scandals, school closures, teacher certification and negative student achievement stories.
- Develop a “Rapid Response” strategy. Stand ready and able to respond to all negative and inaccurate print and broadcast news and to provide key media contacts with factual information about the charter school movement.

3. Disseminate a Professional Quarterly Publication

Your charter school stakeholders want to hear from you. Develop and disseminate a professional quarterly publication to members and to the broader charter school community. Do not try to over-inundate your supporters by sending these too frequently. Make sure that the content of this publication includes information on positive charter school news, policy updates, best practices of charter schools, technical assistance articles and upcoming charter school events.

4. Disseminate Timely and Positive High-Level Information to Supporters

Through various targeted electronic communications, your CSO should circulate pertinent charter school information directly to supporters and to the broader public via a ‘listserv’ in order to get your message out in an unfiltered manner.

- It is critical to build an effective database of charter school supporters. You will want to keep them informed of positive developments within the charter school movement.
- Send out a high-level communication each month designed to give the broader community a sense of ownership over the movement. These may include positive news articles on charter schools with statewide implications, positive reports and studies on charter schools’ successes, major milestones and regional updates.

- At the beginning of the school year and calendar year, send out a high-level mailer to “opinion elites” on milestones in the charter school community. This list may include philanthropists, policymakers and their staff, chamber of commerce staff, state researchers and other trade supporters.
- Each week or perhaps monthly, keep charter school decision-makers, your CSO board and staff informed of the latest education news from around the state.

5. Expand Media Relations into Non-Traditional and National Media Sources

In order to maximize the positive message of charter schools with various audiences, concentrate your efforts on non-traditional and national media sources.

- Once-per-month, focus on placing an article in an ethnic, trade, special interest, parenting or business publication. Real estate, financial, education trades and philanthropic publications should be high on your list.
- At least once-per-quarter, focus on a national media audience to position the state’s charter school movement as promoting quality and accountability within the reform movement. While we’ll discuss our “milestone” announcements later, these announcements should include anything that drives the quality and accountability discussion. This includes student achievement data, quality assurance programs and even potentially legislative announcements.

6. Establish a Speakers Bureau

It can’t just be all you. Make sure that your CSO is armed with talented professionals that can help you get your message out. This is your Speakers Bureau. Offer up individuals, groups, panelists and speakers for various media opportunities and education forums around your state and nationally.

Your Speakers Bureau needs to be comprised of your most passionate and articulate charter school advocates. This may include school leaders from high-performing charter schools, charter school teachers, parents, CSO Board Members, elected officials and even charter school graduates. Public opinion surveys indicate that the public places a lot of credibility in and wants to hear from parents of charter school students, charter school teachers that had previously taught in a traditional public school and successful charter school graduates. While it’s important to consider these points, the CSO Speakers Bureau should ensure that its number one prerequisite is someone that is an effective, well-trained communicator.

- Start by assembling a Speakers Bureau brochure and talking points for engaged supporters which should be updated on a quarterly basis.
- Identify and train at least 10 key individuals to engage the media and the broader public. These chosen few should be comfortable interacting with the news media and familiar with your key messages.
- Develop a calendar of public events to identify speaking opportunities for your trained spokespeople.
- Each quarter, place trained spokespeople on various news, talk radio and televised broadcasts that feature education and that are timed with your news announcements.

7. Maintain Professional Media Collateral

Maintain professional, useful media information and collateral. This information should reflect your brand while being up-to-date, accurate and credible.

- Maintain all media collateral, including fact sheets, print news, press releases and press kits. Timeliness is critical, so be sure to update your press kits with the latest stats and news articles each month.
- Keep up-to-date, accurate statistics on your state's charter schools.
- Maintain and update your media database and media calendar with upcoming external public events, test score announcements, conferences, reports and studies by major institutions.
- Review all press releases, fact sheets and opinion editorials for consistent branding, accurate content and grammar.
- Develop high-quality, pertinent talking points on charter schools for staff and supporters – both of whom may engage the public.
- Maintain a subscription to pertinent news publications such as Education Week, state-based newspapers and relevant national magazines.
- Create regular updates for your board and staff of ongoing media activity and placed press.
- Create a testimonial database that chronicles stakeholders' success stories and prioritize parents, students, teachers and charter school graduates. Also include testimonials from charter school champions and the media.
- Develop media collateral to include a Charter School Media Toolkit or Wallet-sized Talking Points for member schools. Develop marketing materials including buttons, bumper stickers, lapel pins, etc. Create a one-page, high-level glossy "What is a Charter School" document to be distributed by your general membership and for the broader public.

8. Create and Maintain a Professional, User-Friendly Web Site

Maintain a professional virtual presence thus making your CSO's message more useful to members of the media, policymakers, the charter school community and the general public.

- Keep the news section of your web site updated weekly with the latest press releases, fact sheets and public information. Review content frequently for accuracy and grammar.
- You may wish to create a Spanish-speaking section on your existing web site.

9. Events Publicity

During the year, your CSO should sponsor at least two events that afford you opportunities to communicate with key audiences.

- Promote your CSO's annual charter schools conference. Select high-profile speakers and present awards that recognize high-performing schools and outstanding charter school leaders. There are a lot of good human interest stories that you can frame around each conference.
- Promote school visits by elected officials and use these as media opportunities.
- Promote National Charter Schools Week by coordinating state-level public relations activities, including a key emphasis on major media markets. Facilitate and broadcast different events to the charter community.

10. Enhance Charter School Public Relations Capabilities

By strengthening the ability of individual charter schools to implement their own public relations efforts, your CSO can leverage its own public and media relations.

- Host regional workshops each year for school members on how to engage the media in telling the charter school story.
- Coordinate a "Rapid Response" group to support movement advocacy efforts. Cultivate a list through your Speakers Bureau participants. Develop a response strategy through letters to the editor of local newspapers, blogs and online news stories.



2

Identify the Key Charter School Messages



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2

Identify the Key Charter School Messages

A seasoned public relations professional instinctively knows two things. First, persuading the public requires finding the right balance between reaching the public where they are by using messages that they are familiar with and comfortable using, and using key messages to move the public's attitudes and understanding firmly over to your position. Second, repetition works. Simple messages that resonate with the public, consistently and frequently conveyed, will establish a base level of awareness and understanding of the value of charter schools.

David Cantor of the Washington, D.C.-based public opinion research firm The Glover Park Group is perhaps the nation's foremost authority on charter school messaging. He's commissioned dozens of state-based and national polls on key charter school messaging, including a series of annual public opinion polls for the National Alliance. Cantor has shared his results regarding the public's attitudes towards charter schools. Cantor has also been able to use his national polling work to identify the key messages of charter schools that most positively resonate with the broader public. Commit these key messages to memory, and tailor them to fit the needs of your state and local circumstances.

Support for More Public School Choice

According to The Glover Park Group's 2008 national public opinion survey, commissioned for the National Alliance, national voters favor creating more options for public schools and believe that allowing parents to choose the appropriate school for their child will improve the entire public school system. In fact:

- Three out of four voters (77%) favor giving parents more options when choosing a public school for their children (46% strongly favor this proposal).
- A majority of voters (52%) also believe that allowing parents to choose the public school they think best meets the needs of their child will improve the public school system.

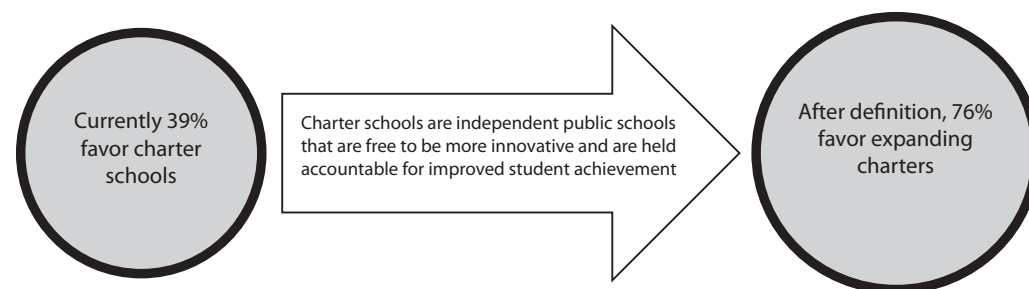
A Simple Definition of Charter Schools Moves Public Opinion

Self-reported knowledge of charter schools is quite low, with just 12% reporting a high level of knowledge and 28% reporting no knowledge when asked if they are familiar with charter schools.

Currently, a plurality of voters is unsure if they support charter schools (47% unsure). Support does outweigh opposition—39% favor, 14% oppose. However, when the public hears more about what a charter school is, they like what they hear. After hearing a simple one-sentence definition, support grows significantly, with 76% favoring expanding charters. This simple definition is:

Charter schools are independent public schools that are free to be more innovative and are held accountable for improved student achievement.

Generally, voters don't tend to know that charter schools are public schools. In fact, over the last three years, knowledge of charters as public schools has ranged from 34% to 41%. The Glover Park Group's research has shown that this understanding is a key first step to building support for charter schools across the country.



Support for Things Charter Schools Do

There is solid support for many of the things charter schools do (and that differentiate charter schools from traditional public schools). In particular, voters value charter schools for their accountability and flexibility. The national public opinion surveys found:

- There is more support for giving schools freedom to do certain things than for giving schools a blanket freedom from regulation.

- While a majority of voters support each of the items below, there is a great deal of variance between things voters strongly favor and areas where support is significantly softer.
- There are many ways to introduce charters to the large segment of the public for whom charters are a largely foreign concept. We should stress the elements that they support most strongly when introducing charters to voters.

Themes of Charter Schools that Resonate with the Public (things to stress when introducing charters):

- Structure and discipline
- Requiring more parental involvement
- Holding parents, students, and teachers accountable
- Allowing schools to make quick, effective changes
- Providing parents more public school options

Themes that Do Not Resonate with the Public (things not to stress when introducing charters):

- Freedom from regulation
- Closing schools
- Greater control over budgets
- Competition

Support for Elements of a Charter Education

The Glover Park Group presented the national public with elements of a charter school education to find out which attributes of charter schools most resonate with them. Polling found that there are certain attributes of charter schools that resonate more favorably than others.

Elements of a Charter Education

%	Strongly Favor	Totally Favor
Providing a more structured learning environment, more student discipline and requiring more parental involvement	77	94
Holding students, teachers, and parents accountable for improving student achievement	74	93
Giving schools more freedom to fire teachers who aren't performing	67	88
Rewarding high-quality teachers with higher pay	66	88
Giving parents more options for where to send their child to school	59	85
Putting schools that fail to educate students under new management	57	82
Allowing schools to make quick, effective changes to improve student achievement	56	87
Giving schools more flexibility to design curriculum	51	86
Promoting public school choice by allowing the money to follow the student to any public school the parent selects	44	74
Giving the people who run the school greater ability to decide how to spend their budgets	38	76
Closing schools that fail to educate student	38	63
Giving schools freedom from many of the regulations traditional public schools face	27	63

Detailed Charter School Messaging

One message point that resonates with the public includes stressing the partnership between parents, teachers, and students, where parents are more involved, teachers can be more innovative and students are given more structure:

Charter schools are unique public schools that foster a partnership between parents, teachers and students to create an environment in which parents can be more involved, teachers are given the freedom to innovate and students are provided the structure they need to learn.

It's important to stress the public nature of charter schools when defining them. It is also important to balance innovation and accountability. Parents worry about innovation without any oversight, but at the same time they worry that a strict focus on accountability will lead to simply teaching to the test.

Another message point that resonates with the public is the notion of sharing the success across the school system so all students benefit—not just those in charter schools:

Public charter schools are on the cutting edge of improving public schools. By giving charter school teachers the freedom to innovate and try new ways to improve student achievement, charter schools are developing successful new teaching models that work across the entire school system.

What People are Hearing about Charter Schools

A note of caution to charter school supporters: The number of voters reporting reading, hearing, or seeing something about charter schools has lately remained consistent, however there is evidence to suggest that this information has become slightly less favorable in the past year.

Recently Heard Something About Charter Schools

%	2008	2007	2006
Heard Recently	28	28	25

- Positive information has declined 12% since 2007, while negative information has increased approximately 13%.

Impact of Charter School Information

%	2008	2007	2006
More favorable	43	55	40
Less favorable	34	21	29
No difference	19	22	26

- The print media is the top source of information on charters (47% of people having heard, seen, or read something recently report getting information from newspapers or magazines).
- Word of mouth (25% from friends and family) and television (24%) are also primary sources of information.

Importantly, word of mouth is by far the most positive source of information while print and television tend to be negative. This is a call to action to every CSO that prioritizing getting the positive message out through the news media is critical.

Impact by Source of Information

%	Print (47%)	Word of Mouth (25%)	TV (24%)
More favorable	36	61	29
Less favorable	39	23	45
Net (more favorable)	-3	+38	-16

3

Tips for Working With Journalists



National Alliance for Public Charter Schools



3

Tips for Working With Journalists

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

-Thomas Jefferson

As former Washington Post publisher Philip Graham so famously said, “Journalism is the first draft of history.” Journalists envelop themselves in recording information and events and they rely primarily on interviews to help them do so. Charter school advocates are in a unique position to help journalists shape the way that charter schools are either positively or negatively viewed. They should not wait for reporters to call them; they should actively promote their cause. Think about it this way: Most negative stories that appear in the news originate from reporters who came up with the story ideas themselves. Most positive news stories that appear in the media occurred when someone brought a story idea to a reporter’s attention.

Since charter schools are still so new, it is important to start from square one. Journalists and their readers, listeners or viewers may know nothing about charter schools or very little about the charter school movement. They need the best available information, articulated clearly and concisely.

Ten Principles for Communicating with the News Media

It's becoming more challenging to get into the paper and on air with your story these days, especially in light of shrinking news holes and dwindling staff. Pitches have to be newsworthy, relevant to the news outlet's audience as well as catchy and to-the-point. However, with this challenge presents opportunity for a skilled communications professional. Reporters like never before are under heavy pressure to get published or on air. This gives the skilled, responsive advocate a better shot of getting the message they want to get across. Your job is to be proactive in reaching out to the media who may cover you to get your message—and the message of charter schools—across to them. You don't want to find yourself in the position of playing defense, such as when a charter critic has reached the reporter first and you're being called to react.

The key is developing relationships with reporters so they know they can trust you to always be honest and that they can rely on you for accurate information delivered in a timely manner.

Keep the following tips in mind to increase your chances of not only getting a reporter or editor interested in your story, but excited enough to want to write about it.

1. Make Your Stories Newsworthy

Before calling or emailing a reporter, go through the checklist most reporters will run through themselves to screen your pitch. Remember that the reporters you are targeting have an audience of one: their editor. After you make your pitch, the reporter is bound to run your idea by their editor, whose mindset will always be based on, "Why should the public care?" It's a good question. Have an answer to these questions:

- What's the news hook? What's the "news" of your pitch, or what's unique about it, and is it something that will appeal to the publication or outlet you're targeting? That's often hard to crystallize, but you must do it because reporters may not. Gleaning the key point of your pitch will probably be the most difficult and most critical part of the pitching process.
- Do you have a public event where you can draw reporters? Is someone introducing legislation? Announcing opposition to a school district policy? Are you releasing a study or report with new and compelling data? Instead of just a press release, consider whether it will be more effective to hold a press conference with officials/politicians serving as the draw.
- Do you have a compelling human-interest story that will resonate with all readers?

- Do you have a compelling visual that would enhance your story? This is necessary, especially for broadcast media, which we will cover in a later chapter. Is there a photograph, map or other visual that would tell your story graphically? Sometimes, if you present a solid "art" prospect with the pitch, it may help bump what would have been an inside story to page one, especially if editors are scrambling for a centerpiece story that day.

2. Be Open and Honest

Never lie or spin. Reporters instinctively recoil against people they feel are withholding or twisting the truth. If you answer a question truthfully (even though it may not be to your short-term benefit), it's likely to have less of a negative impact than if reporters uncover the lie on their own.

If you're a parent, have you ever been in a situation where your child is locked behind closed doors? "What are you doing in there?" you might ask. "Nothing!" they respond. Your natural instinct is to assume the worst, and before you know it, you're ready to break down that door. This is very much the same way that reporters approach their job each day. If they get the hint that information is being withheld from them, or that they are not getting the full story, they are bound to investigate further. Being honest and available at all times is the surest way to ensure that your story gets told.

3. Be Proactive

Reporters hear a lot from people who don't like charter schools. So never assume that a reporter is anti-charter school. This is why it's important for you to get your message across first so reporters are informed about charter school facts before criticism arises. Don't wait for someone in the media to contact you. If they're calling you first, it's probably a call you don't want to get.

When approaching the media, it's always good to:

- Tell your story first. Be proactive and approach the media before they approach you.
- Tell the truth.
- Tell the story your way. Get all the facts out there that support your position.

Many public relations professionals often think: "What should I do when the reporter calls?" That wrong-headed thinking will get you in trouble. Get to them first.

4. Do Your Homework

Find out what your local newspaper/broadcast news reporters like to cover (including what they like to editorialize on) and see if you have story ideas that would appeal to them.

For example, a particularly controversial school district could rarely do right in the eyes of a paper that regularly covered them, making the editors look favorably upon anything they felt was shaking the status quo, especially charter schools. Not only were the paper's editors open to charter stories, but the editors gave those stories favorable placement in order to spur public dialogue on the district's inadequacies and what to do to fix them.

Remember to consider the journalist's audience: do they cover a particular ethnic community or is their focus more national? Once you know that, don't waste the reporter's time—and lose credibility in the process—by pitching something they would never cover. You may need them when the time is right.

5. Keep it Simple

Make your story easy to cover for the journalist. Focus in on the who, what, when, where, why and how. Reporters like data. Facts, figures and statistics can assist you, especially if they're presented in an easy-to-understand manner. Avoid edu-jargon at all costs. Remember that you are trying to get your message out through the media to an uninformed public.

6. Focus on the Long-Term

As a communications professional, you represent the front line for articulating and conveying your organization's image. That's a long-term proposition, but it will serve you well, especially in the midst of a crisis. Face it: negative news cycles will happen. You will need to occasionally weather the storm, and explain to internal staff that negative news cycles can and will happen. While managing short-term news cycles is important, it's even more important to focus on what people will think of your CSO months and even years from now rather than just tomorrow. Factor that thinking into every communication that you send out.

7. Get to the Point

Make your press releases and other communications catchy, pithy and substantive. Don't exaggerate or be dramatic. When writing your press release, you have at most three chances to get the reporter interested in your story: the email subject line, the press release headline and the first couple of sentences. In that space, you have to tell them why they should be covering the story. So get to the point immediately, because if it's buried in the fifth paragraph, the reporter will never read it.

When calling a reporter, cap your pitch at 30 seconds. Reporters and editors tend to tune out after that. If you need to distill your pitch to its essence, write it down before you call so you can get right to the point. Don't start looking for the point during your conversation.

When sending information to a reporter, keep long documents to a minimum—reporters probably won't read them if they're longer than a page or two. Put the key points in a one-page document with short sentences and bullet points to organize the main facts.

Keep in mind that reporters get hundreds of press releases a week. In the space of a few seconds they determine whether to keep the press release or to throw it out. While there have been no studies to confirm this, experience states that the vast majority of press releases get deleted.

8. Respect the Reporter's Time

Reporters are especially busy people, so respect their time. Email them first, giving them a heads up that you will be contacting them. Also, let them know what you will be contacting them about. When you call a reporter, call early (before noon, since they're dealing with deadlines in the afternoon) and always ask, "Are you on deadline?" The question lets them know that you are showing respect for their busy day.

9. Be Responsive

Get reporters information and answers to their questions in a timely manner. You will get far with reporters if they see that you are there to help. Have your facts ready for them, preferably in an easy-to-read, uncluttered one-page sheet that states your key points with clear bullet points. Be prepared to do research for them. Sometimes it helps reporters to offer names and contact information of third-party validators—sources outside your organization, with no perceived vested interest—who can lend a credible voice to the story. As newsrooms shrink, reporters are being asked to do double or triple the work they did even one year ago, so the easier you make it for them, the more inclined they will be to cover your story—and to cover it accurately.

Make sure you are always available to reporters. A good rule of thumb is that every media inquiry should be returned within the hour. Give them your email address, cell phone number or work number where they can easily reach you. If you know that you will be unavailable, have a back-up individual available who is ready to speak to the media. If reporters know you're accessible, you'll quickly become a go-to person for news stories. Most of the time they need a quote immediately, and they'll turn first to those they know they'll be able to reach in a crunch.

10. Relationships with Reporters Matter

Develop relationships with reporters who cover you. Reporters want to know the people with whom they interact. Trust and credibility matter. Let them know you are a good source to comment on charter schools and education as a whole, as well as a good resource for story ideas.

Keep in touch with reporters without being annoying. Call them, and set up face-to-face meetings to introduce yourself. Give reporters the impression that you're following their work. Send a short email commenting on articles they write or broadcast, particularly if they weren't related to charter schools. Recognize that reporters generally don't hear back from sources when they do get it right. When you do this, they'll appreciate it, and that's how positive media relationships are built.

On the flip side, if a reporter messes up, let them know about it, and if necessary, request a correction or retraction. But don't make it personal. Remember, just like any one of us, reporters are human. They're likely to make an occasional mistake. Recognize that they're doing their best to get a story right, sometimes under intense timelines and with sources who often fail to follow through with them. They do their best to cover both sides of an issue, and sometimes they get it wrong. When they do get it wrong, let them know it; don't beat them over the head about it. When they get it right, let them know that, too.

Keep in mind that patience and persistence are important. If you send information to a reporter regularly, sooner or later you will get coverage.

4

Create A Plan for Interacting with the News Media



4

Create A Plan for Interacting with the News Media

A. Select Your Charter School Spokesperson

Each CSO should appoint one key contact who will be responsible for interacting with the news media. This person should be articulate and within the inner circle of decision-making at the organization. This contact should be an individual specially trained to work with the news media and, if resources permit, should not be the head of the organization. Remember the old adage: “He who has himself for a lawyer has a fool for a client.” Communications and media relations are no different and no less important. The point is, each organization should have one individual whose sole focus is media relations.

The media contact should work with the leadership of the organization to ensure that everyone is intimately familiar with the key messages of charter schools and should have the organization’s key charter school messages committed to memory. The messages should be able to roll off her or his tongue as naturally as in a conversation with a friend.

The spokesperson should be disciplined and discerning, recognizing when it’s important to say just enough, but not too much. Sometimes it is important that this person recognizes what not to say.

As noted before, a good spokesperson should be easily accessible. Reporters are often working on tight deadlines and need to get information or comments in a very short time. Ideally, the spokesperson should be someone who can respond within an hour to a media inquiry. Reporters deeply appreciate people who promptly call them back. This sounds obvious, but many organizations lose the opportunity on a daily basis to have their views accurately represented in an article or story because they took a day or two to respond to a

reporter's inquiry. A reporter once remarked, "I could get the superintendent of our state's largest school district on the phone within five minutes at almost any time, but it often took days to get a school principal to get back to me." Don't let that be you.

Your spokesperson should also be very knowledgeable. Well-informed people are invaluable for journalists, who constantly seek reliable individuals for quotes, comments, charter school facts and responses.

Tips for Hiring an Effective Spokesperson

So, are you the newly-hired Executive Director for your state's start-up CSO? Maybe you're a seasoned CEO who has been in the field for years, but you've just never been able to put together a coordinated public relations campaign. In either case, here are some of the qualities that you'll need to look for when hiring an individual to run your communications efforts:

Experience – The first question that you need to ask is: Do they have experience in dealing with the media, specifically in media relations? You want to try to hire someone who comes from an agency field, a policy background or from a political environment in which they have a track record of proactively engaging the media in a fast-paced environment.

Effective Writer – Make sure that you review writing samples provided by your prospective communications person. This should include sample press releases, letters and even persuasive articles that they have bylined. Think about it: This person that you intend to hire will be drafting all your press releases, writing your opinion pieces and various forms of official communications that come from your CSO. They must be effective written communicators.

Persuasive – One of the major skill sets of an effective communications person is how well they can persuade an audience. Your communications person must have a certain level of charisma, be able to argue with tact and effectively think on his or her feet. These are verbal and personality skills that can be hard to find.

Responsive – A good communications professional needs to be responsive to the day's news and media environment. Find the type of individual who can juggle four to five different communications demands at the same time, and then be able to drop everything and shift on a dime when a more important challenge arises. It will happen.

Policy and Advocacy Knowledge – An effective communications plan will take into account that charter schools are in fact a product (which entails the need for marketing) and an idea (which entails the need for advocacy-communication). Charter schools operate in a fluid environment where public opinion is still unformed. Because of this, communicating to policymakers or advocacy groups, is critical. Your communications person should have a good working knowledge of the public policy arena. A background in political campaigns or as a spokesperson for an advocacy-related cause is critical.

So, by now you're looking at these above qualities and asking, "Where am I going to possibly find such a candidate?" It's a great question. After all, some of our best writers might not have the best verbal skills. An effective political operative might not be the most skilled writer. You will have some tradeoffs. However, make sure that they have experience interacting with the news media. Do not fret if they do not have a knowledge of education public relations. It's the track record of success in dealing with the news media that's most important. After all, it's easy to train a generalist to be a specialist; it's much harder to do it the other way around.

B. Establish Organizational Roles and Protocol

A couple of years ago, a charter school suffered a shooting on its campus. While thankfully nobody was hurt, the incident created quite a feeding frenzy as the news media quickly reacted. The school faced a barrage of phone calls, which were answered by the school secretary. She was asked by a reporter the school's policies and procedures when faced with these incidents. Wanting to help field the incoming media inquiries, she was caught in a trap when she acknowledged she was unaware of her school policies. The headline the next day stated, "Charter school official unaware of school policies in light of shooting."

How simple would it have been for the secretary to refer the calls to the school's spokesperson who was trained to deal with these situations? The fact of the matter is the shooting took place after hours near the school campus and by an individual unaffiliated with the school. Simple information management could have prevented this negative headline.

Recently, a CSO filed a lawsuit against a local school district that was blatantly mistreating its charter schools. The evidence of wrongdoing by the district was overwhelming. The CSO maintained strong message discipline throughout the trial, repeatedly reinforcing the detrimental acts of the school district. However, a reporter chose to shop around for information within the CSO to see if they could find another perspective. In an unauthorized interview, one staff member acknowledged that the district's treatment of its charter schools was improving. The end result? The school district's attorneys seized on the quote and

presented it as evidence to the judge. Case dismissed. The judge ruled that, since even the plaintiff CSO had publicly pointed out the district's improved behavior, the lawsuit was moot. The district continued its unfair treatment of its charter school.

Both organizations failed to clearly define their protocol for interacting with the media. Each CSO needs to establish and articulate clear organizational protocols for engaging the media so it can avoid making critical public mistakes. Every staff member should be familiar with these protocols. The following principles, especially for smaller, newer CSOs should be adhered to by staff:

- The CEO should speak for the organization and needs to be branded wherever possible as the voice of your state's charter school movement, and particularly out in front with respect to positive news.
- The CEO should be able to appear above the fray and should not have to be on record in the event of a crisis. Let the trained spokesperson serve as the "attack dog."
- The public relations team should present a unified front to the media on behalf of the organization; all staff calls should be directed to the public relations staff member or team.
- The public relations team should be responsive: Each media inquiry should be returned within an hour's time.
- The CSO should always present a consistent organizational message to the public that is aligned with messaging that is determined by the public relations team.
- Reporters should not be able to 'shop around' for a quote within the organization. This becomes even more important in the event of a crisis, when it becomes critical that public communication be as centralized as possible.

Given these axioms, it may make sense for your charter support organization to keep its public relations functions tightly managed. The public relations team, being the media's first point of contact to the CSO, should manage all incoming and outgoing media activity, particularly when it comes to media campaigns and press releases, media pitches, CEO publicity management and organizational messaging.

C. Learn the Different Types of News Sources

Newspapers

Newspapers typically fall into three categories: dailies, community/neighborhood papers and targeted papers. Dailies tend to publish seven days a week and serve a large geographic area. They tend to print international, national, state and local news. Most dailies have a specific education beat with one or more reporters. Community papers tend to print once a week, or in some cases, once a month. However, some community papers publish one or up to several times a week. Targeted papers often appeal to a particular ethnic group, like a newspaper focusing on Asian, African-American or Latino communities.

Community papers will typically find your local story more interesting. A story that might receive just two-paragraphs published in the back of a daily could be the top story of a community paper. Targeted papers will be much more likely to print a story about someone representing the audience they want to reach. A newspaper focusing on women's issues will be more receptive to a story about a terrific female principal or a Spanish-language newspaper will be much more interested in a charter school that works successfully with Latino students.

When dealing with newspapers, please remember:

- Newspapers print news, not history. Find out deadlines for a reporter and a columnist, and whenever possible, submit a story idea at least one week in advance of an event or news announcement. Don't wait until the day before an event to invite members of the media.
- There are important differences between reporters and columnists. A columnist often expresses vigorous, even controversial opinions. A reporter reports various sides of a story. You want to work with both kinds of journalists -- but recognize that they have different jobs and different needs.
- For larger papers, reporters from beats other than education may be interested in your story. Do you have a new, unusual collaboration with a business? Business reporters may write about school and business partnerships. Is a high-profile celebrity or sports athlete a charter school supporter? Arts and entertainment or sports sections may consider writing about this connection. Look at various parts of your local and regional papers, and think about which reporters might be interested in your story.
- A reporter will not use your story prior to a specified release date. However, at the discretion of the editor, they may use it anytime afterwards.

- Always put FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE at the top of the first page of your press release, along with the date. (See samples at the end of this section.)
- Send your press releases to the right place. Larger newspapers tend to have local bureaus. Contact the local bureau directly. If you are unable to find the name of a specific reporter, mark it to the attention of the EDUCATION EDITOR. Daily newspapers tend to have fewer staff on weekends. If you have a report that can wait a few days, you slightly increase the likelihood of it being used if you give it to the reporter Thursday or Friday, with a media embargo (a media embargo prohibits the press from using your press release prior to a specified publication date) until 12:01 a.m. for Monday morning.

D. Getting Started On Your Media Plan

Begin by gathering all of the information that helps you tell your story. Look at the broader movement to assess how charter schools are impacting public education. According to several reports and studies, charter schools are indeed adding value to public education.

Assess your CSO's strengths. Make sure that you can define your organization's mission in what is called an "elevator pitch." If you enter an elevator with an interested journalist, parent, potential donor or community member, can you quickly articulate your mission before you arrive at the ground floor?

Example: A well-known charter school's mission is: "It is our goal to prepare low-income students whose parents lack a college diploma to attend and graduate from a four-year university." Is yours that simple? If not, try to refine it so it is.

Utilize data. Can you use your member schools' test scores to tell a positive story about charter schools in your state? Don't stop there; go further. Do they have a waiting list? How about the students the school serves? Is there a positive story that shows that the school meets the particular needs of students who were underserved in the traditional public school system? Dig deep to find a compelling story that may resonate with the public. Then, follow these simple steps to prepare to reach out to the news media:

1. Create a Press Kit

A press kit should include general information that you will give to a reporter to highlight your CSO, your newsworthy announcement or the features of charter schools in your region or state. It should be presented in your organization's press folder and ready to hand to reporters. A good press kit should include:

- **A fact sheet** mentioning the important pieces of information that a reporter will need to know about your announcement, easily readable through a quick scan. It should be in bullet points and highlight facts about the organization

or school. This should include: the number of charter schools in the state, the number of students served, unique curriculum and past performance data (test score results, etc.). Keep your fact sheet to one page.

- **Newsworthy events.** Include the latest press release about your upcoming event or story idea.
- **Basic charter school facts from your state.** Know the statistics and demographics of your state's charter schools. Reporters will access these as background to their story.
- **A backgrounder** that gives a factual narrative on unique aspects of the CSO, but is too detailed for a fact sheet or news release.
- **Basic contact information** for your CSO.
- **Prior news articles** on the charter school movement in your state, especially if they were positive. Since reporters will access prior news stories before writing their story, this is a helpful gesture and will help focus a reporter on specific areas of your story.
- **Proper translation**, especially if you are working with a reporter from a paper or radio station that serves people who don't speak English as their first language. It helps to have a press release in the relevant language. Journalists appreciate your extra effort on this. You can get help from bilingual members of your staff, or perhaps a community partner, student or parent.

2. Identify Members of the News Media

Become familiar with members of the local news media. Subscribe to your major daily newspapers and community publications. Follow the education stories and become familiar with the writing style of the education and political reporters. Target the 10 most prominent education writers in your respective state. Build a media list in an excel file that can be easily updated. Include information such as each reporter's phone number, e-mail address and cell phone number. This media list will come in handy for when you begin sending press releases.

3. Contact the Reporters

Call your local paper and other media sources and ask to be connected with the education reporter, even if you do not know their name. When you reach them, always ask if they are on deadline. Introduce yourself and ask them how they prefer to receive information. Both of these simple practices show that you respect the journalist's time, and their needs. These easy gestures, which journalists rarely receive, are effective ways of building relationships with the media.

4. Arrange a Site Visit

Always tie a reporter site visit to a newsworthy event or to something about charter schools that differentiates them from the nearby traditional public schools. These face-to-face interactions are the best way to build rapport with members of the news media. Do not worry if a story is not written by the reporter immediately after a visit. The reporter may contact you several months down the road, or will respond to your next inquiry. Remember, your goal is to establish long-term relationships with members of the news media.

5. Always Cater to Differences in the News Media

Keep in mind that there are differences between newspapers, radio and television. While newspapers may devote 800 words to a story, television and radio may only give 15-60 seconds. Newspapers include pictures and text in a static format, television focuses on visual action and radio allows people to listen and to create a picture in their heads. If you know what you want to communicate, you can more easily find the proper medium for your message.

E. Drafting A Press Release

The best and most traditional way of getting your story out to the news media is through a press release (also known as a news release). A press release can be used for most types of news media, with subtle changes for radio and television.

News releases are not the time to get creative with language. They should be very straightforward. Focus on the facts: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY and of course HOW. You want to reach the reporters and impress them with the event, story or “hook,” the news angle that is going to get the reporter interested in attending an event or writing about charter schools.

It is best to write a news release as factually and as concisely as possible. As mentioned earlier, reporters and editors come across dozens, if not hundreds, of press releases a day. Here are a few key points to consider:

- Put the important factual information in the first paragraph.
- Put your release on your CSO letterhead.
- Include a contact person and a daytime phone number at the top of the page.
- Include a quote from a charter school leader. If your news is an event featuring a visit from a distinguished guest (i.e. an elected official), be sure to include a quote from that person as well.
- Follow the Associated Press Stylebook. Spell out all numbers from one to nine. Use numerals for 10 and up.
- Page number your news releases if they go beyond one page. It is important to remember that most news releases should be a single page in length.
- Always put the date at the top of your press release.
- Send your press release to the media early in the morning on the day of the release. It is best if the reporter receives the release just before arriving to work. Follow up the release with a phone call to the reporter you are targeting.
- Signal the end of your news release at the bottom with this symbol: ###
- MOST IMPORTANT! Have more than one person proofread your document. Check it thoroughly for typos or mistakes.

Enclosed is a template news release, followed by actual press releases that generated positive publicity for the California Charter Schools Association. These can provide you with a format for how all news releases should be written:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Month ##, YEAR

Organization

CONTACT: John Spokesperson

XX Charter School

(###) ###-####

COMPELLING TITLE HERE, ALWAYS CENTERED AND IN ALL CAPS

Subtitle with Supporting Fact/Data Here, Centered and Italic

XX CITY, YY STATE – The first paragraph should contain your concise, unique hook and a brief recap of the data it is based on. This paragraph contains the most important facts about your story (keep this to 2-3 sentences).

Articulate your story in more detail, citing specific supporting data. Perhaps this is where you add broader context to your hook (keep this to 2-3 sentences).

“Include a relevant quote from a stakeholder or your spokesperson,” said Charter Leader, Executive Director of XYZ Charter School Organization. “Quotes are formatted as their own paragraph; don’t forget to include the speaker’s name and title. Make sure you’re quoting an individual other than your contact on the release.”

Include any awards, honors or major milestones achieved either recently or since the organization’s inception. For example, a major quality initiative, a major policy win or some announcement that articulates the role that the CSO has displayed in leading the broader state movement (keep this to 2-3 sentences).

“Include a relevant quote from an additional ‘third-party’ stakeholder,” said Third-Party Validator, Leader of XYZ Organization. “This person should be a high-profile individual that brings with her some level of community standing and whose credibility ties in to the point of the newsworthy announcement.”

Conclude the body of your press release with less pertinent, yet still important information that provides addition and perhaps even historical context to your release (keep this to 2-3 sentences).

About XX Charter School Organization

The press release should end with your charter school organization’s “boilerplate” language - a brief description of your CSO in less than 75 words that also provides information on your movement’s broader milestones.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

June 10, 2008

CONTACT:

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REPORT: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN LOS ANGELES UNIFIED OUTPERFORMING TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

First-Ever District and Neighborhood "Matched Comparison Analysis" of Charter Schools Vs. Traditional Public Schools in Los Angeles Unified

Los Angeles, CA — Charter schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are outperforming traditional public schools in a variety of student achievement measures, according to a revealing analysis released today by the California Charter Schools Association. Entitled, "Charter School Performance, in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis," the report also assessed for the first time charter schools' performance compared to three of its most similarly-matched district schools that students may otherwise likely attend.

More than seven in 10 charter schools (70.6 percent) outperformed their most similarly-matched district public school on 2007 API Growth results, while more than six in 10 (62.8 percent) outperformed all three of their most similarly-matched peers.

"Charter schools are raising the bar for student performance in LAUSD," said Caprice Young, president and CEO of the California Charter Schools Association. "It's clear from this report that charter schools continue to expand high-quality educational choices for parents in Los Angeles neighborhoods while delivering on their promise of raising student achievement."

The analysis used statewide student achievement (API) data from the 2006-2007 academic school year to conduct a district-level assessment of charter schools and traditional public schools, including elementary, middle and high school levels. It also provides a first-ever micro level, neighborhood-by-neighborhood analysis to compare charters' performance with their three most similar traditional public school peers within a five-mile radius. Similar schools were selected based on the school's racial composition, average parent level of education, and free/reduced price lunch participation.

Other Key Findings

The research shows that charter schools in LAUSD are more likely to improve their California State Academic Performance Index (API) at a faster rate than traditional public schools. In fact, eighteen percent of charter schools were found to increase their API growth score by 50 points or more while only five percent of traditional public schools did the same.

Charter middle schools in LAUSD were found to consistently outperform traditional public schools, with median API base levels registering 100 points higher than that of traditional public schools. In addition, median API scores were found to increase as LAUSD charters mature.

Charter schools serving African-American students outperformed traditional public schools serving similar students in elementary, middle and high schools. API results for other traditionally disadvantaged groups such as Latino students were higher at the middle and high school levels, while slightly lower at the elementary school level.

"We found that the population of students in independent charter schools and traditional schools is similarly diverse, refuting the creaming theory often accusing charters of primarily serving more advantaged students," said Young. "This data indicates that charter schools are doing a better job serving the same students."

This report's methodology used an in-depth local analysis of charter schools based on a foundation of national research. It was authored by Stanford Ph.D. Aisha Toney, Senior Data Analyst for the California Charter Schools Association and was peer reviewed by noted California researcher Vicki Murray.

To download a copy of the full report and executive summary, visit: [HYPERLINK "http://www.myschool.org"](http://www.myschool.org) www.myschool.org

About the California Charter Schools Association

The California Charter Schools Association is the membership and professional organization serving 687 charter public schools that serve an estimated 240,000 charter school students in the state of California. The Association's mission is to improve student achievement by supporting and expanding California's quality charter public school movement.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
October 8, 2008

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13 CA CHARTER SCHOOLS AWARDED WITH CERTIFIED CHARTER SCHOOL HONOR

86 Public Charter Schools Now Recognized as Certified, Surpasses

12 Percent of All CA Charter Schools

Los Angeles, CA – The California Charter Schools Association today announced that 13 public charter schools have been named Certified Charter Schools, bringing the state’s total number of Certified Charter Schools to 86.

The 13 Certified Charter Schools named today are participants in the Certified Charter Schools Program, which validates charter schools that have undergone rigorous, independent review and upheld quality standards established by California’s charter school movement. Launched in May 2007, the Certified Charter Schools Program represents the first time in the nation that a state’s charter school movement has defined standards for high quality and accountability, and recognized charter schools that have met those standards.

“We’re pleased to recognize these 13 charter schools that have joined a select group that is demonstrating a commitment to high quality,” said Peter Thorp, Interim CEO of the California Charter Schools Association. “These schools represent a strong commitment to continued achievement and accountability in California’s charter school movement.”

More than 12 percent of all of California charter schools are now Certified. Along with the 86 Certified Charter Schools, there are currently 420 Candidates for Certification, for a total of 506 California charter schools that are participating in the Certified Program. Over 70 percent of the state’s charter schools are participating in the movement’s quality efforts.

After more than three years of input from over 300 charter leaders, the Association created this program to recognize charter schools that have met quality standards which assess student achievement, responsible governance and fiscal integrity.

The program includes a rigorous, independent review process by Association-approved third-party reviewing agencies that are aligned with the movement’s Quality Standards. These reviewing agencies include the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), Cambridge Education’s Charter Program Quality Review (CPQR), Insight Education Group and the State Board of Education’s Charter Renewal Review.

In order to become a Certified Charter School, a charter school must successfully complete the third-party review. A charter school involved in the program currently undergoing a third-party review is a Candidate for Certification.

The 13 Certified Charter Schools Announced Today Include:

Bert Corona Charter School, Pacoima
Desert Sands Charter High Schools, Lancaster
East Palo Alto Academy – Stanford New School, Menlo Park
eScholar, Red Bluff
Heritage College-Ready Academy High School, Los Angeles
Horizon Charter School, Lincoln
Huntington Park College-Ready Academy High School, Huntington Park
Los Angeles Leadership Academy, Los Angeles
Natomas Charter School, Sacramento
Oakland Military Institute, College Preparatory Academy, Oakland
Richard Merkin Middle School, Los Angeles
Rocklin Academy, Rocklin
SIAtech, Vista

To see which charter schools are participating in the Association’s Certified Charter Schools Program, visit: [HYPERLINK “http://www.myschool.org”](http://www.myschool.org) www.myschool.org

About the California Charter Schools Association

The California Charter Schools Association is the membership and professional organization serving the more than 700 charter public schools that serve over a quarter million charter school students in the state of California. The Association’s mission is to improve student achievement by supporting and expanding California’s quality charter public school movement. [HYPERLINK “http://www.myschool.org”](http://www.myschool.org)www.myschool.org.

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F. Writing Opinion Articles

Newspapers are still widely read, perhaps even more so now with online news aggregate sites. One way to get across your CSO's position on a particular education issue is to write an opinion article that will capture the reader's interest and prove a valuable point. Newspapers encourage opinion articles and commentary, and education is a popular focus. The two most common types of opinion articles are letters to the editor and guest editorials. Letters to the editor are usually a brief reply to a news article, piece of legislation or a current event. A guest editorial, also known as an op-ed, is a longer opinion piece that focuses on larger issues.

Letters to the Editor

Basic Tips

Most newspapers publish less than one-third of the letters they receive. The following tips can improve the odds of having your letter published:

- **Keep it Brief** - The best letters are short and limited to a single point. The average length of a published letter is around 150 words and is typically limited to no more than 200 words. In any case, letters are likely to be condensed in the editing process. Follow the old adage: "Brevity is the soul of wit."
- **Keep it Timely** - Tie your letter to a newsworthy educational event. Generally, your letter should arrive within two days following the event. It is not always required, but it helps if you can reference a particular story that has already appeared.
- **Keep it Electronic** - Since letters received electronically don't require re-typing, there is less of a delay between when the letter is sent and when it appears in the publication. Email is more effective than fax. Paste the letter into the body of the email as spam filters may cause technical problems with attachments.

Sometimes newspapers will publish letters to the editor or guest columns offering a viewpoint different than the one given by a reporter or editorial page writer. In a number of cases around the country, charter advocates have been able to present their views in one or both of these ways. While this does not eliminate the misinformation or questionable assertions that sometimes appear in articles or editorials, this is a way of more accurately getting your message out.

The following letter to the editor appeared in the national publication USA TODAY after a negative editorial was published by the newspaper:

Charters Represent 'Finest' Education

May 10, 2004

Regarding your recent editorial, "Charters Lack Accountability", let's put things into perspective. One faulty program within our nation's 3,000 charter schools is not enough evidence to indict an entire movement. Using the same logic, our nation's public school system should be abandoned given the egregious mismanagement in a handful of school districts.

In California, we can quantify the number of troubled charter schools – four percent of California's 500 charter schools have been closed down for underperformance. In fact, your editorial should have been entitled, "Charters Promote REAL Accountability" given the work that those of us who are leaders in the charter school movement are doing to ensure that all charters meet high quality standards.

California's 471 charter schools, serving 170,000 students, are transforming public education. Independent studies by such organizations as the Rand Corporation confirm that the achievement of low income charter school students in CA is improving at a faster rate than in non-charter public schools, despite the fact that charters receive less funding on a per pupil basis.

Charter schools open a window of fresh air into the public school system. With that fresh air comes a few flies. Remember that a "charter" is a contract, and responsible charter authorizers and charter leaders agree that charters must be held accountable in exchange for the opportunity to develop innovative best practices. The fact that the reported actions of the Pensacola school were identified and addressed underscores that the system is working just as it should.

Peter Thorp
President of the Board of Directors, California Charter Schools Association
Executive Director, Gateway High School, San Francisco, California

The following letter to the editor was submitted to The Los Angeles Daily News after a negative comment from a critic of charter schools appeared in a news story about a positive charter school report:

November 12, 2008

In his predictable criticism of today's story on the report by the California Charter Schools Association ("Charters rated as top schools serving poor"), United Teachers Los Angeles President A.J. Duffy took a gratuitous - and false - shot at charter schools in Chicago. He said a recent Rand Corp. study found "virtually no difference" between their performance and that of the traditional system. Quite the contrary; here is the very first sentence of Rand's May 7, 2008 news release announcing the study: "Chicago's multi-grade charter high schools (those serving students in grades 7-12, 6-12 or K-12) appear to improve [emphasis added] their students' chances of graduating and attending college, as compared with the city's traditional public high schools." As the CCSA's own report indicates, high-quality charter schools are making a big difference in the lives of thousands of students in our poorest communities. That's good news and cause for celebration, not sour grapes.

Nelson Smith
President & CEO
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

Guest Editorials - Also Known as Op-Ed Columns

Basic Tips

It's rare that a major newspaper will use a piece longer than 700 words, but check the requirements prior to submitting an article. In one instance, a column of 800 words was rejected, because the newspaper had a limit of 700 words. It was resubmitted at 700 words, and printed. However, you may not get a second chance to resubmit (and you also want to make the best possible use of your time). Check ahead of time on length and keep it tight.

If you know of a particular upcoming news event that you wish to comment on, for example a local ballot initiative, start writing your op-ed now. It is important to give the editor plenty of time to consider your piece, as they typically plan their pages in advance and most likely will not be able to accommodate a last-minute submission.

What's Your Point?

Take a step back and write down the one point that you want to get across in your op-ed. Stick to that point and provide supporting points and examples. Avoid throwing in the kitchen sink.

Grab People's Attention

State your position in the first sentence. The more interesting you can make the first sentence, the more likely people will keep reading. Just because you are fascinated by charter schools does not mean potential readers will be interested. Don't expect readers to finish your whole piece to find out what you think. They won't.

Examples of first sentences that will interest readers:

- "Why are people coming from all over the nation to see Main Street Charter School?"
- "Despite critics' predictions, Arizona charter schools have proven extremely attractive to minority and low-income students."

Be Specific

Make sure that you provide a level of specificity in your opening statements. Don't be vague. Examples of specific statements include:

- "We need a new, results-driven mindset at the Department of Education that will drive innovation and scale up proven approaches that work. The federal government stands in a unique position to help."
- "With economic issues sucking up so much political oxygen this year, K-12 education hasn't received the attention it deserves from either Presidential candidate. The good news is that school reformers at the local level continue to push forward."

Use Anecdotes

Let people know that real children are being impacted because of the presence of charter schools. Make sure to appeal to the audience's "pathos" or emotion, sympathies and imagination. It's completely acceptable to admit that the other side has some valid points. Use that to your advantage.

Examples:

- “Charter school critics point out that charters have not done enough to help out all of those who are being left behind. They’re somewhat right. Only by expanding the number of charters that can be granted this year will we be able to reach all children who deserve a quality education.”
- “Oakland should celebrate the successes of its charter schools: My school, the nationally-renowned American Indian Public Charter middle school, along with our high school, scored in the top five public middle and high schools in all of California, despite enrolling mostly low-income, minority students.”

Reinforce Your Central Point

Your conclusion should restate your opinion, and what action should be taken.

Example:

- “New York’s charter schools are helping our community’s most underserved children. This is an experiment that’s working. The school board should authorize new charters.”

Basic Do’s & Don’ts:

- Know your audience.
- Don’t try to cover the waterfront. Focus on one or two major issues.
- Keep it simple yet varied. Don’t use big words if more common words will do the job. Use a mix of short and long sentences.
- Don’t over-repeat yourself. Repetition turns off readers.
- Avoid telling readers the obvious. Don’t waste their time by arguing that public education is a good thing. Tell them how to achieve better education through the advancement of charter schools.
- Look for clichés in your writing and eliminate them.
- Remember to support your brand.
- Have a strong “Call to Action”.
- Ask someone to read what you’ve written and tell you if your points and examples are clear. You probably understand yourself, but the point is to get other people to understand you.
- When you think you’ve finished, read your article out loud. Listen for clunky wording and long sentences. If it doesn’t sound right, it won’t read well.
- One cannot say enough about the importance of your first paragraph. If you spend an hour writing your letter, use the majority of that time to craft the first paragraph. It should set the tone for the rest of the piece.

Who Should Submit the Editorial?

There is nothing more convincing than to read directly from a charter school leader. If possible, have the head of your CSO or a director or principal of the charter school help write the editorial. Their name needs to be signed on the editorial. It is also appropriate to work with a teacher at a charter school or an involved parent whose child attends the school. If you have been able to build a relationship with a local legislator, it may be effective to see if they will collaborate with you on an editorial. Many legislators are waiting for the opportunity to speak out on an important educational issue.

When submitting your piece, be sure to send it to the correct editor. If it winds up in the wrong email box, it may be overlooked or deleted. Typically follow up your email with a phone call to bring the piece to the editor’s attention and to emphasize the news angle. This is your opportunity to explain why the editor should care. When working with smaller, weekly newspapers, find out when they start production for the week, so that you can be sure to get your piece in beforehand to be considered for that edition.

Two Examples of Well-Written Op-Ed Columns:

Example 1

LAUSD Must Do What’s Right for Area Children

July 23, 2008

Appeared in the Los Angeles Daily News

Last week the Los Angeles public school system was rocked with sobering news: According to the state, one in three Los Angeles Unified students is dropping out. But buried deep within the data was a sign of encouragement – charter high schools are showing strong signs of reducing this trend. In fact, every charter high school in Los Angeles Unified last year reported a dropout rate significantly lower than not only the school district’s average, but the state’s as well. Yet despite this and other positive developments within the growing charter school movement, critics continue to cast aspersions on charter schools, repeating the same tired arguments that they’ve unsuccessfully used for years.

These arguments basically boil down to four points: Charter schools make their decisions locally, they select the best students, they’re smaller, and they cause the

district to lose funds as taxpayer money follows students to the schools they choose.

Yes, charter schools get to make their decisions locally, and since they're held accountable for how their students learn, this school-site control encourages innovation that leads to greater learning. In contrast, a public-school system where seven school board members make every decision affecting nearly 700,000 students will have difficulty improving student achievement. I remember serving on the school board, when seven grown-ups would spend half a day debating the merits of whether schools should use forks or sporks during lunch. These decisions and vastly more important ones that impact learning should be left to educational professionals.

The second argument of preferential student-selection has consistently been debunked by academic research. Charter schools accept all students using public lotteries, not special selection. A 2005 Rand Corp. report again put this myth to rest when it found that in California, "African-American and Hispanic students were more likely to transfer to a charter school than other students, and this was especially true for African-American students." This underscores why public school choice is critical to closing the achievement gap, considering that a staggering 41.6 percent of African-American students drop out of district schools.

Third, it's unfair to dismiss charters' higher performance simply because they're smaller. Parents want the option of enrolling their child in a smaller, safer public school where every teacher knows every student by name. They know that when children feel safe, chances are greater that learning will occur – and the data prove this.

Last, it's true that charter schools do take away some control from downtown headquarters. In charters, money is spent on students, rather than in bureaucratic red tape. Critics such as LAUSD school board member Julie Korenstein need to ask themselves what's worse – seeing thousands of students choose charter schools, or watching tens of thousands of Los Angeles Unified students drop out of school altogether?

Commenting on last month's report that found that most charter schools are academically outperforming their

neighborhood peers, Senior Deputy Superintendent Ray Cortines said, "I think that what it says is that they have some best practices, and those should be replicated in the district in all schools. I would say the same about islands of excellence in the Unified district. ... We need to each learn from each other."

Cortines is right. Let's stop attacking each other with tired falsehoods that don't stand the test of credibility. Let's focus as partners on doing more of what's working for kids.

Caprice Young is former president of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education and current president/CEO of the California Charter Schools Association, www.myschool.org.

Example 2

NEVADA VIEWS: Moving Forward with Charter Schools in Nevada

They are an Integral Part of Solving Education Woes
Oct. 26, 2008

By John Hawk

Appeared in the Las Vegas Review-Journal

The final presidential debate revealed both candidates agreeing on something: charter schools as a solution for public education in America. Nationally, more than 4,000 charter schools are fostering competition and providing public school choice to families.

Such national affinity toward charter schools -- independently operated, largely autonomous public schools that receive taxpayer funding -- has cut across state and party lines. Much of the popularity can be attributed to the "shut your doors" accountability standard; Nevada has exercised it three times since the inception of the Nevada charter school law in 1997.

Nevada's public school district accountability standards pale in comparison. For example, what happens when a Nevada school district doesn't meet class-size reduction ratios, provides dated textbooks, fails facility inspections or lacks teacher certifications? Districts

submit waivers, file for exemptions or petition for variances.

On the other hand, by law, charter schools have 90 days to correct the deficiencies. Otherwise, these charter schools shut their doors.

Administrators of Nevada's 25 charter schools find themselves wearing a variety of hats, including superintendent, director, principal, assistant principal, dean, teacher and counselor. A parallel of responsibilities can be drawn to rural school administrators, but that skews when it comes to school funding. Nevada is built on an equity-funding allocation model which suggests, in very simple terms, an indirect relationship between numbers of students in a school district and funding per student. The revenue stream in Nevada has similarly sized school districts being funded better than charter schools.

For example, the Eureka County School District, with approximately 230 students, gets funding of nearly \$30,400 per student, whereas Nevada State High School (a charter school), with approximately 230 students, gets almost \$6,500 per student.

Charter schools are charged with the duty of doing more with less, and many school-choice critics suggest that is what charter school operators willingly and knowingly agree upon with their sponsors (the agency that underwrites the charter school). Clearly, one size does not fit all when it comes to funding models for Nevada.

The state must start by considering a no-cost equity funding model that adequately and fairly distributes money to all schools. Second, charter schools must be given access to facility funding after proving to be a successful operation.

In school districts, construction/bond money is separate from the general fund revenues that fund public schools. Charter schools have no access to bond money. Hence, charter schools report outspending school districts by more than 13 cents on every state dollar for facilities and equipment. In comparing other operating expenditures, the gap grows even wider.

To make the division worse, charter schools are forced to kick back a 1 to 2 percent sponsorship fee for technical assistance.

Among all charter schools in Nevada, these sponsorship fees total more than \$600,000 and are traditionally used by sponsors for consultants and to conduct audits. Individual school district schools rarely see this kind of oversight from the state or their respective school district central offices.

On Oct. 7, the Legislative Committee on Education voted to help make strides with technical assistance to charter schools in sponsoring a Bill Draft Request (BDR 297) for the 2009 session to create a separate charter school district.

To ensure the success of a charter school district and hold individual charter schools to the ultimate accountability standards, Nevada legislators must insist on the following: continuing to allow charter school governing bodies local control over decision making; promoting the better use of sponsorship fees for more productive and meaningful technical assistance; and creating equal access to funding.

Local decision-making in charter schools has restored confidence in education with parents and the public alike. Clearly, the public is supporting the high accountability standards of charter schools, and both major-party presidential candidates agree that charter schools are part of the solution for education in America.

John Hawk, a former member of the Nevada State Board of Education, is executive director of Nevada State High School, a Henderson charter school that emphasizes courses for college credit.

G. Working With Editorial Boards

Every major newspaper has what is known as an editorial board. Editorial boards do not print news. They usually respond to news with an opinion piece that serves as the official position of the newspaper – an editorial. Editorial boards endorse political candidates and legislation, and they often weigh in on pertinent news issues of the day. To charter schools, an editorial board of a newspaper can be a critical ally. Get to know the education writers for your local and state newspaper editorial boards. You can often find their contact information on the newspaper’s web site.

Note that quality newspapers have a firewall between their news reporters and their editorial boards. Newspapers rarely mix their news and editorial sections. You will often find that the education reporters and the editorial writers do not communicate. Therefore, you will need to start at square one when dealing with the editorial writers as well.

Basic Tips

Editorial boards usually take a position on larger public policy issues, and will rarely delve into a local charter school issue unless it has broader implications.

- Build relationships with members of your local editorial board.
- If you get a positive story in your newspaper, send it to the editorial writer.
- If there is an upcoming event or major news story, it is appropriate to initiate contact with the editorial board to request a meeting.
- The best time to request a meeting with an editorial board is when you want them to take a position on your issue. This could be to support a particular piece of legislation, or to validate an important study on the effectiveness of charter schools.
- Always bring someone who can speak to the broader charter school movement with you to such meetings. This will likely be someone from your CSO or perhaps even a board member.
- Do not bring more than three people with you to an editorial board meeting. Too many voices will dilute your message.
- Rehearse what you are going to say and know your facts. This will ensure that everyone is on message.
- Bring written material, but keep it brief. A fact sheet on the topic you are there to discuss is critical.

H. Know Where Charter Schools Are Vulnerable

As we reviewed before, during the initial planning phase you’ll want to identify your opposition. You’ll also want to become intimately familiar with the messages and strategies that opponents of charter schools will use against you. In essence: You’ll want to know where charter schools are vulnerable.

Here’s the easy part. For more than a decade, the opposition points against charter schools have been the same. In fact, they largely lack creativity, and one could argue that they’re worn out and tired arguments. At the same time, charter opponents have been successful at sticking with these same message points with the hopes that repeating them over and over again will stick in the minds of the public. The bad news is that without a sustained effort of well-crafted response points and a communications strategy to combat these messages, the public, and in many cases policymakers, will buy them. The good news – and extensive polling confirms this – is that after the public hears the criticisms, as well as charter advocates’ responses to them, support for charter schools still increases. The point is: If you learn effective response techniques, the public will be on your side.

Every criticism of charter schools can somehow be placed into one of five categories. Make sure that you have a tactical response to each of these – a well-crafted sound bite that effectively responds to these criticisms. Done well, the reader or listener will weigh both arguments and will most likely side with charter school advocates. You’ll also want to have a strategic message or a communications strategy that “pre-buts” these criticisms, or refutes them before you are hit with them.

Criticism Number One: Charter schools drain money from the public school system.

Perhaps the most common, and most successful criticism leveled against charter schools is the myth that charter schools drain money from the public school system. This criticism comes from many different sources, including most school districts, individual school board members and even teachers unions. In fact, one California school board member outlandishly said, “If we keep starting charter schools, pretty soon we’re not going to have a public school system anymore.” Nonsense! The most effective way of tactically refuting these criticisms is to point out the fact that charter schools are public schools. It’s so obvious, but it does need constant reinforcement.

Tactical Responses: Commit these sound bites to memory:

- “Charter schools are public schools and therefore they keep public money in the public school system. Charter schools allow the educational dollars to follow the student when they choose the public school that best meets their needs.”
- “Charter schools give parents choices within the public school system and empower parents. If a regular public school is not addressing the needs of a particular student, then their parent can enroll them in a charter school that may better meet their needs.”

Strategic Messages: Be cognizant of the fact that any time you are debating whether or not it’s right for families to choose the best public school for their child (which the public overwhelmingly supports), you are still arguing from a zero-sum position (what’s good for charter schools may be bad for traditional public schools). The public will still wonder about the fate of those students left behind in traditional public schools. That’s why charter opponents often take their draining money argument to an additional level. “Even if families are choosing these charter schools,” they point out, “we run the risk of creating a two-tiered system of public education – one for the haves and one for the have-nots.”

As we discovered in the section on key charter school messages, the public wants to know that charter schools are working across the entire public school system. It’s important here to “pre-but” this messaging challenge by staying on a positive sum message. Reinforce how charter schools benefit everyone in the broader public school system. Persuade your audience that charter schools are inspiring all public schools to get better and working to make the entire public school system improve. One of the most effective poll-tested messages we’ve found states:

“Charter schools have the flexibility to try new and innovative ways of improving student achievement. They are also sharing these successes with the broader public school system so that all students benefit.”

Focus in on how charter schools are acting like the research and development arm of the public school system. This has shown to be a more effective technique than the less-effective message of competition. Public opinion polling and focus groups have found that the competition message works fairly well with men, but not so much with women. After all, even though healthy competition may force existing schools to improve, the public would rather see all public schools working together on behalf of students, not competing against one another.

Staying on the positive sum argument, devise a communications strategy around the following benefits of charter schools:

- **Relieving overcrowding.** If overcrowded, dilapidated public schools are a problem in your state, then this argument can be effective. After all, if the creation of new public schools can solve this problem, then this point has considerable merit and will negate the draining funds argument. It’s helpful to arm yourself with information from your state department of education on the percentage of students currently in overcrowded facilities. You may actually find a common ally here with school boards associations and school districts who are trying to solve this problem.
- **Sharing best practices so everyone benefits.** Can you find examples in your state of where school districts have adopted new practices from the successes of charter schools? In major urban communities like Los Angeles, New Orleans, Oakland and Washington D.C. – areas where there is a high presence of charter schools – school districts and many public schools are beginning to adopt the successes and practices of charter schools. In Los Angeles, for example, today the local teachers’ union head, a vocal charter critic, even uses the term “charter-like” in positive terms.
- **Serving at-risk kids or reducing the dropout rate.** A vast majority of charter schools are preventing kids from slipping through the cracks. Face it, in urban communities where dropout rates approach 50 percent and higher, this argument can be effective. Focus on telling the story of charter schools that are serving traditionally under-served kids and creating new opportunities for them. Find out if aggregate data exists that shows that charter schools are helping to reduce the number of dropouts. Do this effectively, and you’ll find that the draining money criticism will begin to look sillier and sillier.
- **Bringing families back into the public school system.** The national average for private school attendance is above 10 percent. Many urban centers report a high percentage of school-age children attending private schools. Seattle, San Francisco and New York in fact all report private school attendance rates above 30 percent. If you can point out that charter schools are helping reduce this number by bringing families back into the public school system, then this may be an effective strategy for you. A couple of years ago in San Francisco, some school district officials blamed charter schools as the reason for massive enrollment declines. In response—and with California’s CSO coordinating—San Francisco’s charter schools surveyed their charter students to find out where they came from prior to enrolling. To their surprise, more than one-third of their students were previously enrolled in non-San Francisco public schools. They were effectively able to get the message out that charter schools are reducing the city’s declining public school trend.

Criticism Number Two: Charter schools perform no better than traditional public schools.

One school board member in the nation's second largest school district recently asked, "Since they (charter schools) aren't doing better, what's the point?" Individuals within the status quo will remarkably continue to say such things, even when the evidence points to the contrary. Use the real evidence against them.

Tactical Response:

Recognize that student achievement reports will likely be your best ally. An effective response can be to state, "According to every recent study, charter schools are performing every bit as well as traditional public schools – especially on behalf of underserved students. In many cases, charter schools are outperforming the broader public school system."

Perhaps on an aggregate basis, charter schools in your state may not be outperforming traditional public schools. In that case, dig deep into the data and compare apples to apples. After all, does it really make sense to compare well-funded district schools in Lake Forest, Illinois with charter schools in urban Chicago? Focus in on comparing charter schools with their local district public school counterparts. Also, rather than looking at snapshots of how charter schools are doing in a single year, how about looking at how charter schools are doing at improving student achievement over time? Almost every study that has been commissioned looking at value-add data has found that charter schools are improving student achievement at a faster rate.

Strategic Messages:

Stick to the data. It can't be stressed enough that the reason that charter schools are hit with this criticism is because advocates have not been aggressive enough at getting out performance data and accurately framing it on their own terms. Your CSO should do its own student achievement analysis, and you should constantly be building relationships with state- and national-level researchers who can do this work, while adding additional credibility to charters in the process.

Criticism Number Three: Charter school teachers are less experienced and have lower levels of satisfaction than those in traditional public schools.

Teachers in charter schools are often those whose voice at the state level is underrepresented. It is so important for you to tell the message of how charter schools are creating new and professional opportunities for public school teachers.

Tactical Response:

Each year, and in virtually every state, the number of charter school teachers rises. How could that be possible if teachers weren't happy, or qualified? Two effective response techniques can include getting out the message of why teachers are choosing to teach in charter schools. The following below are two such responses. Note the second response, which throws it back on the traditional public school system to point out that the existing public school system has its own challenges, which charter schools solve.

- "Teachers who teach in charter schools have much higher levels of satisfaction because teachers no longer have to go to a distant, impersonal school district to ask for permission. It is this freedom that allows educators to unleash their talents and abilities to design programs that work better for the students they serve. This is why many young and talented teachers oftentimes will only teach in a charter school."
- "Today, most teachers leave the teaching profession within the first five years of teaching.² The number one cited reason they leave is a lack of a voice in the decision-making process. Charter schools are giving those teachers a say, and that's why teachers are flocking to them."

Strategic Messages:

Create a strategy for communicating the message of the charter school teacher. Gather data – overall or anecdotal – showing teachers in traditional schools defecting to the charter movement. Those numbers or stories are compelling. Conduct a charter school teacher satisfaction survey. Specifically ask teachers who taught in the traditional public school system to compare their experience and to express which environment they prefer most. Also, consider doing a survey of new charter schools in a particular area and ask them how many teachers they interviewed prior to the start of the school year. Chances are they were able to pick and choose among a wide variety of teachers. One charter school released those figures: In its first year of operation, the Oakland Military Institute in Oakland, California, got the message out that 400 teachers applied for only nine teaching positions in its first year.

Find the teachers in your charter school movement that have a story to tell. Explaining why teachers are flocking to charter schools, with good evidence, can be a strong pitch to the news media. Whenever there is a positive news story around a successful charter school, use it as an opportunity to have a teacher be interviewed. This assigns a voice to that school's success.

² "Teacher Turnover, Teacher Shortages and the Organization of Schools," Richard M. Ingersoll, University of Pennsylvania and Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, January 2001.

A Note on Teacher Credentialing:

Public opinion polling and focus groups have found, oddly enough, that many veteran teachers in traditional public schools question the usefulness of a credential. Many charter school teachers wear their lack of a teaching credential as a badge of honor, but parents are insistent that their teacher has one. The fact is: it's a deeply-held belief by the public that equates teacher quality with a credential. This is not a policy statement – it's a reality and a messaging vulnerability. Charter advocates must have a strategy for dealing with this if it is a policy issue in your state. Here are some ideas:

- Find the stories of teachers who lack a credential but have a very strong pedigree (the university-level doctorate who is teaching advanced physics at a charter school) and get them out.
- Analogies can be effective. Here's one example: "Our schools need to have flexibility to recruit the best and brightest: After all, because of the credentialing challenge, Bill Gates could not teach computer science, George Lucas could not teach theater and Senator Harry Reid could not teach civics since none has a credential."
- Pivot, and get back to student achievement. After all, what matters most is how these schools are improving learning.

Criticism Number Four: Charter schools "cream" the best students.

Perhaps the oldest criticism leveled against the notion of choice, this myth relies on the belief that if you give parents a choice, then only the "best" parents would make that choice, leaving the disadvantaged students behind. Here's what a respected education researcher, and a noted charter critic recently said on this point: "We know it's the eager-beaver parents who are working the school-choice market more and getting into charters. So the higher growth rates can still be explained by family characteristics, parents who help with homework, for example, or restrict TV, or push their kids to work harder in school."³

Tactical Responses:

Again, go back to the data. It's important to be armed with good demographic data on the students being served by charter schools in your state. Here are three effective techniques for refuting these criticisms:

- "Charter schools are serving a higher percentage of low-income students, nearly twice the percentage of minority students and a higher percentage of students with academic difficulties."

³"Report Critical of Charter Schools," The San Francisco Chronicle, April 1, 2003.

- "Charter schools are closing the achievement gap by taking in underserved students and improving their student achievement at a faster rate than in the overall public school system."
- Sometimes it's effective to respond to an unproven criticism with a question. "If a traditional public school is working for you, why would you move your child?"

Strategic Messages:

Showcase the changed lives of the students in charter schools. Concentrate your efforts on those schools that are in particularly underserved areas and work with those charter schools to find examples of kids who were on the brink of dropping out that were able to turn it around due to a charter school.

A San Jose Mercury News reporter visited a nearby charter school after being pitched the story of a formerly-troubled student. Following this visit, they profiled the student: "Medina had attended six elementary schools in San Jose in six years, as her mother, a single mom, struggled financially. Medina's attitude toward school had been as bad as her study skills. Three years ago, in her freshman year at Downtown College Prep, Medina's grade point average was 0.8, meaning she failed many of her courses. On Saturday, her 3.1 GPA entitled her to automatic admission to California State University colleges."

Criticism Number Five: Charter schools lack accountability.

Given the right circumstances, this criticism could serve as the biggest threat to the charter school movement. Charter schools that academically underperform draw notice. Charter school failures tend to always be high-profile, and will be used by critics of charter schools as reasons to deny other charter school petitions, propose regulatory reforms, or worse. Make sure you are aggressive in your responses.

Tactical Responses:

It can be an effective response to point out that, unlike traditional public schools, there are real consequences for schools that academically underperform. There are three effective responses in this case: Accountability that leads to school closure, accountability meaning having the ability to make quick effective changes and accountability that leads to placing failing schools under new management. These responses are included below. Go back to the polling results earlier in this playbook. Note that while the public does like the accountability message of charter schools in both cases, it does question the logic of shutting down an existing public school, charter or not. After all, where will the students go? So while both responses may work, the "quick, effective changes" response, or the "placing schools under new management" may be more appropriate.

- **School closure:** “Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability to our system of public education. If a charter school is not improving student achievement at a greater rate than the nearby regular public schools, it can be closed down. This stands in stark contrast to many traditional public schools that have been mired in academic underperformance for decades.”
- **Quick, effective changes:** “Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability to our system of public education. If a charter school is not improving student achievement, it can make quick, effective changes like replacing staff or modifying curriculum to get back on track.”
- **Under new management:** “Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability to our system of public education. If a charter school is not improving student achievement, it can quickly be placed under new management so that it can get back on track.”

Strategic Messages:

One charter school leader recently said, “Charter schools are like a breath of fresh air into the public school system. And with that fresh air comes with it a few flies. It’s important to make sure you swat the flies.” This may sound rather harsh, but consider that many states have faced harmful attempts at re-regulation due to a few bad apple charter schools.

Recognize that even in negative policy environments, there are sensible elected officials that hate it when negative news hits their doorstep, particularly if it’s negative news about a charter school in their own district. Their mantra to charter school advocates is often, “Either you police your own, or we’ll do it, and it won’t be pretty.” Sounds drastic, but it’s actually thoughtful advice. In fact, most industries that are in some form regulated by the government, let alone accepting of public dollars, have faced further, restrictive rules assigned to it when the public perceived that the particular industry was not doing enough to hold itself accountable. Think of the financial, airline and accounting industries, for example.

It’s important for CSOs to consider their role in establishing quality standards for charter school operations. If charter school advocates seize the initiative, do this first, do it on their own terms and then get the message out about their efforts, then they can stop efforts to halt the movement due to a perceived lack of accountability. After years of facing re-regulation from Sacramento, the California Charter Schools Association created its first-in-the-nation “Certified Charter Schools Program.” With someone now minding the store and ensuring quality in the movement, efforts at reregulation have largely ceased.

I. Third-Party Validation

When meeting with journalists, don’t rely on just an articulate message to get your point across. Gather everyone who can testify to your movement’s success – your third-party validation. There is nothing more powerful than a parent whose child’s education has been transformed due to the success they’ve had at a charter school. Learn kids’ stories, and be prepared to articulate those from at least three students.

Teachers play an important role in delivering the charter school message. Since teachers groups are often among those that vehemently oppose charter schools, it is important to allow your teachers the ability to tell their stories that are compelling to the public. It is helpful to be able to turn to one or more of your teachers who can share how they are more empowered by teaching at a charter school. Help them get their message out to the community – it may turn into one of your most powerful media opportunities.

Perhaps most importantly, charter school advocates need to find supportive individuals who have a high profile in the community. This person could be a legislator, a school board member, a mayor, a professor or any newsmaker who can validate your school’s success. Never underestimate the value of such allies. They can come in handy at a community or school event, or when you need a quote for a press release or a reporter interview. If you can’t identify such a person, cultivate one. You’ll find it will help you get your message out successfully.

J. Working With Broadcast Media

Due to limited airtime and the up-to-the-minute news cycles, radio and television markets tend to be a more difficult medium to access than print and online. Keep in mind that your message will only be newsworthy if it appeals to a larger audience.

Television

When considering TV, don’t just think Oprah, 60 Minutes and The Today Show. There are numerous local news programs that need thoughtful and interesting guests. Get to know your morning, afternoon and nightly news shows, mid-morning and afternoon talk shows, and weekend public affairs programs.

When pitching a television producer, remember that they will want a good visual to go along with the story. A compelling visual could be a charter school rally at the school district headquarters, where parents and students are seen waving signs demanding equitable funding for their local public schools. Another visual may be pictures or footage of charter school students at an awards ceremony or sporting event. Whatever the story, interesting props will increase your ability to get coverage.

Assignment editors are always looking for the local angle to big national stories. If a national trend shows charter schools are closing the achievement gap, pitch one of your local high-performing charter schools to give the story a local angle.

Talk Radio

Talk radio is quickly becoming the strongest medium within the alternative news media. It is an excellent way to deliver your message. However, it is often the most difficult. Many talk shows provide a forum for two different points of view and often allow listeners the chance to call in and discuss their topic. The best way to contact such a show is through the radio show's producer.

The talk radio forum demands extensive knowledge, a strong command of the facts, an articulate presentation and a quick wit to respond to off-the-cuff questions. Little time is wasted on careful thought and reflection.

Radio news stories will likely include a brief sound bite from the spokesperson. These interviews are most frequently done over the phone, and are spliced around the radio anchor's commentary. Be cautious and always remember that you might be recorded! If you are not prepared when you are called and asked for information, it is perfectly appropriate to ask the reporters if you could call them back after they ask you their question. This gives you time to organize and compose your thoughts so you will not be led into a sound bite you'll regret.

Broadcast Media Interview Tips

It is a good idea to set aside time to prepare before your interview. In addition to knowing the content for the interview, it is also important to look the part and exude confidence. Here are few tips to keep in mind to ensure your interview will be a success.

Interview Preparation:

- Ask reporters as much as you can prior to the interview and try to anticipate the questions that they will ask of you.
- Devise a scripted sound bite. Think ahead of time about what you want to say. In most cases, only 10-15 seconds of what you say will be used. Have a sentence or two in mind that clearly summarizes your views.
- Tell your story. This is an opportunity for you to frame your view, before critics tell your story for you.
- Write down talking points and key messages.
- Practice with a colleague.

Basic Do's & Don'ts - General Rules of Thumb:

- Remember that anything you say can be used. Think before you speak.
- Keep answers simple and use everyday language; avoid jargon.
- Stay focused; a good reporter may ask the same question several different ways.
- Answer the questions and then stop talking. Don't feel obliged to fill dead air after a tricky question. Just pause, think, and then answer. Don't be rushed.
- Be prepared to answer questions you most hope aren't asked.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know the answer to a question. Instead, offer to find the answer and get back to them.
- Don't respond to questions based on unfamiliar facts.
- Don't repeat negatives and don't use negative buzz words.
- When possible, turn negatives into positives.
- Don't take the bait. Reporters sometime use this phrase: "So what you are saying is XYZ, right?" Be prepared to repeat your statement over and over.
- If the reporter asks you an antagonistic question, do not get defensive and don't argue on camera with the reporter. Relax, smile, and say what you want listeners or viewers to hear. Always go back to your key charter school messages.

The Art of Bridging

A bridging statement is simply a transition from one topic (based on a reporter's question) to a subject you want to talk about (your message).

Examples of bridging phrases:

"The fact is..."

"Let me reemphasize something I said earlier about..."

"That's why it is important to..."

Avoid Traps – Stay on Message!

Sometimes you need to abruptly change the direction of the interview. Perhaps the reporter has wandered into a different direction, or is touching on a controversial issue, and you want to get back on message.

Example phrases:

"What we should really be considering is..."

"Look, the real issue here is..."

Dress for Success and Be Aware of Body Language:

Make sure you dress appropriately, and remember, there are ways to look more camera-friendly:

- Avoid white shirts or blouses at all costs!
- Be wary of color combinations -- red and dark blue “vibrate” on camera.
- Avoid busy prints. This includes detailed ties. They look fuzzy on camera.
- It is best to wear soft colors; light blue is a good example. Take note by observing the dress of your local newscasters.

Focus on good body language. You want to exude confidence and maintain a relaxed demeanor:

- Avoid uncomfortable facial expressions.
- Avoid looking directly at the camera.
- Look at the interviewer, to avoid “wandering eyes” syndrome.
- Lean slightly forward if sitting.
- Put one foot in front of the other if standing, to avoid the tendency to rock.
- Speak slowly and enunciate.
- Avoid “um’s” at all costs.
- Choose a location with lots of light, either a well-lit room or outside in the sunshine.
- Strategically place your logo or sign in the background for additional publicity.
- When all else fails, smile!

5

Dealing With Negative News



5

Dealing With Negative News

Here's the scenario: Your state's charter school movement is in the midst of a catastrophe. Imagine if you will, that your state's largest charter school, which was of poor quality to begin with, shut its doors just prior to the beginning of the school year, thereby displacing several thousand students. Then imagine that same week, the nation's most influential and widely-read newspaper publishes a report showing that the nation's charter schools are underperforming compared to traditional public schools. How would you handle this scenario? This situation happened just a few years ago.

Just days after California's largest charter school closed amidst scandal, displacing some 5,000 students, the New York Times published a front-page story, entitled, "Nation's Charter Schools Lagging Behind, U.S. Test Scores Reveal." It set up a firestorm of criticism from the news media and statewide press picked up on both stories, and put California's charter school movement in a crisis. News reporters and television cameras quickly started showing up on the campuses of charter schools asking, "What are these schools that are both performing poorly and throwing students out on the street?"

How did California weather this storm? Simple: The CSO recognized that the broader public, from policymakers on down, saw that there was a major problem and they naturally wanted to see someone step forward and offer a solution. In the midst of a crisis, be ready to offer that solution.

Be prepared for a crisis and anticipate that one may happen. As Andy Grove, founder of Intel so famously said, "Only the paranoid survive." California recognized that any vulnerability, perceived or real, could undermine the charter school movement. The public could have lost confidence in charter schools if not for a swift, aggressive response. As California found, in the midst of a crisis:

- **Focus on the long-term.** Make sure you are thinking about how charter schools will be perceived not only through the next news cycle, but six months and even years from the moment that the crisis hits.
- **Be proactive.** As stated before, it's important to tell your story first, and to tell it your way. In the California crisis, its CSO focused on getting all the facts out about its movement's successes.
- **Be a leader.** In the midst of a crisis, your supporters will need good information to get out to their constituents as well. California distributed a series of talking points and internal messages, arming its schools with information that helped them set the record straight.
- **Be disciplined.** Streamline your communication within your CSO and let all information pass through one individual.
- **The side that embraces accountability wins.** California aggressively responded by pointing out its efforts to hold this bad apple accountable which led to this closure. However, it didn't stop there. It worked with its area charter schools to find seats for the displaced students.
- **Document everything in advance.** Know if there are lousy schools out there. Have your facts and figures ready for dissemination about all your efforts to embrace quality and hold bad schools accountable.
- **Be prepared to offer solutions.** Recognize that one good quote will not re-frame a story. Have a good response, but have a proactive strategy for getting your positive message out. With California's perfect storm, the CSO went beyond the old adage of just stating, "Accountability works." It offered solutions and even proposed legislation to restrict certain authorizers from issuing charters to ill-intentioned groups.

The aftermath of this crisis was positive. California's CSO aggressively pointed out that, even by the numbers cited by The New York Times, its charter schools were outperforming its district public schools. California successfully made the case that, since its charter schools were around longer, other states would soon be able to follow suit. That turned out to be correct.

As California learned, when dealing with negative news, it is vital to remember that the best defense is a good offense. If you have a relationship with members of the media, and you have been able to convey the value of charter schools to them beforehand, you are likely to get more favorable treatment in the event of a crisis. The most important things to remember in the event of a crisis are: always tell the truth, be open to communicating with the press and get all the information that is most favorable to your position out and into the

hands of the press. Being first to offer a legislative solution that fixed the perceived problem allowed California's CSO to be the first to co-opt the accountability message. Detractors of charter schools, eager to use this as an opportunity to re-regulate the movement, were kept at bay.

Several months later, California did a poll on the public's attitudes towards charter schools. Support for the movement actually increased during that time. Crisis averted: The public maintained and even increased its level of confidence towards charter schools.

It is valuable to carefully check news articles or reports that are presented as negative. Sometimes they may contain positive information that needs emphasizing; sometimes they may be leaving out important information that can provide a level of balance. When the New York Times' reporting said that district public schools' test score averages were higher than charter test score averages, they neglected to show that charter schools overall had greater improvement gains in student achievement. And, charter schools were serving a higher percentage of low-income students. When this information was brought to statewide reporters, follow-up stories appeared with very positive headlines, reporting that other analyses showed the clear majority of charters were producing greater gains than district public schools.

Line up your third-party validation prior to a crisis. Contacting your supporters to articulate your positions to them can be as important as contacting the press. If your crisis situation includes a legal component, make sure you discuss what you are going to say to the press with a legal expert or attorney. If you do these simple things prior to a negative story, you will find that your position will be represented much more accurately and you will be able to positively get your message out.



6

Creating Your Earned Media Campaign Calendar





6

Creating Your Earned Media Campaign Calendar

It's time to put together your proactive media campaign. In order to present a proactive and positive charter school message to the public, it is extremely important to develop an annual media calendar and launch a series of monthly media campaigns that are designed to effectively position charter schools and drive momentum for the movement. Your goal is to fill the media cup, or to take advantage of the existing news vacuum by making periodic (at least once-per-month) news announcements. These various announcements should be designed to drive your CSO's and the movement's broader vision and agenda.

Categorize these announcements into two buckets: Announcements that effectively position charter schools and showcase movement successes and announcements that effectively position your CSO as the organization leading positive change in public education. This is the exact type of strategy that the CSO in California used to take charter schools from a negative environment, where they were politically controversial and stuck with the baggage of years of negative news, to the point today where the public understands what they are, why they are important, and even detractors are forced to acknowledge that they are succeeding. Provided below are ideas that you can incorporate into your free media campaign. They are tested and proven to drive positive coverage and improve the awareness of and support for charter schools.

A. Charter School / Movement Positioning Announcements

The first type of charter school news announcement includes news stories that showcase how charter schools are increasing in their effectiveness of serving your state's public school

system. In many of these cases, you will need to have solid data on your state's charter schools and then you will need to be able to present them to the public in a compelling, newsworthy manner.

Milestone Announcements

- **New Charter Schools Announcement** – On an annual basis, announce through the vehicle of a press release a summary of the new charter schools that opened up for that particular year. It makes a strong case to the public that charter schools are in demand; the public wants them.
- **Public-Opinion Survey** – If your budget allows, conduct an annual poll of the public's attitudes towards charter schools and the characteristics that they provide. Make sure to ask a question or two in the release that can help formulate a newsworthy announcement. One of the most effective questions has proven to be asking the public if they are in favor of giving parents more public school choices. If this results in an overall favorable response, then you have a good newsworthy announcement.
- **Wait-List Survey** – Survey all of your state's charter schools. You'll find that most of them have a waiting list. By releasing the aggregate results of the data, you are telling the broader public that charter schools are in demand and that the state needs to prioritize opening more of them.
- **Teacher Recruitment Milestone** – Do you know how many charter school teachers there are in your state? It's important to convey to the public the message of the charter school teacher. As your state's charter school movement grows, more teachers will accept teaching positions in them. Use the latest number of teachers that are now teaching in charter schools as your news hook and develop human interest stories of why teachers are flocking to charter schools around your announcement.
- **Graduation Week** – Each year, charter high schools in your state will be graduating their senior class, many of them sending students to college. What's particularly newsworthy is the fact that some of these charter schools will be graduating their first class. Pick up on that point and use it as a news hook. Focus on the human interest story around these graduates, potentially spotlighting students that have overcome obstacles to get to college.

Data Announcements

An important note on data: Data is not only used to help individuals make decisions, it's also for dissemination. Consider the following types of Data Announcements:

- **CSO Student Achievement Results** – Your state will have an accountability system that provides the latest results of how its public schools performed. If you have a data analyst, prioritize at least on an annual basis commissioning an analysis of how your state's charter schools performed. Have your analyst immerse themselves in the results. Make sure not only to look at how charter schools performed overall against their district counterparts, but look for value-add measurements and make sure to also factor in comparative student demographics.
- **Independent Student Achievement Results** – In order to provide additional credibility for charter schools, build relationships with independent researchers in your state. See if they would be willing to commission an independent review of charter schools to assess their performance. Release this information to the news media.
- **Teacher Satisfaction Survey** – See if you can get beyond just looking at student achievement results. How about commissioning a report on charter school teachers' satisfaction rates of teaching in a charter school? If you do this correctly, you can convey a strong message to the public that teachers in charter schools are highly satisfied, while also preempting a major criticism of charter schools by opponents.
- **Dropout Report** – Most likely, charter schools in your state are helping previously underserved students from slipping through the cracks. If your state provides data on dropout rates of individual schools, there may be results that are favorable to the movement. Consider releasing the aggregate results to the news media showing that charter schools are effective at reducing the dropout rate. This strategy can be very effective at preempting the criticisms that charter schools are draining money from the public school system, or that they cream the best students.

B. CSO Positioning Announcements

The second type of charter school news announcement includes news generated by CSO events, activities or programs. While the CSO is at the spotlight of these announcements, they should still serve to drive public awareness for charter schools. These announcements can include:

Operational Announcements

- **Quality Assurance Program** – Has your CSO developed a program consisting of quality standards for its members? Is there a recognition element that honors charter schools that have met those standards? California, for example, created the Certified Charter Schools Program, that recognizes charter schools that have met a threshold of high quality based on standards developed by the charter school movement. Other CSOs are following suit. Creating and publicizing a program like this will go a long way towards demonstrating quality and accountability in the charter school movement, and enhancing your CSO's image in the process.
- **Annual Conference** – Make sure that you are inviting members of the news media to your state's annual charter schools conference. Make sure you have a storyline to your conference. You may wish to promote in the press some of the more high-profile speakers. And if you haven't yet, this is an excellent opportunity to announce annual award winners. These can include your charter school, charter school teacher, charter school leader, legislator, and perhaps even "Innovator of the Year" awards.
- **High-Level CSO Programs** – Has your CSO developed a program that is helping to narrow the inequities that charter schools in your state face? Perhaps you've developed a particular insurance program for your members. Maybe it's a teacher support program, or a fund that provides loans to growing charter schools. If you can develop a good news hook and properly framed story, then it provides an excellent opportunity for you to get publicity. California, for example, developed a Cash Flow Loan Fund for growing charter schools. Tough to figure out how that is newsworthy? By properly framing the story, it garnered coverage in the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times and several financial publications.
- **Foundation Support** – Make an effort to publicize major grants from federal and state agencies, as well as the philanthropic community. Remember that the media likes numbers; they will see this of value, particularly if there are a lot of zero's behind the number.
- **Major Board and Staff Appointments** – Has your CSO scored a coup and landed a board member of considerable community standing? Perhaps your CSO has added a well-known community leader or philanthropist. Maybe it's a well-regarded member of academia. This is an excellent opportunity to publicize this milestone to create news. New staff announcements may be a possibility, but the media tends to ignore such announcements.

Advocacy Efforts

Make every attempt to have a communications strategy for your CSO's advocacy agenda. In fact, you may find that up to a third of your communications team's agenda revolves around the policy arena. Ideas to publicize may include:

- **Positive Policy Proposals** – Does your CSO have a goal of using public relations to change public policy? There are many policy proposals that charter school advocates have been able to pass into law by effectively incorporating policy solutions into their media campaign calendar. These include getting new facilities support passed, lifting charter school caps, creating additional charter school authorizers, creating special education solutions and many more. More importantly, advocates have strategically used proactive policy proposals to fend off negative legislation.
- **National Charter Schools Week** – Have a public relations plan around celebrating National Charter Schools Week at the state level. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools will be able to assist you and provide ideas to help you get your message out.
- **Annual Advocacy Day** – Every CSO should plan at least one annual Advocacy Day, where charter school advocates can descend upon your state Capitol to meet with legislators and personally explain the benefits that charter schools have provided them, and to request their support for charter schools. Find a good news hook to this activity (a policy proposal can be helped tremendously by using the news media and charter supporters to advocate for change).
- **Legal Defense** – Charter school advocates have increasingly gone to the courts to fight for change. Incorporate a media campaign around any legal activity.

Out-of-the-Box Ideas

If you've exhausted the above ideas, or if you have the internal capacity to accomplish more than one proactive news announcement in a particular month, then you might want to think out-of-the-box by creating your own news. Most likely, it will actually be a public event that will require on-site media coordination. Successful ideas have included:

- **Getting a high-profile individual to teach in a charter school** – One recent example of this, in Arizona, included getting the mayors of three large cities to spend a day teaching class in a charter school.
- **Hosting a community organizing event** – Try to tie this around a particular challenge currently facing the charter school movement. Perhaps it's a school district authorizer that has stonewalled or rejected a charter school petition,

or even mistreated its existing charter schools. If you can gather charter school advocates around a school board meeting to protest a school district's treatment of charter schools, you will get media coverage.

- **Public officials and/or celebrity visits to schools** – Perhaps you have a famous celebrity, athlete or public official who is willing to visit a local charter school. Turn this into a media event and invite the press.
- **Publicizing a 'Lottery Day' for in-demand charter schools** – One of the most heart-wrenching moments for a potential charter school parent takes place when a charter school has to conduct its public lottery. If you do public relations for a state that is reluctant to approve more charter schools or has policy barriers preventing their growth, then capturing the human interest angle of this emotionally powerful story can help make the case for change.

So you developed your plan of action, created your media calendar, sat down with reporters, pitched them on your newsworthy event, and it all led to a positive news story that landed on the front page of your paper. Congratulations! Now, your real work begins. Don't assume that everyone will see it. Be strategic with your news article and turn it into a marketing piece.

Carefully cut out the news story and format the original version, with the newspaper's logo, to an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of paper. Better yet, go to the newspaper's web site and order professional reprints. Frame it for all visitors to see. Include it in your press kit. Send a copy to each and every one of your stakeholders, including your elected officials. Include with the article a note that thanks them for supporting charter schools. You will find that your CSO will get a lot of value out of this type of communication.

7

Some Rules For State Charter Support Organizations



National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools



7

Some Rules For State Charter Support Organizations

A. Keep Your Communications Team Bound

Your talented communications person or team has a big job ahead of them. Make sure you can guard their time and keep them productively focused on executing on your CSO's goal of raising public awareness. They will encounter a great deal of pressure from your schools, who will want them to do their public relations for them. Resist this pressure.

A rule of thumb for school-level public relations is: Does this (positively or negatively) impact the broader charter school movement? They will need to be armed with positive charter school success stories, and they will be forced to engage in school-level crisis management when it reaches a certain level. However, make sure that it's in the movement's interest first before engaging. If you do not follow this rule, your communications team will be less effective and will likely burn out.

If your communications staff wears a few different organizational hats, consider bringing aboard a public relations firm that brings with them deep media contacts. You may find that it's worthwhile to provide this extra support from a firm that spends all of their time helping organizations get their message across through the press.

B. Keep Your Communications Team Informed

A while back, one CSO was engaged in a particularly heated battle over a negative piece of charter school legislation that would have been detrimental to the movement. The CSO naturally opposed the legislation and properly used the news media to get its message across about why the legislation was bad for charter schools. While waging this public battle, the CSO's advocacy team was working with the bill's author on alleviating the detrimental aspects of the legislation. Guess what? Nobody told the communications staff of these efforts, and the CSO's spokesperson delivered a scathing public rebuke of the legislation at just the wrong time. It took a long time to repair the damage done from this quote.

Fortunately the negotiations were salvaged and the legislation did no harm. But imagine how much easier the process could have gone if the communications team was kept informed? Make sure that you are fostering an environment where your communications team is made aware of the latest information so that they can support your agenda.

C. Recognize that Data is Important

Remember again that data is for dissemination. Your CSO should be regarded by the news media as the premier source of data on your state's charter schools. You should gather, verify and disseminate key charter school data points in order to drive visibility, momentum and accurate coverage for your state's charter school movement. Make sure that you are able to track and provide at least the following:

- Simple definition of a charter school.
- Number of charter schools currently operating.
- Number of students currently being served by charter schools.
- Demographics information on the students being served by charter schools.
- Number of charter schools opening up in the new school year.
- Number of charter schools closed or revoked, and why they were closed or revoked.
- Yearly growth of charter schools since your charter school law was enacted.
- Student achievement results through simple, multiple measures.
- Number of charter school teachers in your state.

D. Establish Quality Standards and Recognize Quality Schools

In order to demonstrate quality and accountability within the movement, it makes sense for each CSO to establish some type of quality standards for the movement, holding its membership to a higher level of accountability. These standards should be a prerequisite for membership, should be developed in partnership with its members, and should provide a recognition element (a seal of approval) to the schools that meet and exceed those

standards. A major publicity campaign should be implemented to recognize the schools that are honored. Each CSO should be very attentive to ensure buy-in from its membership, reinforcing that this Certified program would not be another bureaucratic requirement from its schools, nor another hoop to jump through.

E. Commission Regular Polls for Messaging Feedback and to Drive Awareness

If budget permits, try to conduct an annual poll in order to gauge public awareness of and support for charter schools, testing and refining your key messages, and to drive public awareness through a news announcement.

F. Pick the Noble Fight

Through several statewide policy and local district battles, the California experience has shown that "picking the noble fight" against a major injustice being carried out against charter schools, with an aggressive media campaign, can in fact work in your favor. This includes addressing inequities in charter law and enacting favorable policy changes, all while getting the public on your side in the process. Use controversy to your advantage. However, be astute enough to pick the right battle. As the old adage goes, "Don't bring a knife to a gunfight." The areas that are typically most ripe for this type of fight include:

- Lifting the cap and removing policy barriers to allow for more charter schools.
- Raising awareness about the school district conflict-of-interest in order to achieve more independent, alternative authorizers.
- Addressing every state's facilities challenge.
- Allowing teachers the right to participate in the state's retirement system.
- Advocating for additional regulatory flexibility for charter schools.

G. Get Your CSO Leader on the Road

As the public voice of your state's charter school movement, your CEO needs to have visibility. Create a "thought leader" strategy that gets the leader of your CSO in front of the news media. This should include twice-per-year in-person media tours with major state news publications. These tours should be timed around the start of the school year when new school data is collected and finalized and at the beginning of the legislative session in the spring. Make sure to reinforce how charter schools are positively impacting the broader public school system. Come ready with a newsworthy announcement to preview to them, be armed with good data and a series of anecdotal success stories.

H. Develop Key Relationships with State Researchers

As stated in the Third Party Validation section, your CSO should establish relationships with key researchers within higher education, think tanks and the public policy arena to get them to independently validate charter schools' success through the timely and frequent release of charter school research. These research reports or studies should be geared toward those topics listed previously that articulate charter successes and "pre-but" their vulnerabilities.

Conclusion



**National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools**

Conclusion

Don't wait for reporters and news writers to come to you. You can actually help reporters do their jobs. If your state's charter schools are functioning well, you have a great story to tell. Many people want to hear hopeful stories. There is plenty of gloom and doom to go around.

Your communication should be concise. Whether writing a press release, an opinion article or simply talking with a reporter, don't waste words. Include strong opinions based on the key charter school messages, placed high in the piece, if not in the first paragraph. Your communication should be bolstered by facts, quotes, observations and specific examples. Any figure you use must be accurate, and you should include a note to the newspaper telling where the figure came from and how it was calculated (if this is not clear from the piece). Be cohesive; if you wander off your main point, you are likely to lose the attention of members of the news media.

Finally, remember that raising public awareness takes a lot of work, but this work can produce many benefits. It takes plenty of planning, clarity, responsiveness, and perhaps most importantly, plenty of internal communication within your organization. Working with the news media should be a high priority for every CSO. It doesn't take a masterful communicator to accomplish this — just a good understanding of how to communicate and a commitment to deliver.

Appendix:

TEN RULES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

Do you want to increase your organization's public visibility through the news media? Follow these tips to increase your chances of not only getting a reporter or editor interested in your story, but excited enough to regularly cover your work.

1. Make Your Stories Newsworthy

Create a good news hook that tells why your announcement is first, best, unique or appealing to a broad audience—and answers the question, “Why should the public care?” Reporters like public events, facts, stats, compelling visuals and controversy.

2. Be Open and Honest

Never lie or spin. If you answer a difficult question truthfully, it's likely to have less of a negative impact than if reporters uncover a lie on their own.

3. Be Proactive

Don't wait for the media to contact you first, it will likely be a call you don't want. If you approach reporters, you can tell your story first, tell it your way and present all the facts that support your position.

4. Do Your Homework

Find out what the journalists are interested in before you pitch them. Also, knowing their target audiences is key to curtail your pitch to meet their needs.

5. Keep it Simple

Make your story easy to cover by focusing in on the “who, what, when, where, why and how.” You are trying to get your message out through the media to an uninformed public.

6. Focus on the Long Term

You represent the front line for managing your organization's image. Negative news cycles will happen so keep your eye on the big picture—what people think of your organization months and even years from now rather than just tomorrow.

7. Get to the Point

Journalists get hundreds of press releases a week, most of which get deleted. Make your communications catchy, pithy and substantive so they stand out. Cap your pitch on the phone at 30 seconds, and get your point across in the first sentence or two of your press release or pitch.

8. Respect the Reporter's Time

Reporters are especially busy people. Call them early in the day and always ask if they are on deadline.

9. Be Responsive

Your job is to help journalists get the story. Have your facts ready in a one-page sheet that clearly states your key points. Do research for them. Make yourself available to reporters, providing them with all your contact information and returning every request within the hour.

10. Relationships with Reporters Matter

Trust and credibility matter. Let them know you are a good source for a comment as well as a resource for story ideas. Keep in touch with reporters and follow their work. Patience and persistence are important. If you send information regularly, you will eventually get coverage.



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