

TO: Jeanne Allen, Founder & President
Center for Education Reform (CER)

FROM: Kellyanne Conway, President & CEO
Ashley Koonce, Senior Research Manager
the polling company™, inc.

DATE: December 9, 2007

RE: Vidalia and Alpharetta, Georgia Focus Group Results & Analysis

I. Introduction & Methodology

the polling company™, inc. is pleased to present to the **Center for Education Reform (CER)** and the **Georgia Association of Public Charter Schools** this report and analysis following two focus groups of registered voters in Vidalia and Alpharetta, Georgia. The Vidalia focus group was conducted on November 29, 2007 beginning at 6:30 PM (Eastern Time), and the Alpharetta group was held on November 30, 2007 beginning at 12:30 PM (Eastern Time). Each discussion lasted two hours.

Vidalia participants were drawn primarily from Vidalia and Lyons, Georgia, as well as surrounding areas. Alpharetta participants lived in towns surrounding Atlanta, from Dawsonville to Woodstock. They varied in terms of age, political party and ideology, education level, household income, and marital and family status (see pages 3-4 for full participant profiles).

The objective of this research project was to assess the interest in and knowledge of issues related to educational alternatives and charter schools in Georgia and how the public support for the issue might grow and advance. A key element of the discussions included testing images and messages to be used as part of a communications and outreach campaign, e.g., advertisements and brochures¹. A statewide survey of voters will follow this qualitative exercise.

An original discussion guide was crafted by **the polling company™, inc.** and approved by representatives of CER prior to execution of the group. The guide is attached to this report as Appendix A.

Ashley E. Koonce, Senior Research Manager of **the polling company™, inc.** directed both discussions and was assisted in planning and execution by Kellyanne Conway, President and CEO, Shelley West, Project Director, and Danielle King, Operations Manager.

¹ Two focus groups focusing on similar topics were conducted on behalf of CER in Jackson and Cheyenne, Wyoming in September 2007.

II. Key Findings

- **Georgians rank the nation’s moral values as “extremely poor,” and their view of the public education system was not far behind.**
- **Small-town residents are exceedingly worried about shaking things up with regards to education.** Many fear they – or worse, their children – will be labeled as a troublemaker if they attempt to interfere with what they refer to as school board politics.
- **Parental involvement and accountability are extremely important in the Peach State.** Comments such as, *“parents are key to the child’s attitude,”* with regards to school and homework were common in both groups. Even those who were outwardly critical of the school system and teachers would not give parents a pass, noting their essential (and sometimes absent) role on the spectrum of players responsible for the education of children.
- **Charter school awareness is incredibly low in Georgia, especially in Vidalia.** Participants there were so confounded by the term in the smaller town, they did not even feel comfortable voting on them as “public,” “private,” “religious” or “magnet” educational institutions.
- **Merit-based pay is a positive aspect of charter schools for Georgians, but only if it is part of a larger “compensation matrix.”** Participants voiced concern for teachers who have developmentally disabled students, gifted students, or even students with lackadaisical parents, as these could greatly influence teacher pay if it is based solely or mostly on student performance.
- **Many feared that an expansion of parental choice in education could create a segregation of sorts; with students who have involved parents at one school and the remainder at another. For some, confusion arose along with this fear, as** one county in North Georgia currently allows parents to choose from a multitude of schools within that district. Many Alpharettans felt allowing parents to choose was a positive thing, since they felt it was so important for parents to take an active role in their child’s education.
- **The performance contract does not appeal to Georgians.** In Vidalia, discussants wondered what would happen to the students if the school was shuttered mid-year since there are only two schools there to begin with. In Alpharetta, people asked if charter schools could attract the best teachers if there was a possibility the school would suddenly close
- **“Tax dollars follow the child,” really resonated with Georgians.** Adding this phrase into marketing materials where appropriate will likely help move people to the next step, such as going to the website or picking up the phone to learn more. This terminology was important because it meant the school was open to all and it would not be exclusive (even more than that the residents would not be asked to pay more).

III. Participant Profiles

Vidalia Participants

Shirley

African American Female
Aged 65+
Strong Democrat/Somewhat Liberal
Some College/Vocational School
Retired
Divorced
No children at home
Household Income: Under \$35K

Stacie

Caucasian Female
Aged 18-34
Strong Republican/Somewhat Conservative
High School Graduate
Employed Full-time
Single
2 children in public school
Household Income: Under \$35K

Cynthia

Caucasian Female
Aged 35-44
Strong Republican/Somewhat Conservative
Some College/Vocational School
Employed Full-time
Widowed
2 children in public school
Household Income: \$35-45K

Jessica

Caucasian Female
Aged 18-34
Strong Republican/Very Conservative
Some College/Vocational School
Employed Full-time
Married
No children
Household Income: Under \$35K

Monty

Caucasian Male
Aged 55-64
Independent/Very Conservative
College Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
No children
Household Income: \$100K

Roman

African American Male
Aged 18-34
Strong Republican/Very Conservative
Some College/Vocational School
Employed Full-time
Single
1 child at home, not school age
Household Income: Under \$35K

Tony

Caucasian Male
Aged 45-54
Independent/Somewhat liberal
Some College/Vocational School
Unemployed
Married
1 child in public school
Household Income: \$45-60K

Joe

Caucasian Male
Aged 18-34
Strong Republican/Somewhat Conservative
High School Graduate
Employed Full-time
Single
1 child in public school
Household Income: Under \$35K

Vann

Caucasian Male
Aged 35-44
Independent/Very Conservative
High School Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
1 child in public school
Household Income: \$35-45K

Robert

Caucasian Male
Aged 35-44
Strong Republican/Very Conservative
Some College/Vocational School
Employed Full-time
Married
2 children in public school
Household Income: \$35-45K

Alpharetta Participants

Cole

Caucasian Male
Aged 45-54
Not-So-Strong Republican/Very Conservative
Post Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
2 children in public school
Household Income: \$60-80K

David

Caucasian Male
Aged 35-44
Strong Republican/Moderate
Post Graduate
Employed Full-time
Divorced
1 child in public school
Household Income: \$100K+

Vic

Caucasian Male
Aged 55-64
Not-So-Strong Republican/Moderate
College Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
No children
Household Income: \$80-100K

Amy

Caucasian Female
Aged 35-44
Independent/Somewhat Conservative
College Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
No children
Household Income: \$60-80K

Bruce

Caucasian Male
Aged 45-54
Not-So-Strong Republican/Somewhat
Conservative
College Graduate
Employed Full-time
Married
2 children in public school
Household Income: \$100K+

Levonne

African American Female
Aged 45-54
Strong Democrat/Very Liberal
College Graduate
Unemployed
Married
4 children in public school
Household Income: \$60-80K

Marcie

Caucasian Female
Aged 18-34
Not-So-Strong Democrat/Somewhat Liberal
College Graduate
Full-time at home
Married
2 children in religious school
Household Income: \$60-80K

Wilma

Caucasian Female
Aged 55-64
Independent/Very Conservative
College Graduate
Retired
Widowed
No children at home
Household Income: \$35-45K

Brenda

Caucasian Female
Aged 45-54
Not-So-Strong Republican/Very Conservative
Some College/Vocational School
Employed Part-time
Married
1 child in public school
Household Income: \$60-80K

Pam

Caucasian Female
Aged 45-54
Strong Republican/Very Conservative
High School Graduate
Unemployed
Divorced
No children at home
Household Income: Under \$35K

IV. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Moral Values are Rated Lower than the Education System in Georgia, and That's Not Saying Much

To start the discussion, the moderator asked participants to share what they would do if put in charge of the nation or the state of Georgia for one day. If President, participants in both groups would tackle tasks ranging from healthcare and ending the war in Iraq, to fixing America's growing credit and debt issues. Only one participant in the Vidalia group said she would do something about the schools and/or focus on the kids. However, there was widespread agreement among Vidalians with her statements.

None of the respondents indicated any specific changes they would make to the nation's or the state's education systems – aside from wanting to “improve” them overall. Although education was not top-of-mind, all participants readily, candidly, and intelligently shared their concerns and suggestions for improvement while demonstrating a respectable level of knowledge or intuition about the state of affairs as it relates to education.

The moderator asked participants to rank separately the nation's economy, the nation's moral values, and the nation's public education system on the same one to ten scale, with one being “extremely bad” and ten being “extremely good.” The nearby box shows the participants' ratings.

The nation's economy received the highest ratings from participants of the three areas tested, but even then scores were mediocre. The falling value of the dollar and the increasing credit and foreclosure problems were the most commonly cited reasons for the average rating of “5.”

PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10, WHERE 1 IS “EXTREMELY BAD” AND 10 IS “EXTREMELY GOOD”		
	VIDALIA	ALPHARETTA
NATION'S ECONOMY	5.1	5.6
NATION'S MORAL VALUES	1.2	2.8
NATION'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM	3.7	4.6

The nation's moral values are regarded as exceedingly poor by these Georgians, especially in Vidalia, where the mean score was slightly above ‘1,’ the lowest possible ranking. Across the board, disscuants attributed their low ratings to a lack of religion and respect for elders, as well as the “garbage” on television. One woman in Vidalia said, *“People just don't care about other people anymore. It's all about me, me, me.”*

While ranking the nation's public education system, participants divulged many insights into why they think they way they do. One Alpharetta man told a story of his experience with the public school system:

“As far as [teaching] methods, I have experience with a teacher who thought fluorescent lights were bad for children. But, in her efforts to eliminate fluorescent lighting, she put one incandescent bulb in the corner, and wouldn't open the blinds... There was no gauging on what this teacher was doing...as far as learning methods, they need to be audited or checked, because in this case, it wasn't.” – Bruce, Alpharetta

Men and women in Vidalia rated the country's education system as poor based on their experiences with their own school system. In that jurisdiction, there are only two public schools to attend, both of which have a unique set of problems. **However, Vidaliens perceive that being the change agent would brand them or their children as “troublemakers,” which prevents many of them from confronting the politics of the school board.**

Politics Produces Problems...

To continue the discussion on education, the moderator asked participants to share their biggest concerns with respect to public education *in Georgia*. Answers ranged from too great a focus on sports and not enough on learning and a lack of parental involvement, to politics between school board members and an overload of paperwork for teachers. Overall, members of both focus groups voiced a variety of worries that were the causes or effects of one other. This is very similar to earlier focus group findings in other states.

Case-in-point: Problems with teachers having excessive paperwork that “keeps them from teaching” could be in part due to a poorly performing school board. Although participants did not necessarily make these associations explicitly, one could logically connect the dots between their individual responses.

“I'd like to know why the Government can't project into the future and build schools that compensate for our growing population. I don't think the children should have to attend classes in a trailer.” –David, Alpharetta

“You'd be surprised at the amount of paperwork these teachers have to do...my ex-wife was a teacher, and she had to do three lesson plans for each class, each day. She had advanced students, regular students and “problem” students. There's too much paperwork and not enough teaching time.” – Monty, Vidalia

*“You have to pick and choose your battles when you talk to [the school board.] And then you have to talk guardedly. It's more of a political arena than an educational one.”
– Bruce, Alpharetta*

*“When you have a senior class with 300+ starting out, and only graduating 150 of those students, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell you that something is wrong.”
– Cynthia, Vidalia*

Although some participants hinted at whom they believed should be the most important individuals in a child's education during the beginning of the discussion, the moderator probed discussants to share what role specific individuals, such as parents and teachers, played in a child's education.

Participants clearly indicated their preference that parents play the biggest role in the education of their own children, but also expressed some disgruntlement that parents have no input as to what their child is learning, or the environment in which they learn. They recognized the school boards as having the greatest power, but feel they are too removed from the classroom and are too political.

"Parents are the key to a child's attitude [toward education]." –Roman, Vidalia

*"[Parents role in their child's education should] be bigger than huge."
– Bruce, Alpharetta*

"The school board needs to be more involved." – Monty, Vidalia

*"I think anyone on the school board should come up the ladder so they know the inside."
– Brenda, Alpharetta*

"Teachers can't do it all alone." – Stacie, Vidalia

The general consensus in both groups is that teachers have an uphill battle, and need more help from parents and administration alike. The statement, *"Teachers should not have to spend their own money on classroom supplies,"* volunteered by one participant, received head nods and verbal agreement all around the table in Alpharetta.

Many of the parents in the groups, however, voiced a need for school curriculum to have more input from moms and dads. There was also a common concern that students are graduating from high school with little or no "real life" skills.

Participants feel that students should finish high school with marketable – or at least useful – talents, such as budgeting, how to use a credit card, how to follow the stock market, and how to use a computer (the latter was only a concern in Vidalia).

"It doesn't matter how good the teacher is if the parents are not involved."

The moderator prompted the talk further by asking people to share their knowledge of *how* teachers were paid. Participants responded with fairly standard pay guidelines – teacher pay is based on his or her education, experience, and tenure.

*"If someone went to the trouble to get a Master's they deserve more than someone who doesn't. It shouldn't be all of it – tenure, experience, and how well you do."
– Vic, Alpharetta*

“I work with a lot of people who have Master’s and Doctorates, and they couldn’t teach a lick. I think some of this gauging needs to take into account the performance of the teacher.” – Bruce, Alpharetta

Before the moderator engaged them in a discussion about merit-based pay, Alpharettans raised the topic *sua sponte*. They wondered aloud why teachers are not paid like “real world” or “regular” employees. Some felt that if a teacher does well, s/he should be paid more than a similar, but under-performing co-worker. Others in Alpharetta however, felt that if a teacher has a Master’s degree, or 20 years of experience, s/he should receive a higher salary. Those folks were most adamant that teacher performance should be considered as part of an overall compensation matrix that examines a number of factors.

The idea of enhanced compensation for teachers based on student performance was put forth to the groups. In Vidalia, participants supported the idea at first, but as the conversation moved on, several participants raised concerns, such as, *“It doesn’t matter how good the teacher is if the parents are not involved.”* Vidalia participants also wondered how kids with special needs – either gifted or mentally challenged – would factor into teacher pay. This last objection was raised recently in similar focus groups held in Wyoming.

In Alpharetta, heads started shaking at the mention of pay-for-performance as a majority of the group was against the idea – mostly because teacher pay, in their eyes, can only be tied to student achievement if parents are active in the student’s education.

“It goes back to the parent again. If you have a class full of students whose parents don’t care, no matter how good that teacher is, it’s not going to make an impact.” – Marcie, Alpharetta

*“It opens up the door for the teacher to be worrying about ‘I want those [good] students, but not those over there.’”
– Wilma, Alpharetta*

These Georgians view schools as businesses of sorts that need to deliver results. One parent in Vidalia voiced her concern that the schools aren’t effective at all. Her daughter, who has failed the high school exit exam three times, yet got all Bs and Cs on her report card in school, will attempt to pass that exam for a fourth time soon. *“If that’s ‘passing’ and ‘average’ why can’t she pass the exam the first time?”*

“My daughter had to switch schools to one with block scheduling. Her grades shot out the roof all because there is more teaching time, more learning time at the new school. She’s still going to a public school; she just lives with her Daddy now so she can go there.” – Cynthia, Vidalia

Parents receive a failing grade

Next, the group conversed about the rights and responsibilities parents should have in their children's education. Vidalia discussants shared their dissatisfaction with parents in their area. Likely due to the small population around Lyons and Vidalia, many participants seemed resigned to the fact that the schools just "*are the way they are.*" Many worried about speaking up and "being labeled." Others pointed out that they just do not have time to work with their kids after school.

In Alpharetta, however, participants said it was too hard to generalize whether parents in Georgia are involved enough in their child's education. Everyone could relate tales of both good and bad parental involvement in their own schools.

"The jobs just aren't here. And the jobs that are, they just don't pay enough. So you end up either working two jobs as a single parent; or if you're married, both people are probably putting in long, hard hours on the railroad, and they're exhausted when they get home." –Robert, Vidalia

"Elementary kids shouldn't have 4 hours of homework a night either. It makes me wonder what they're doing in school all day if they couldn't get more work done there." – Cynthia, Vidalia

"I think they're just teaching to the [No Child Left Behind] test now." – Joe, Vidalia

"You can make the schools better. But you get out of it what you put into it. Teachers always say to me, 'I hope I get you as a parent,' because they know how involved I am at home and at school." –Levonne, Alpharetta

"I know how important education is, but I don't like the school board telling me what I can and can not do with my child. If I want to take my kid to a family reunion and he'll miss two days of school, that's fine by me. If my kid's getting B's and A's, leave me alone. I put my son in private pre-K because I didn't want them telling me I can't take him to a family reunion. I don't want some public pawn telling me how to take care of my kid. Kiss my butt...excuse me." – David, Alpharetta

"It'd be great if teachers could grade parents, wouldn't it? Well, sir, you're kid was great. He gets an 'A.' You however, you fail." – Cole, Alpharetta.

However, one participant noted that, in his experience, greater parental choice begets greater parental involvement. In his school district within Forsyth County, Georgia, parents are allowed to choose any school in the district for their child.

“In Forsyth County, you can decide which school your child attends. I think the reasoning is that each school only teaches one language. So, this school here only teaches Spanish, and the one down the street only teaches French. This forces parents to at least take a slightly more active role in their child’s education.”

- Bruce, Alpharetta

Upon hearing this, several participants (two of whom had already moved in order to get their kids into better public schools), said they would actually consider relocating to Forsyth County to escape the current lack of choice and quality and to improve their education selection for school-age children.

School Choice Creates Worries of a Different Kind of “Segregation” in the South

Moving along with the natural flow of conversation the moderator asked the group to share their feelings about allowing parents to select the school their children attend without geographical restrictions and additional costs, before fully disclosing the definition of “school choice.” This had already been partially covered in Alpharetta, but participants in both groups overwhelmingly supported allowing parents this option. At the same time, brought up some of the more contentious “political” elements related to school choice, mainly, creating a “new segregation.”

“That should be the formal way you get to do it.” – Wilma, Alpharetta

“If you’ve got these idiot parents that don’t care about their kids, I’m sorry for the kids, but I don’t want my kids around them.” – David, Alpharetta

When asked if it is better to assign children to one public school based solely on where they live or allowing the parent to choose from a variety of schools, discussants proffered answers spanning the spectrum:

“Choice could create competition and that could make all the schools better.”

– Cole, Alpharetta

“Well, that sounds good. But where else are the kids going to go? We only have two schools here. It’s too political and too small to have school choice I think.”

– Tony, Vidalia

“I think that will force some schools to be bad schools. I think kids would get left behind. It would be another segregation. These are the kids with parents that care, and these are the kids with parents that don’t. That school is going to have behavior problems and just be a bad school.” – Levonne, Alpharetta

“You should be able to go where you please. Maybe they’re having problems – them and a student, them and a teacher. No matter the problem, they can’t learn at that school. So, going somewhere else where they can get more attention, that one-on-one thing, I think that would be better.” – Roman, Vidalia

The moderator prompted further discussion by providing a definition of “school choice,” to both Georgia groups detailed verbatim as below.

Moderator: “School choice” is a broad term that can refer to a number of educational opportunities and programs. In this case, I am speaking about allowing parents to use their own tax dollars to send their children to a school other than the public school assigned to them based on where they live. This may be a public school in a different district or a private religious school. Based on this definition, overall do you think school choice is a positive or negative thing? Why?

Interestingly, no participants challenged the source or the accuracy of this definition, or the durability of its premise, but rather tried to sort through the barriers that could prevent them from utilizing such an option.

“I like that. Tax dollars follow the child. That’s good that it doesn’t cost me – or other taxpayers any extra money.” – Vic, Alpharetta

“”You might end up with all the students in one school. Look at the teacher’s perspective, you have 15 students and all of a sudden you have 30. There’s not really a lot of schools to choose from here.” – Robert, Vidalia

“Ha. Yes. Take the cash and decide for yourself.” – Bruce, Alpharetta

Low Awareness of Charter Schools

There was little to no awareness of charter schools in Georgia. Only one person in Vidalia was confident enough to raise their hand when the moderator asked who was familiar with them; however, later on, upon hearing the definition, several men and women realized they had heard advertisements about them on the radio.

Five participants in Alpharetta had heard of charter schools, but only one was comfortable enough to explain them to the group. Many had heard the term before, but had no idea what it actually meant or represented. One parent had his child in a German-focused “charter” school in the state they lived in previously. He told the group of his positive experience there; however, he said he also paid additional money to send his child there.

In both locations, few participants had positive or negative feelings toward charter schools, especially since so few had ever even heard of them. Most people neutral, open to new ideas.

“I don’t really know much about [charter schools.] I always thought they were over-achieving type students.” – David, Alpharetta

Over the years, **the polling company™, inc.** has conducted numerous surveys for the **Center for Education Reform** across the nation and in several states, including Georgia in 2005. In each survey, respondents were asked to characterize charter schools as “public,” “private,” “magnet,” or “religious.” Among adults in Georgia in 2005, 20% knew charters were public institutions. In these 2007 discussions, no respondents in Vidalia knew or even guessed that charters were public, while those in Alpharetta seemed to hedge their bets by characterizing the schools as three or four different types of institutions including public.

After asking about the four elements in the nearby box, two women in Alpharetta said they thought that charter schools were for children with discipline or behavioral problems.

People in Vidalia were very unsure of charter schools and extremely reluctant to vote on the school types presented to the group (public, private, magnet, religious). There could be several reasons for this, but it likely ties back to the small population and worries of being labeled a “troublemaker.”

The moderator then read aloud a definition of “charter schools.” The explanation spawned a discussion of choice and parental rights in regards to education. Although not all the participants were parents of school-aged children—or any children—they all shared one thing: everyone cared about children getting a good education and had a desire to improve the schools. In essence, they all shared a proximity to the situation and an interest in its outcome.

HOW WOULD YOU CLASSIFY CHARTER SCHOOLS? (MULTIPLE RESPONSES ACCEPTED)		
GEORGIA DISCUSSION GROUPS NOVEMBER 2007		
	VIDALIA, GA	ALPHARETTA, GA
PUBLIC	0 OUT OF 10	8 OUT OF 10
PRIVATE	3 OUT OF 10	8 OUT OF 10
MAGNET	5 OUT OF 10	10 OUT OF 10
RELIGIOUS	5 OUT OF 10	10 OUT OF 10

HOW WOULD YOU CLASSIFY CHARTER SCHOOLS? (MULTIPLE RESPONSES ACCEPTED)	
WYOMING DISCUSSION GROUP, SEPTEMBER 2007	
PUBLIC	6 OUT OF 9
PRIVATE	1 OUT OF 9
MAGNET	5 OUT OF 9
RELIGIOUS	2 OUT OF 9

While no one objected to public financing of schools, there was a mutual understanding that the tax dollars should be used efficiently and wisely and at the discretion and consent of the people, thereby making it a truly “public” school.

Moderator: “Charter schools” are public schools formed by communities of parents, teachers, and other concerned individuals and open by choice. They are held accountable for student results but free from most burdensome rules and regulations other public schools must follow except for health, safety, discrimination, and standardized testing requirements. Charter schools are funded by public tax dollars but do not cost taxpayers any additional money over what they already pay. The tax dollars that previously went to the public school the child was attending ‘follow’ the child to the new school. What is your reaction to this definition of charter schools? What is most appealing or surprising? How, if at all, does this change or help form your impression of charter schools? Why?

Responses to the definition of charter schools were sanguine. It even prompted one participant in Vidalia to say, “I wish we had one,” a sentiment echoed in Alpharetta.

“I think that’s good. They’d probably have smaller class sizes.” – Amy, Alpharetta

“But what would be the requirements for the teachers?” – Tony, Vidalia

“I want to know their screening mechanisms for teachers because they have higher standards.” – David, Alpharetta

“The concept of charter schools is doing away with all that government paperwork, right?” – Monty, Vidalia

Probing further into the charter school dialogue, the moderator presented both groups with nine facts about charter schools on an easel and asked them to indicate whether each point made participants feel more positively towards charter schools. Generally, each statement improved their view of charters. One statement, regarding no additional fees to attend charter schools, actually elicited applause in the Alpharetta group.

1. Public Schools are charter schools. There was immediate reaction to this in both groups – head nods, smiles, and people quickly clamored to speak to this. **Vidaliens particularly liked that it meant the institution was open to everyone – regardless of race, income, or location. Alpharettans, however, focused on the fact that it does not cost any additional money – from the parents or the taxpayers.**

*“To me, that means I won’t have to pay as much if I sent [my son] to a private school.”
– David, Alpharetta*

“Anyone can go. Privilege and money isn’t the issue.” – Vic, Alpharetta

2. Charter schools emphasize and often require parental involvement. This was positively received across the board in both groups. There was instant eye contact between parents of school-age children, as if signaling to one another that this should always be the case. In Vidalia, one person said aloud what everyone seemed to be thinking, “*why can’t all schools be that way?*” In Alpharetta, participants referenced an earlier conversation about grading parents *and* students.

“If a parent says I really want my kid to do well, but I don’t want anything to do it with – then guess what? You can’t go to the charter school.” – David, Alpharetta

*“The parents and the teachers can work together to create the curriculum.”
– Monty, Vidalia*

“You should cross out emphasize and just make it say ‘require.’” – Cole, Alpharetta

“The parents should be involved in anything that advances their children and every stage of their lives. You should have a parental right to step in and find out what’s going on with your child.” – Shirley, Vidalia

“Teachers always tell me, ‘I hope I get you as a parent.’” – Levonne, Alpharetta

3. Charter Schools emphasize innovative teach and learning methods. This statement received mixed assessments in both Vidalia and Alpharetta and fell into the “mostly neutral” category. When presented with this statement, the mood in the room shifted from jubilant about charters to suspicious. Few people spoke aloud to this, but the comments below seemed to resonate with the entire group based on head nods, facial expressions and body language.

“I like it at a 50,000 foot level. But when you get down to the front lines, it could be taken advantage of. We didn’t but our son in Georgia Pre-K because the curriculum was too vague. It can’t be like the teacher has autonomy on what they want to teach.” – David, Alpharetta

“Yes, Formalized Innovation.” – Cole, Alpharetta

“If innovative means ‘technology,’ then that’s not fair because not everyone here can afford to have a computer at home.” – Robert, Vidalia

“You can’t just get up there and teach out of the textbook. You have to make it exciting, get everyone involved.” – Amy, Alpharetta

- 4. Charter schools are required to meet the same standardized testing and other achievement requirements as other schools in the district.** This was met with silence akin to a blank stare, as all participants felt this was simply a given. It caught no one off guard, and people had a nonaligned reaction to this since they assumed the same standards would be applied.

“The only thing that I would like to see different is that students going to college are prepared for college. And those that aren’t going to college can start working and are finishing high school with real world skills.” – Monty, Vidalia

“That doesn’t make me feel positive or negative. It just is.” – David, Alpharetta

- 5. Charter schools emphasize accountability – from students, teachers, and parents.** Steering the conversation back toward accountability revived Georgians in both locations, as all participants felt this is a very necessary component to a successful student. Reactions ranged from shrugged shoulders indicating “of course” to sighs of relief from some parents who had spoken earlier about how essential accountability from all parties is needed.

“That should be a no brainer.” – David, Alpharetta

“You can’t rely on teachers to do it all.” – Roman, Vidalia

*“It sounds like [the teachers] will finally get the help they need from parents.”
– Stacie, Vidalia*

- 6. Charter schools do not cost taxpayers any additional money – the tax dollars they already pay simply follow the student from the traditional public school to the charter school.** This elicited clapping and “woo-hoo’s” in Alpharetta, followed by, *“that’s the way it should be.”* Vidaliens did not have quite the same ecstatic reaction, but they were delighted that all children would be permitted to attend the school, regardless of their background or back accounts. The fact that charter schools will not cost any additional money was a big “plus” to the Georgians in these two focus groups.

- 7. In the United States today there are approximately 4,000 charter schools educating about 1.2 million students.**

Again, this brought smiles to many faces, but still fell into the “mostly neutral” category. While it did bring about satisfactory feelings toward charter schools, many wondered why more students aren’t enrolled and why there aren’t more charter schools in the country, but more importantly, near their own towns.

“They should be doing more. I believe smaller classes, more attention and parental involvement will advance children better in the long run.” – Shirley, Vidalia

*"Why aren't all schools like charter schools? It comes back to parental involvement."
– Bruce, Alpharetta*

8. Charter schools are on a performance contract and can be closed down any time for failure to meet the terms of the contract without having to go through lengthy, costly government processes. This was the only statement that gave participants more negative feelings, especially in Vidalia. Discussants in both groups wondered what would happen to the students if a school was shut down in the middle of the year. As you recall in Wyoming, this was one of the most compelling statements for people there, yet in Georgia, it has the opposite effect. Again, this is likely a result of the limited educational options around Vidalia.

"I think regular public schools should have performance contracts." – Vann, Vidalia

"That's going to make them be on their P's and Q's." – Brenda, Alpharetta

"I don't like the fact that they can lose their accreditation. Once a child gets adjusted, they might have readjusted, so they need to do something about that... That could be a downfall for some kids." – Levonne, Alpharetta

"No, you have other students going there. Some students will do well, some won't. You can't close down the whole school because of that." – Roman, Vidalia

"You can't shut down the school in the middle of the year... Yes, what's going to happen to those kids?" – Shirley and Roman finished her thought, Vidalia

*"What happens if you under-perform as an employee? You get let go. I like it."
– David, Alpharetta*

"The only thing I don't like is if you were a teacher, do you want to go work at a school where your job isn't based on you, but on everyone else. Are [charter schools] going to attract the best teachers?" – Pam, Alpharetta

9. One factor that determines teacher pay is their success with students. This would be received positively, if the "nitty gritty" were worked out, such as gifted or disabled students, degrees, years of experience, and the like. Alpharetta participants had previously agreed that this would be beneficial if it was part of an overall "pay matrix."

"There are some students you can't reach. We called him "zero." The boy wasn't dumb, he just didn't want to be in school." – Monty, Vidalia

"It should be one of the factors." – Levonne, Alpharetta

"In this situation, if the parents are involved, I think it will work." – Pam, Alpharetta

"I don't think I'd like that if I was a teacher." – Roman, Vidalia

It's The Law...

The moderator then proceeded to discuss the laws regarding charter schools and participants' familiarity with such legalities. When asked if anyone knew the current laws about creating charter schools in Georgia, it was met with laughter in Georgia and comments such as, "I didn't even know we had charter schools."

After explaining the current laws regarding the formation of charters in Georgia, most of the reactions were negative, sensing that the State had passed an impossible standard.

Moderator: Currently in Georgia charter school applications must be approved by local school boards. The state board of education has the power to grant appeals and become the sponsor of a state charter provided a majority of teachers and of parents from the appealing school support the application and it meets a set of state rules and regulations that the board has set and are not specified in law. Did anyone know this was the law?

Not a single participant in either group was aware this was the law regarding charter schools, but all felt it was unfair.

"[Charter schools] are dead." – Vic, Alpharetta

"That's not fair. The board is going to look at that and say no. Around here it's too small." – Roman, Vidalia

"That's probably what's killing them. The school board is never going to approve that. It's their funds." – Cole, Alpharetta

"That's just setting up charter schools for failure." – Levonne, Alpharetta

"That's a way of keeping charter schools down." – Monty, Vidalia

When asked if other entities (beyond the local or state school board) should have the power to authorize school boards, Georgians agreed that this would be beneficial to the reality of school choice overall. In Vidalia, participants shared their concerns of "school board protectionism" that could hamper parents from successfully pursuing what they believe to be in the best interest of their children.

"Doing it at the university level would help get rid of some of the politics of it. The local board would not be involved, and they have a definitely reason why NOT to do [approve charter schools] it." – Monty, Vidalia

*"It needs to be a group that's not financially impacted [like the school board is.]"
– David, Alpharetta*

The moderator then told participants that seven states allow universities to authorize charter schools and how seven others give the authority to mayors and special commissions. That raised many eyebrows and attracted a fair amount of agreement that

this would be a more suitable plan for Georgia.

*“Where ever you have one group doing it, something will get out of control.”
– Marcie, Alpharetta*

*A group of university chancellors would be good – they know something about
education.” – Vic, Alpharetta*

*“When you only have one person, or one group, or one anything making decisions, it’s
biased.” – Cynthia, Vidalia*

When the moderator told the groups *“the exact amount of funding is not set by the law, in some states it is 95% or 90%, but it is at the discretion of the school district here in Georgia.”* Upon hearing this, there was shocked laughter and participants in Alpharetta were particularly focused on the percentage of tax dollars that would follow a child to a charter school in Georgia.

“If the child is going, all 100% of that money should go with him.” – Brenda, Alpharetta

*“That sets the charter schools up to fail because they won’t have enough resources.” –
Levonne, Alpharetta*

*“You can budget on that percentage; you can’t if you don’t know what’s coming.” –
Bruce, Alpharetta*

*“It’s just as hard to teach them in a charter school as a public school. That’s not fair at
all. If they can’t explain where the rest of the money is going, with all these upper class
crooks around here...” –Shirley, Vidalia*

*“My question is, where is the rest of the money going if it’s not going with the student?”
– Robert, Vidalia*

Evaluation of Media and Materials

In the final section of the discussion, participants were asked to assess several visual elements of a possible outreach and communications campaign, including advertisements, fact sheets, and a logo “close-to-home.”

Keep it Short and Sweet

The first document – featured at right – was not well-received by either group in Georgia. Participants generally criticized it too wordy and too busy. Also, men and women in both groups noted that there was no website listed, only a phone number.

Vidalians wondered *where* they would see something like this; and seemed to get hung up on the best or “proper” places for this piece to be displayed.

“This looks like a tutoring advertisement for Sylvan Learning Center.” – Levonne, Alpharetta

“Those drawings at the bottom make it look like it’s focused on the little kids – maybe kindergarten age. Maybe if there was more eye appeal. A worm coming up out of the apple with glasses and reading a book.” – Tony, Vidalia

“If I saw it as an ad in a magazine, I would turn the page.” – Cynthia, Vidalia

“I’m so accustomed to hearing bad things about charter schools, this doesn’t do a thing for me.” – Pam, Alpharetta

“I would highlight ‘your child deserves a great education.’ People will look at that if you highlight education and child.” –Robert, Vidalia

“Know your rights, Use them should be the focus, they bury it here.” – Amy, Alpharetta

“Simplify the whole thing. Your child deserves a great education. You have rights. Use them. Here’s the website. That’s it.” – Jessica, Vidalia

Your Children Deserve
A Great Education.
Make sure they get it.

You have rights. Use them.

- Do you know if your child is learning at "grade level" or if your schools are working?
- Do you know if your child's school is on the state's "needs improvement" list?
- Is your child's school safe?

If you said "no" to any of those questions, you may be able to get special help, or even to move your child to a new school.

Know your rights. Contact the Parent's Network for Better Education to see if your child's school is doing its job, and to find out what options and choices you have.

Call 1-877-881-9800.

You have rights. Use them.

The Parents Network for Better Education

Your children deserve a
great education.
Make sure they get it.
Call 1-877-881-9800.

The Parents Network for Better Education

Several people wondered aloud *where* they would come across this advertisement. Many said they would not stop to read it if paging through a magazine, and if it was handed to them on the street, it would get a cursory glance at best.

Participants did, however, like the simplicity of the back of this piece, and suggested that that be the focus. Other positive attributes include the headline and its font, as well as the tagline, “You have rights. Use them.”

Why Aren’t they all Charter Schools?



The second piece, featured at left, garnered positive nods and reviews in both groups. Participants got enlivened and more animated when talking about this piece than the previous one. As dialogue raged on, most agreed the standout aspect of this ad was the second line “Failure is

NOT an option.” Interestingly, men in the groups were more verbal about how this statement rings true for the nation’s public school system currently.

However, some people spoke up to offer some areas of improvement, especially on the image:

“The image could give the wrong impression.” – Marcie, Alpharetta

“I like the look on his face. It looks like he has hope. But, it could cause controversy or confusion with just one black child there.” – Shirley, Vidalia

“I like the picture. The way you’re looking down on it, like you’ve got power to do something.” – Vic, Alpharetta

“I like the ‘failure is not an option. He looks like he has a little hope.’” – Cynthia, Vidalia

“I think ‘new public school’ might cause some controversy.” – Roman, Vidalia

“I want a group. I like to see a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The public schools represent all of us, and I’d like to see all of us represented here. I also like ‘failure is not an option.’ Those are strong words and that’s the way it should be.” – Brenda, Alpharetta

“A group of kids [rather than one boy] would appeal to a larger demographic.” – Jessica, Vidalia

Upon seeing this piece, Wilma, a participant in Alpharetta, said, “*Why don’t we just make them all Charter schools?*” This piece “hit home” with the majority of participants in both locations, aside from the image.



1...2...3...4... We Like Charter Schools More. All discussants appreciated the layout and content of this piece, pictured at left. It delivers a wealth of information, while still being concise, to the point, and easy to read. Georgians praised the “numbering system” on the inside of the brochure, saying it was “simple” and “provided everything you need to know.” Alpharettans particularly liked the “what is a charter school” section, while Vidalia residents specially praised the “accountability” information. One man in Alpharetta suggested adding some information about the “cost” of attending charter schools.



“When you first look at it, it captures your eye. Great schools are made not born. You do have to make a great school. It also explains itself – it tells you what a charter school is, and tells you exactly what you’re looking at and what you’re going to be talking about.”
 – Roman, Vidalia

“They’re numbered and characterized. I like that.”
 – Tony, Vidalia

“Add in that these schools don’t cost any more than a public school. If I didn’t already know that, I’d think this was a private school. I like the line about tax dollars following the child. I think that should be in here.” - Bruce, Alpharetta

“You know what this is about right away. It’s very well organized.” – David, Alpharetta

David’s statement was met with agreement and vigorous head nods from the majority of his co-participants. Overall, the brochure was given an ‘A’ by discussants.

Alpharettans once again offered a few tweaks for the brochure. Several women in the group did not like the color scheme. “*It’s too boring,*” said Pam, and Amy added, “*I’d really like to see some more color. Something to catch my eye, make it pop more.*” Specific suggestions included making the school house red, the tree bright green, and adding a few “stick children” playing outside.

Men and Women in Vidalia liked the content of the brochure so much, they discussed places that it could be displayed. They decided that rest areas along the highway (I-16) and the local Chambers of Commerce would be ideal places to spread the

word about charter schools.

That Logo Sure is Peachy Keen.

Participants in both groups had rave reviews for the “My School, My Choice,” logo. Upon seeing this, several “uh-huh’s” and “umm-hmm’s” were heard around the room. The word “my” really resonated with folks, and garnered positive head nods and comments in both groups. All liked the color scheme and especially, the image of the peach.



Vidalians were so favorably disposed to this that they had little to no feedback. Comments like, “It’s great,” and “I love it,” were heard from all sides of the table, along with a comment or two about how good the peach would be with some ice cream.

“It says ‘MY.’ I like that.” – Cynthia, Vidalia

“Just by having ‘my’ it gives parents more power. I like it.” –Roman, Vidalia

“It’s cool.” – Stacie, Vidalia

There were a few ideas to tweak the logo in Alpharetta, but overall, participants would not change anything.

*“I really like the ‘my choice.’ Until today, I had no idea we had a choice.”
– Amy, Alpharetta*

*“What if we changed the wording a bit? Something like, ‘Our schools, My choice,’ or
‘Our schools, our choice.’” – David, Alpharetta*

*“Well, right now, in Forsyth County, you can choose. Need to say something about what
it is... ‘Charter Schools, the NEW public school.’” – Bruce and Brenda supplying a
tagline in Alpharetta*

Can I encourage the Dream?

The final piece, seen at right, received mixed reviews. The moderator read the case study aloud as it was passed around the room. Upon finishing, there were no immediate comments as there had been with previous pieces. However, that could likely be due to the fact that this piece is significantly longer and more “personal” than the others viewed so far.

In Alpharetta, discussants liked the piece, but said it would not be successful as a first introduction to charter schools.

dream interrupted
Broadly Supported Atlanta Charter on Hold

My School My Choice

STRIVE Academy—Edvin Chang

about the school's leadership
A committed educator, Edvin Chang is an exemplary model for how urban education should be led. He began his teaching career through the Teach for America program, spending four years in an urban middle school in Atlanta.

Chang's experiences gave him a firsthand look at the lack of high-performing, college preparatory schools in urban Atlanta, particularly in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Students were dropping out in record numbers, and those who stayed were unprepared for the demands of higher education. As he observed, "The kids need more options, plain and simple. The more kids that have a good education, the better society can be as a whole."

This noble proposition led Chang to consider establishing an independent urban charter school in Atlanta. His ambition and drive prompted Chang's selection as a fellow in Building Excellent Schools (BES), a year-long program for potential urban public school founders. BES provided the leadership training and hands-on experience Chang needed to return to Atlanta and build a base of support.

Gerard Robinson is a STRIVE board member. "I've been advocating for charter schools since 1992 – because they support parental choice and action, and because they focus on quality and outcome," Robinson said. He is also the president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, created in 2000 with a goal to empower families and increase options for African-American children.

Facts About the School
Grades: 6-12
Location: Atlanta
Annual Enrollment Goal: 120 6th-graders

about the school
From these collective experiences, the concept for STRIVE Academy, Atlanta's first public, coeducational school for grades six through 12, was born.

Following his return from BES, Chang began his work building a strong founding board for STRIVE. More than 300 community leaders were interviewed, so Chang could assemble a board with diverse expertise in essential areas like accounting, human resources, law and education. At the

“If I received that brochure a few days ago, and now I was looking for more information, this would be a great second piece to find online.” – David, Alpharetta

“It doesn't really grab your attention, but if you were already looking for Charter School information, then it would. This is not a good stand alone piece.” – Vic, Alpharetta

Also, Alpharetta dwellers said they would like to see a call to action at the bottom. If this was the first they learn of charter schools, there is no contact information or website.

In Vidalia, participants also had some praise, but wondered where they would come across it – it's too long for a magazine, too long for a handout, they claimed.

“I'd like to see the curriculum highlighted more. That's all good stuff he wants to do, and I think that should stand out somehow.” – Roman, Vidalia

“I wish him good luck.” –Monty, Vidalia

Vidaliens agreed with this – the case study would improve if certain aspects were highlighted, such as bolding key words and phrases throughout the document so one could skim it quickly and still understand the overall purpose.

After the Alpharetta group ended, Pam asked the moderator if there was anyway to voice her support for Mr. Chang and his charter school dreams. *“I think it's really important what he's doing. He might just need some more encouragement to keep at it.”*

V. Conclusions & Strategic Recommendations

Emphasize Parental Involvement to Georgians: The most appealing aspect of charter schools to many was the requirement of parental involvement and accountability. **Stress results:** for example, parents that remain involved with their child’s education create better environments for lifelong learning. According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*, “moms and dads who hover over children in college and swoop into their academic affairs appear to be doing plenty of good.”² This would ring true to the men and women who participated in the focus groups in Georgia; they were critical of a lack of parental involvement and clearheaded in the nexus they perceive between involved parents and successful students.

Additionally, parents voiced concern regarding their children’s curriculum. They desire a more accessible avenue to have input into the schools so kids are graduating with real world, marketable skills. Provide basic information that the “charter” of charters is precisely that: to allow parents a louder voice and a more noticeable presence in their children’s education.

Explain the Legislative Fix that is Needed and the Public Outcry that Would Move it Along: Peach State dwellers want to know why the legislature has made forming a charter so prohibitive and why there are not more of them in more places across the state. Tell them why – and give them action items to make a difference. Vidaliens, especially, left the focus group charged and hoping for change; to the point where they cleaned the moderator out of 40 business cards in case they had follow up questions. Georgians indicated that allowing third-party authorizers—such as commissioners, mayors, and people in academia— is the only way to expand the reach of charters in Georgia.

Help Parents Reclaim The Local School Boards: People in both groups intuited that the school boards have too much power and are too far removed from the day-to-day operations of the schools and the needs of the students. Leveraging these sentiments and providing additional facts about the politicization and non-responsiveness of school boards is an easy way to *engage and enrage* parents and, subsequently, gain the attention of lawmakers. It is, however, important to be cautious in small areas, such as Vidalia, to not get locals branded as “troublemakers.” The school boards in these areas are highly charged political entities, and small towns are all about “who you know.”

Keep it Simple in Georgia: In the analysis of the media pieces participants expressed a preference for messages that were short and concise, and that contained a clear call to action. Georgians “clicked” with the peach logo and color scheme – it hit home as a “localized” message. Keeping with this theme will likely help messages and advertisements resonate with more folks who call Georgia home.

² “New Study Gives Hovering College Parents Extra Credit,” by Jay Mathews. *The Washington Post*. 5 November 5, 2007; Page A01