

PARENT POWER FOR CALIFORNIA

DINNER AND WORKSHOP FOR CHARTER SCHOOL PARENTS

Does Your Child or Someone You Care About Attend a Charter School?
Come Learn What Makes Your School So Special
Learn How to Advocate For Your Child's Education
And How You Can Protect Your Choice and Your Child's Education

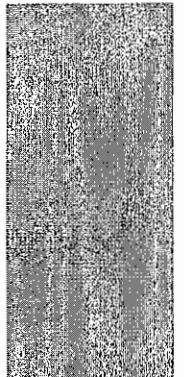
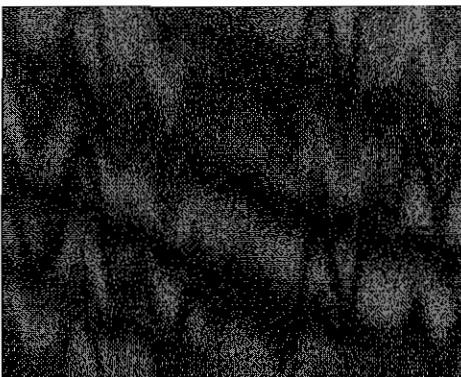
Join Us at Oakland City Hall
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2004
6:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Hearing Room 3
City Hall
1 Frank Ogawa Plaza
Oakland CA 94612

Buffet Dinner Served
Babysitting or Child Care available
PLUS A CHANCE TO WIN PRIZES

Presented by:
Jeanne Allen, President
Center for Education Reform
In Partnership with the
California Charter Schools Association

For More information call: (866) 411 2272



Subject: Tips for getting parents to the meeting

Date: Tuesday, February 3, 2004 4:29 PM

From: Kara Hornung <[REDACTED]>

To: Gary Larson <[REDACTED]>, <[REDACTED]>, <[REDACTED]>

Cc: Anna Varghese <[REDACTED]>

Good afternoon Californians,

Below are some points I drew up for you to use as a checklist for outreaching tools. You will really need to work with the schools and make them a partner in this effort to cut costs, ensure good turnout, and to strengthen your relationship with the schools. I have also attached a draft letter for the school director's to send out along with the flyer. Feel free to edit it, but you want to be sure that it is kept simple. If director's need to know more about Jeanne or the Center, we can send them information.

Thanks for pulling this together.

Let me know if you have additional questions or suggestions.

Best,

Kara

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Kara Hornung
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Outreach Checklist for Parent Training

1. Most importantly, events must offer food. Parents are not going to come if the message is complicated. They will come with the incentive that there is a FREE meal, and that it will be fun.

2. Raffles always draw attention and use examples of what will be raffled off on the flyer, and the actual prizes do not need to have a high cash value. (save the raffles for the end, it will keep them in their seats)

- Gap gift certificates
- School supplies
- Target, or Walmart gift certificates
- Area grocery store certificates
- Etc.

3. A letter from the schools accompanying the flyer will gain the parents trust, and affirm the quality of the meeting.

4. the flyer needs to be translated into Spanish.

5. two days before the meeting a reminder needs to go out, either with phone calls, or another flyer. The schools are not going to give up their phone lists, but they may have a parent phone tree they can put to use. Or offer to go to the schools and make some calls

yourself.

6. A translator will be needed at all events. The Spanish speaking population is completely untapped because of the language barrier, and they have a lot to offer and can become a huge force. Ask the schools if they can suggest a translator, Gary this might be better coming from you as you have a good relationship with the leaders, they may ask that their teacher/translator get a stipend.

7. The districts or county governments have translating headsets available for FREE. It is a public meeting. Check with the schools as they may have used this service before. When distributing headsets, you need to ask that the parents give you something as collateral, i.e. driver's license, that will be returned when they return the headsets.

8. multiple schools need to be invited.

9. Babysitting services need to be provided. Ask the schools if they have potential volunteers, teachers/ maybe some high school kids. Make sure they get food (separate from adults maybe just pizza,) and have movies, crayons and games organized to keep them content without mom and dad around.

10. Sign-in sheets for parents when they arrive. In English and Spanish. The schools won't give you names, but they can give them to you. Later when CCSA needs them, you can call upon them to be your grassroots force.

California Parent Training

Tools for Outreaching to Parents

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THE Center for Education Reform

10th anniversary

The Parent Information Program

Helping Charter School Parents Get The Power They Need

February 27-28

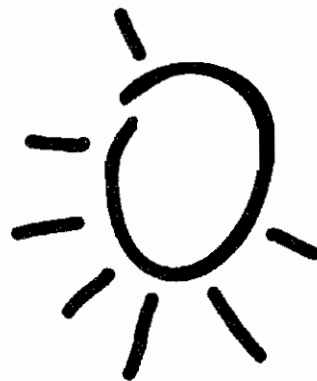
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in cooperation with

The California Charter Schools Association



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10th anniversary

Part I:

An Introduction to Parents About Charter Schools

Charter schools are still very new. They give choices to parents who have previously had no option but to send their child to the public school that the district they live in requires. In California, more than 170,000 children are in charter schools, and there are roughly 221,000 parents making that choice. Nationally, charters serve three-quarters of a million children and more than a million parents.

But getting into a charter school does not mean your job is over. To keep your charter school strong and safe requires you be involved in the process that created your school – the political process. Parents understand that to make and retain good programs, they have to make their support for those programs known. Charter schools are one of those programs, and this parent information program has been created with you in mind – to help you, the parent, be a bigger part of your child's education and a strong advocate for their school.

- Charter schools are independent public schools that must perform well and attract parents to stay in business.
- Charters give parents and teachers the opportunity to roll back regulations, roll up their sleeves, and create and operate schools that they want to teach in and send their children to.
- A charter school must practice open admission policies, meet health and safety standards, and comply with civil rights laws, but it is not bound to state education regulations about curriculum, personnel, scheduling and financial administration.
- A charter school is accountable. Its students must show satisfactory achievement, equal to or better than the state average.
- Charters often serve children that have been unsuccessful. Some are developed to help dropouts to come back to school, and others serve only disadvantaged youth.

- Charters are typically given five years to prove themselves, but their charters can be pulled back at any time by a school board if it does something wrong or is not performing as promised.
- Charters provide freedom for educators, and the people who start the school to use curricula or programs or set up the school day in ways that are not done by the traditional school. The freedom allows schools to address the special needs of their children directly.

That's why most parents think charter schools are better than traditional public schools.

What makes a charter school different?



Independence: Charter schools are public schools but operate independently of the school district. In California, your school district is responsible for the school but does not run it. Your charter school has its own school board, and your principal and staff are responsible for what happens day in and day out.

Freedom: Charter schools are free from the bureaucracy and regulations found in most other public schools. Instead of jumping through hoops and dealing with endless paperwork, school staff can focus on setting and reaching goals.

Some programs focus on the basics — reading, writing and the traditional school subjects that some children struggle with. Other schools have special arts or music programs. Some charters look just like other public schools. There also are dropout prevention programs, adult education programs, charters that serve Head Start and day care needs, and charters that work with children who want to go to college.

Parent choice: You choose charter schools, which makes the schools accountable to you, the parents. Parents even help organize charter schools and have a lot to say about what they'd like to see done at their charter school.

Teacher choice: Teachers choose charter schools, too. In most public schools, teachers do not have very many choices about their work, what they contribute to a school or even their hours. In a charter school, the teachers are in control.

Educational quality: The primary reason for charter schools is to make sure every child has access to a quality education. With the freedom and choice to do so, charters set higher standards and must meet them to stay in business. Most other public schools stay in business no matter how poorly they perform. Not so with charter schools. They are your ticket to higher-quality schools.

Focus on the kids: Perhaps most important, a charter school is set up around the needs of children, not around the needs of adults. The focus should always be on the kids, and programs should be designed to help children succeed, no matter what it takes.



How do charters get started?

The politicians: The law creating charter schools in California came from Sacramento. There, the legislators and the governor in 1992 heard from the people that they wanted more choice and more control over their schools. So politicians are important, not only because they did this but also because they can undo it. We will discuss that more later in the session.

The law: California's charter law says that groups of parents, teachers and community leaders can start charter schools. They must write a proposal that makes clear what they want to achieve — their goals — and how they will get there. They must know what it takes to run a business, teach children, train staff and follow state guidelines. The law says that all charter schools must abide by health, safety and anti-discrimination laws. It also must provide a minimum number of school days in a year. This proposal must then be approved by a school board for the school to open and begin receiving money from the state. If the proposal is turned down, the organizers can appeal to the county board of education and then the state board of education. The state board is made up of people appointed by the governor who can and do make rules changing how charters operate or get started.

The founders: The founders are people just like you, who want a better school for their children and the freedom to pursue it. Often the founder of a charter becomes its principal, but not always. But whatever the founder ends up doing, it's important to know why they did what they did.

The board: Every charter school is required by law to have a board of directors that is ultimately responsible for what the school does. Legally, the board oversees the operations of the school and makes sure it is financially sound and follows the law. But the board lets the principal and staff do the day-to-day work and help create the vision for how the school should operate.

The community: No school can be successful without an active community. That is, there are dozens of groups and businesses in every community that help make a school work well. Some provide funding; some provide moral support. Banks like Wells Fargo operate in many places and are a vital part of the communities they serve. They have helped your school. The Boys and Girls Clubs serve your community and frequently help local charter schools. Churches, synagogues, mosques — these religious institutions supply shelter, support for parents and many other needed services. Recognize the contributions of the organizations around you, and they'll always be willing to serve.

The Politics of Charter Schools



Politics are everywhere, and especially in education. While charters are a great thing, there are different sides. You need to know the sides to be well informed and be able to educate others you know and those who can help your school.

Who likes it: Parents love charter schools. So do teachers. Civic leaders appreciate the diversity of schooling that charters offer. Families without children like the idea that charters are accountable for the money they spend.

Who doesn't: There are many groups that don't like charters, and it's important for you to be aware of who they are and why they feel this way. The leaders of the teachers' unions often have problems with most charter schools. Some school board members in many cities believe that charters are not a good idea. Even some groups that devote themselves to the cause of civil rights are not sure about charters.

Why are some people opposed to charters?

More often than not, people dislike charters because of politics more than because of the quality of education they offer. Many people benefit from the current system of public schools. They are concerned that they will lose their jobs if charters succeed. Others are concerned that if they don't control charter schools, they will fail. This is one of the many myths that exist.

Some people are confused about charter schools, so you may hear talk against them. One parent in a local city was talking to friends who said to her that her charter school's programs were not as good as those in a public school. That's something the friend heard from her school, where some of the staff thought the charter was making them look bad.

Some school officials tell parents that charters take away money from other schools. That's not true. Every child in California is guaranteed a free and equal public education. Charters are public schools, and resources are supposed to be to educate children wherever they go.

Some people say that charter schools only take the best and brightest. But most charter schools are doing the opposite — helping those who did not succeed in regular public schools. In fact, charters are more diverse than most schools.

In many of your own communities, people may tell you that you should think twice about sending your child to a charter school. They may say that they heard your school is doing poorly or is not accountable or doesn't have enough money.

Often they heard this from someone who would like the charter to fail. That's why it's important for you to know what makes a good school and to know for yourself whether your choice is a good one.

About the waiting lists – Why you should care

Maybe you don't have a child in a charter school yet, or your friends are trying to get in. Most charter schools are over-full. So they start waiting lists. Charter schools are usually smaller than most traditional public schools, and there are only a few in each neighborhood. People choose charter schools, and often more people want their children to attend than the school has room for, particularly after the school has been open a few years.

There are different reasons for wanting to be in a charter school.

- Some like the smaller size.
- Others worry about how their child is performing in a traditional public school. Some people think charter schools are safer or like the programs they offer.
- Many parents do not feel their children are challenged enough in traditional public schools.
- Parents know more about education than some believe. Parents know their children should have a better education.

Parents need to help other parents: Waiting lists often mean that charter schools in your area are doing a much better job than the local, traditional public schools. More people want to be there. These parents might be your cousins, your neighbors or friends. We should care about whether they have choices because good schools help all of our kids and help society as a whole.

You may have your children in a good charter school, and you have to work to keep them there. But anything you do to convince people to support charter schools will help parents who are right now on a waiting list.

Charters help build strong communities: Schools have everything to do with strong communities. Schools build strong communities where people care about each other and about how their neighborhood looks. Strong communities attract businesses, which attract jobs, which benefit everyone.

New neighborhood schools: Charter schools are smaller, on average, than most traditional public schools. The school your child was assigned to is a longer distance from your home than the schools were when we were young. Because charter schools are more like neighborhood schools, they help unite people over one common cause. Because they are so successful in many cities, they make other schools work harder.

Safe schools: When people take pride in their community, they work hard to keep it safe and to keep people there. There's a charter school in San Fernando called Vaughn Next Century Learning Center that has transformed its neighborhood. Residents and school leaders have pushed out drug dealers and attracted new business. The public can use the library and the health clinic, and people are knitting together a new community.



The Fight for Charter Schools

Nothing is without its share of struggles: Charter schools have a harder time than most schools trying to keep up with the demands of goals, their students, their teachers, and the politicians. Money is often short, facilities are hard to find (or build!) and transportation can be difficult. There aren't as many administrators in charter schools as in public schools so the work load is often very heavy dealing with paperwork, money issues, and more.

How some people are trying to weaken charters: Struggles come from the outside, too. There are many people who do not support charters that actually work to make things difficult. For example, some want to impose more regulations. That means that the charter staff would have to fill out more paperwork, which takes time away from focusing on teaching children. Others would like the school board to have more control, or the state to have more control. Some would even like to take away money (when in reality, there should be more money for successful schools!)

Why you should worry: You should be concerned because if anyone succeeds in making the charter school law different than it is now, in a way that hurts your school, it will be harder for the school leaders to do their job. It may be that they cannot serve as many children, or they have to cut programs or that they have to spend more time on less important things. You need to know what's happening.

Who opposes charters: Some of the same people and groups who once fought for many good programs to help people live better are now working against charter schools. The California Teacher's Union has traditional public school teachers – and some charter teachers – who are members. They take hundreds from their paychecks and have worked against charter school laws many times. School boards often oppose charters, too, claiming that charters take their money. They also believe many parents cannot make good choices.


Who defends charters: Lots of individual people and groups are working hard to protect and defend the freedom and independence charters have today. They are doing things like:

- Talking to legislators
- Teaching the newspapers and television reporters what makes charters good
- Talking to business people and other community leaders so that they will support the idea
- Trying to put out information to educate people about what charters need the most


BUT THEY NEED YOUR HELP!

Taking it to the streets: What you can do to help Charter Schools


Decide to Get Involved Politically: Education is a political issue. And a choice of schools is political, too. But don't be afraid of the word *political*. *Political* is a fancy word for *building relationships*.




Parents are so important to the people who make decisions in your state. Why do people running for the legislature or Mayor or school board run ads? They do it because they want you to know them, and they want your vote and the vote of people you talk to. If they want your vote, then they have to care about what you want. You can tell people what you want. Not just the politicians, but the people all around you. And you can tell your school leaders you want to help if they need it.



Change your child's future: If you want charters to be around for future generations then you have to get involved now. You have to want to be more involved to have a real impact on your child's schooling, now and in the future. Start by learning how to make the case for charter schools. If your child is on a waiting list and you know the value of having more school options, your job is especially important.



Tell your story: Oftentimes, getting people to act on good policies requires you to convince them what you say is right. Stories work better than anything else in helping get people to understand your concerns. What is your story? In other words, tell why you made the choice. Did you think your child could do better in a charter school? Did she have a problem in her regular school? Have you had problems getting teachers or staff to listen to you? Perhaps the school is too far from your home and work. Perhaps you think the education there is not very good. You have to tell your story — why you want a choice — to get people to listen and do the right thing.



Being aware of what's happening is half the battle. The other half is easy to learn, but will take a little more time. You may have to rely on other parents to tell you when to act and what you need to know. Or you can be active and be a leader. Anyone can with a little information and a little training. We can help you do that.

You might say, why would I want to do more than I'm doing now? I'm already burdened, I already have a job, a family, and other issues to deal with. Why me? "Why me?" is a great question. Because if not you, who? If you like your charter school and your choice, you can do a lot to make sure it's there for you and for your friends and family who need it later.

Information is Power: Too often, people overlook the complexity of education, from who's in control to what's actually happening in the schools. No matter what you are trying to do, you must be an informed parent about education in general and your school in particular. Even if your child's schooling is satisfactory and you are not looking for other options, a working knowledge of your schools may come in handy should you suddenly face the decision about whether to place your child in a new school. You also will be better prepared to evaluate issues that regularly are brought to the community for consideration, such as tax changes, or new educational programs.


10th anniversary

Part II: Becoming an Activist

So you want to keep your charter school?

You can help the schools grow by becoming more active, learning who to talk to and what to say, and keeping pressure on the system to respond to your demands.

Becoming an activist is easy. It's all about communication. Helping your school grow and prosper is all about making your views known – what you think is important, and why the choice you made is important. You need to tell people about that in your work, your community and more. Just as important, you need to help when you are called. There are many ways to help:

- join or help organize a parent coalition to expand your school
- get new charters started
- attend meetings to express your support for charter schools
- make phone calls or write letters to your representatives
- talking to friends and neighbors

Why Parents are the key? Parents are everything! That includes making sure your school continues to stay healthy and grow, if that's what's needed.

You are important because you have been guaranteed by the state that your child will have a free, public education that provides him or her with everything needed to be successful later. You've chosen a school other than the one the city assigned you to based on where you live. That means you've made a choice, and your choice is important. Other people have to know that you value your choice, or they won't work to help you keep it.

Can one person really make a difference?

Yes! That one person is you. Communicate the same message over and over to your legislators, and they will listen. Many individuals working together — in a group or network — and telling important stories can make something happen.

But there's one more thing you need to know: You must vote if you are qualified to vote, and you must register to do so if you are not already.

Voting is the most powerful thing you can do to help your community. And when it comes to charter schools, every vote counts.

The governor can make a huge difference, too. By telling your governor what you think about charter schools and by telling your story, you add to the growing list of voters who have put him on notice that you will be watching what he does.

You need to be taken seriously, and that means making your vote a very real thing for those in a position to serve you — your lawmakers.

An Introduction to Sacramento: Why your state capitol needs to be more than a name to you

There are legislators in your state, and every one of them has a tremendous amount of power to affect what happens to your schools. You need to know who your legislators are.

There is an assemblyman or assemblywoman and a state senator. But you might live in a different district from the school your child attends, so you may have to deal with more than one legislator.

Legislators are people just like you. Some of them own businesses, are attorneys or work in a garage. Some are parents, some are educators and some are career politicians. You have to communicate with them to build a relationship. And relationships are important in getting them to understand the importance of your issue: preserving and growing charter schools.

Communicating with your representatives

The most effective way to influence the legislative process is to get constituents to talk to their representatives, especially members of key committees deciding legislation.

Find legislators who will champion your cause with their colleagues. Once they are committed, a few determined legislators will advance your position much further than a whole group of half-hearted supporters and will be more likely to take advantage of your group's resources and keep you informed on developments.

Try to set up a personal meeting with your legislators. Here are some tips for making that happen and for getting the most out of the meeting.

- Call in advance for an appointment, and explain your purpose and the group you represent. It is easier for the staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you want to discuss.
- Be on time or a few minutes early. Since legislators have busy schedules, be prepared for delays and interruptions — they're inevitable.
- Plan on getting your message across in five to 10 minutes. Focus on the issue and be ready to answer any questions. Bring information and materials to the meeting to support your position.
- Be political: Legislators want to represent the best interests of their district or state. Show how your request will benefit the legislator's constituency. Offer the assistance of your group, and if appropriate, ask for a commitment from the legislator on her position.
- Follow up your meeting or phone call with a thank-you note and any requested information or updates.

Don't overlook the value of the legislator's staff. Often these folks focus on a particular area and are trusted advisers to their legislator. Keep them informed and contact them for updates on issues and bills.

You may want to organize a letter-writing campaign by your school's parent group to state legislators when education bills come up for debate or vote. Provide your coalition members with a letter covering all the points you want to make, but let them personalize the letters they send out. Each letter should be addressed to the appropriate legislator; postcards and form letters are less effective. And remember, do not send photocopies.

Format for letters: State your purpose in the first paragraph. For specific legislation, refer to the bill by title and number. Limit your letter to one topic and one page. Clearly state what action you want your legislator to take.

Although written correspondence and face-to-face contact are most effective, time does not always permit this. If you are not able to schedule a meeting, call your legislator's office or send a fax or an e-mail.

Let's learn from one example of this case study of New Jersey parents:

One day makes a difference

Legislators told New Jersey public school officials that charter school money should be cut. The charter schools serve many, many minority and poor children in cities like Newark, Trenton and Paterson. These parents were not close to their legislators and were unsure about what they could do to fight the budget cuts. They went to a parent training session like this one and learned how to talk to legislators. Then, when they got a phone call asking them to go to the Capitol where the legislators were, they boarded buses and went.

More than 600 parents showed up in Trenton one day, along with many charter school students. They packed a hearing room where legislators were listening to different opinions about charter schools. The parents and charter school leaders let the students talk. Then the parents went around to different offices where the people that represent them work.

After that visit, the Legislature voted and did not cut the budget for New Jersey charter schools.

Several months later, however, it all started again. This time, parents did not know it was happening, and there was no time to pull together. The legislators almost succeeded in cutting funding for charter schools.

The third time they may succeed. Don't let this happen to you!

Building Local Relationships

There are many people in your city or larger community who can also influence the creation and success of charter schools. You need to learn to build relationships with people in your community who can help you get choices.

Locally, that means the mayor, city council members or supervisors, as they are sometimes called, and school board members.

Find out who the mayor is if you don't already know. Find out about the school board members.

Tell them who you are and how you want them to vote. In return for your vote, they will want a good relationship with you. And if you can tell them what you'll do for them when they need it, they'll really listen to you.

For example, maybe you can invite the legislator or school board member to your house to meet your family. A letter from your child with a picture will help them show other people that they like children. Offering them opportunities to speak at groups that you belong to, like your church, and offering to help them with their mailings or getting to know your friends will solidify a relationship. Then, they'll want to do things to help you when the time comes.

Sometimes politicians have to be reminded of how they got there. You're the one to do it. Parents are the most important advocates a legislator or other leaders can have. Don't forget that when you call or speak to them.

Remember:

- Don't underestimate the power of simple grassroots activism.
- Set a goal to speak to at least one new person each day about your efforts.
- Require others you are working with to do so as well.
- Send letters of support and encouragement to legislators and leaders who take strong positions and positive action toward education reform.
- Don't give up on legislators and others who are not so supportive; make an effort to provide them with information and follow up with personal, amicable contact.
- Always strive to inform your community. Hold town meetings to make sure vital issues get discussed publicly and fairly or write thoughtful letters to the editor.
- Be positive! Always underscore your commitment to your school and children.



Part III:

How to Make Good Choices and Good Schools

Helping your Charter Succeed: Even if you already have it, your job isn't over. If you like your charter school, you have to do and know a few simple things to keep it a high quality choice for your and other children to come.

Choosing a school

What's important to know about the school you select? There are several things, some obvious and some not so obvious. Be a choosy customer — and use our checklist to help you. A little later in this handout, you'll learn some of the most important questions to ask. Remember, it's never too late to learn what a school can and should be doing for your child every day.

High standards

Every school should have high standards and should work to make sure your child reaches the highest levels of achievement. It might come as a surprise to some people, but many schools — here and around the country — do not set high standards for all children.

Knowing that all children can learn is important. And knowing that all parents matter is important, too. Unfortunately, many schools excuse the failure of children by saying it is because they are poor or don't speak English well or that they have families who do not value education.

These excuses have nothing to do with whether your child can succeed. Children succeed when they are held to high standards. This is something you need to constantly remind schools.

There are other ways to know if your charter is a success. First several state and national groups give awards to schools and to children. For example, a civic group may recognize the accomplishments of a student who has excelled. Time Magazine recognized The Accelerated School in Los Angeles as elementary school of the year a few years ago. Individual students may be the top of their class, or make the most progress, or receive recognition in art or music.

Get treated like a Queen

Many parents worry that if they ask too many questions, the school will not treat their child well. But the reality is that choosy parents — parents who ask lots of questions in a direct but pleasant way — get what they need for their child much more than those who remain quiet.

To be treated like a parent in charge, you must know what's going on and offer your opinions. Put the school on notice that you're watching. Tell them when you think they've done well and when you think things have gone wrong.

You CAN make a difference

Help change the attitude and culture of a school by expecting it to hold your child to high standards. Make sure teachers work with him to improve his learning. Help your school recognize where they may have missed the brilliance in every child. By uniting with other parents, you make your message even more powerful.

The law requires that schools succeed. If they don't, parents can send their children to another school. Remind your schools that the money they receive is to educate, not to fail. It's a harsh message, but one that schools need to hear.

Getting and using information

Start by finding out some basic information. What is the goal or mission of the school? What's different about this school? What happens when children fail?

How do they get parents to contribute to the process?

Find out if parents are involved and are children engaged? If you go to a school at any time during the day, the students should be involved in their class or program. Parents might be there more often than not. Parents and students show up at meetings when they are asked to attend. Volunteers are not hard to come by.

Does it seek to make every child proficient in every subject? If so, how?

Did your child do better than any other year? Was he happier than you've seen him? What did your daughter do that was a milestone this year? Maybe she learned to read a chapter book, or complete a very difficult project. Give credit where credit is due when your child achieves. The school probably played a big role.

Quality Check

- ✓ **Does your school test, and if so, how does it use the results?**
How much are you told about how your child performs?
- ✓ **Is there immediate action to correct problems your child may be having?** How can you participate in doing that?
- ✓ **What does the state say about your school?** How does it stack up against other schools? If it's not where it needs to be, what is the action plan to improve it?
- ✓ **How are teachers hired, evaluated and rewarded for a job well done?** Do the math teachers know math? Are the science teachers smart about science? Does the reading teacher use the program that's best for your child? Ask these questions, and get some answers.
- ✓ **Parent involvement:** It's more than just joining a group. Parent involvement is knowing where your child is in every subject. How is she doing, and what's the plan to help her? If you have an opinion about how something should be, does the staff listen? Do they have time to talk to you about your concerns?
- ✓ **Size:** Is your school small enough that your child can get to know all of the teachers and reach different classrooms or facilities without walking a mile? How big is too big?
- ✓ **Learning styles:** Your child may need more visual tools or hands-on help. Does the teacher know what style of learner your child is?
- ✓ **Finally, what motivates your child?** Help teachers know what it is that your child responds to best, and they'll do a better job. Communicate with the teachers and the staff.

No Child Left Behind

It's a simple premise: Children should be educated in the schools that were set up to serve them. The federal government has told states that they must educate children or give families new tools to seek their own best education — which may be a traditional public school or a charter school.

One of those tools is the ability to choose another public school. Unfortunately, there often are not enough good public schools in a neighborhood to choose from. Another problem is that school districts are not giving parents a wide variety of choices. That's another reason that independent public schools — like charters — are important.

Is your school on the failing schools list? If so, what choices do you have? If few choices are available, it may be time to make some noise.

Even if your child's school is not considering failing, it doesn't mean that everything is good. You need to know about the quality of your school overall. Do its standards stack up to what the state expects of students? California has some very good standards. Make sure your school is teaching students what the standards expect.

You need to ask every teacher every year: What is expected of my child this year, in this grade? If you know that in the beginning, you'll be able to help your student throughout the year.

How about a child's individual work? A real parent in charge knows how much individual student work — from essays to individual tests to class participation — counts in a course or in a grade. If the teacher does not know, ask the principal. Your child's classroom teacher should be able to tell you what counts with your child.

A good school has a consistent, well-stated set of standards that include many hours spent on the basics like reading and math. Without these essentials, students won't succeed in college or in life.

Size also matters. Big schools are not good for children or even young adults. Schools with more than 1,000 students in the same buildings with the same administrators doom many students to failure. Small schools work better for children, which is another reason to support charter schools.

Learning styles: Some children listen well, and others need something in front of them to understand what you're saying. Some children also need to touch and experience something before they "get it." It's important for all educators to look for signs of how the students in their class respond to the teacher. But every parent will tell you the same thing — parents usually are the ones who have to tell the teacher.

Teachers appreciate hearing things that will help them help the students. Try talking to the teacher and finding out if they've looked for clues about how your child learns best.

What else motivates your child? Some children learn better if they have frequent breaks and lots of physical exercise. That means you have to find out how often there are breaks during the day. Some children need incentives, like reaching a certain goal day by day. You know best what motivates your child; make a point of sharing it with the teacher.

Teacher quality is one of the most important factors that influences learning. Teacher quality is judged by whether the teacher really knows his subject and whether she has accomplished teaching it to children. Ask how teachers are hired, evaluated and rewarded. It is often the case that children in the poorer areas have lower-quality teachers. If that is the case in your school, you need to do something about it.

Active parents make good schools

Choosing a school doesn't guarantee success. Parents are more valued in schools of choice, but there's still a need to be involved. Ask the kinds of questions and get the knowledge that we encouraged earlier.

In fact, if you reach your goal of helping your child by getting him into a charter school, the best thing you can do for that school is to help it succeed.

Charter schools need greater support networks than traditional public schools because there are a lot of special interest groups that are trying to reduce the number of charters. You can help your school and your child by protecting what is good. By making your school good, you're well on your way to ensuring its long-term success.

By being an Active Parent, you can make schools and lives better, too

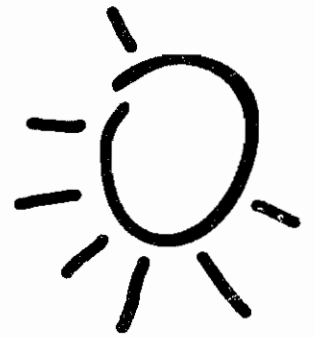
You can make a difference every day: Now that you've learned vital information about charter schools, how your school runs, the value of parent involvement at the school and the value of communicating with people who can make a difference, you are ready to be a parent in charge.

Ask questions, stay informed and be ready to help when you are called upon by your charter school or your parent representative. That's what it means to be a parent in charge.

The benefits are simple: a successful charter school that educates your child well and listens to your concerns, a more productive life for your child, a better educated community, and less violence and safer streets, among many others.

But you don't want to do it alone. You need to recruit your friends, stay in touch with other parents in charge and work to make sure people around you know what's important to you.

Recruiting starts with you ... and the more people you recruit, the more people will listen.



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