

BECOMING A PARENT WITH A CHOICE

A Grassroots Informational and Leadership Development Program

GETTING INFORMED

Information is power. As with any business or private venture, information is critical to the success of any reform effort. Too often people overlook the complexity of education, from who's in control to what's actually happening in the schools. It is imperative to have information well in hand as you begin to make decisions about how and where to approach reform.

Whether you're planning to crusade for change, or are simply taking on the important work of helping your child through school, you must be an informed parent about education in general and your school in particular. Even if you have no choices to make right now and your child's schooling is satisfactory, a working knowledge of your schools may come in handy should you suddenly face the decision whether to place your child in one particular program or pull her from another. You will also be better prepared to evaluate issues that are regularly brought to the community for consideration, such as tax changes, conversions to charter schools and the election of education officials.

As you become involved with your school, you will find that those already in the education loop have the advantages on their side – whether they're working for change or against it. These people have access to facts and figures to support their position, and they have the respect, deservedly so, of the community's leaders. Take advantage of their resources to learn more about how your schools operate – use their expertise and access to get the information you need. As you begin to get a larger, clearer picture of how things work, use your own detective work to fill in the gaps. You will probably find that some of those education insiders will soon turn to you for the inside scoop on the issues.

BECOMING AN EMPOWERED PARENT

Parents are everything: You need to see yourself not as “just a parent” but as so someone who really can make your school successful. 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 they need to be successful later. You’ve chosen a school other than the one which the city assigned you to because of 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.

You have little time and limited money, so what can you do? You can do a lot even if you’re very busy with other things. Here are some important tools to start thinking about:

- Writing Letters to legislators, to newspapers
- Making Phone Calls
- Attending Meetings
- Joining a Parent Coalition
- Talking to friends and neighbors

Let’s learn from one example of this Case Study of New Jersey parents:

ONE DAY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Legislators in New Jersey were told that charter school money should be cut. They were told this by some other public school officials, who run regular public schools. The charter school service many, many minority children and poor children in cities like Newark, Trenton and Patterson, New Jersey. These parents were not close to their legislators, and were unsure what they could do to fight the budget cuts. They went to a parent training session (like the one that gave you this material!) and learned about 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, NJ one day 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. Parents did not know it was happening, and they didn't know it could happen again. There was no time to pull them together. The legislators almost succeeded in cutting charters again.

The third time they may succeed.

Don't let this happen to you!

YOUR FAMILY'S HEALTH, SAFETY AND PROSPERITY

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 benefits everyone.

So you want to have a choice? The best part about this is you can help! It's all about communication. Helping your school grow and prosper, and stay alive is all about making your views known. What you think is important, and 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:

- Joining or helping to organize a parent coalition
- Attending Meetings
- Making phone calls
- Writing Letters

Additional tools are available that help you do just that.

It's important for you to know what makes a good school, and to know for yourself whether your choice is a good one.

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 correction 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 guys 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 are they doing and what's the plan to make them better? If you have an opinion about how something should be, does the staff listen? Is there always room 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 try to know what style of learner your child is?
- ✓ **Finally, what motivates your child?** Help teachers know what it is that your child respond to best, and they'll be able to do a better job. Communicate with the teachers and the staff.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

You're a Parent for Choice: You know that parents matter. And you now know you can make a difference in how your child is educated. Most importantly you are able to choose the public school best for your child among a limited set of options. You have to want to be more involved to have a real impact on the future of your school and other schooling options for your child. Knowing how to make the case for choice is where you want to start.

Making the case for school choice: Why is your choice important to you? What does it do for child that attaches you to the school? You have a special story to tell, and more than anything else that you have, your story can help preserve and protect your school.

Many people do not realize how many children's lives have been improved by school choice. They overlook how involved parents want to be, and assume that a school of choice is not very unique. Your job is to talk about how your child is doing at the school, and how your relationship with the school exceeds your expectations.

Why Albany needs to be more than a name to you: There are over 100 legislators in the state of New York, 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 woman) and a State Senator. You might be in a different district from the schools, so there may be more than one person that you should be working to influence.

Contact the Assembly Public Information Office at (518) 455-4218 or <http://assembly.state.ny.us/> to find out who is supposed to be working for you.

Legislators are people just like you. Some of them owned businesses, are attorneys, or worked in a garage. Some are parents, educators and some are career politicians. You have to communicate with them to build a relationship. And relationships are important to getting them to understand the importance of your issue, which is preserving and growing school choice.

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 other you are working to do so.
- Send letters of support and encouragement to legislators and leaders who take strong positions and positive actions for education reform.
- Don't give up on legislators and others who are not so supportive; make an effort to provide them with thoughtful information periodically, 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; write thoughtful letters to the editor.
- Be positive! Always underscore your commitment to your school and children.

CAN ONE PERSON REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Yes! The one person is you! You and others like you can communicate the same message over and over again to your legislators and others 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 additional piece of this you have to know: You must vote if you are qualified to vote, and you must register to do so if you are not already.

Voting for a person because they did what you though was good is the most powerful thing you can do to help your community. And when it comes to charter schools, every vote counts. There are legislators who were voted for by

groups of people that do not like school choice. Therefore there must be legislators that support choice.

The Governor can make a huge difference, too. By telling your Governor what you think about school choice 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.

Taking it to the streets means making your choice, and your vote a very real thing for anyone that is in a position to serve you. Your lawmakers are there to serve you. Don't forget that very important fact.

INVOLVING THE MEDIA

Did you know that the newspapers love to get letters from real people who care about education? Every day the newspapers print letters to the editor about issues they've written about. They also publish opinion pieces about how important this or that issue is. You can get a letter or piece in the paper! You can write letters, or opinion pieces. And Even if they do not print them, the more they get, the more likely they are to begin publishing information about school choice when they get them.

You need to know about and write to:

The Buffalo News
Letter to the Editor:
One News Plaza
P.O. Box 100
Buffalo, NY 14240
Via email: LetterToEditor@buffnews.com
Via fax: 716-856-5150

And the media includes radio, too. Many people listen to the radio and most radio stations have what they call public affairs programming, where they talk to people about important community issues. Charter schools represent an important community issue. You'll need some information on the media, which you'll find at the end of this booklet.

BY BEING AN EMPOWERED 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 communicating with people who can make a difference, you are ready to be a Parent with a choice.

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

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

But you don't want to do it alone. You need to bring on your friends, stay in touch with others who are working for choice, and work to keep people around you knowing what's important to you.

Recruiting starts with you... the more of you that there are, the more people will listen.

For Additional Information, Contact:

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