

School Choice: Breaking Through the Barriers of Resistance Pre-Conference Survey Summary

I. Key Target Audiences to Address

- The priority audiences (ranked in order by frequency) should be:
 - Policymakers
 - At the state level (e.g., state legislators, governors, superintendents of education, judges)
 - At the local level (e.g., school boards, mayors)
 - Parents
 - “Who can benefit from choice” - minorities, low income, working class, in poorly performing school districts
 - Media
 - Channels that influence opinion leaders
 - News media, education media, conservative media
 - Community Leaders
 - Teachers and School Administrators
 - Voters
 - Business Leaders
 - Private School Leaders
 - School-Based/Grassroots Reformers
 - Education Reform Groups
 - Other “Influentials”
 - Minority group leaders
 - Religious group leaders
 - Funders
 - Moderate Democrats
 - Suburban/Rural Republicans
 - Catholics/Jews

II. Specific Actions for Each Target Audience

Policymakers

- Listen to parents
- Draft, sponsor and support well crafted school choice legislation
- Hold hearings
- State superintendents should issue reports on the advantages of school choice
- Local elected officials should hold press conferences, issue papers on why their particular local jurisdiction could benefit from school choice, lobby state lawmakers
- Debate the merits of choice and consider arguments advancing choice
- Meet with parents who need school choice. Visit inner-city schools. Listen to the outrage of what poor parents and children must do to get a

good education. Listen to how the poor and minorities are ignored by the educational establishment.

- Judges - give kids a chance at a future by upholding school choice.
- Know the facts

Parents

- Educate themselves
- Call-in campaigns and lobbying
- Share what they have learned with as many people as possible - particularly friends and family
- Recruit more grassroots support for school choice and work to make your voices heard by decision-makers and the media
- Consider how school choice would benefit their children
- Become active in supporting the issue
- Get involved in the choice effort at hand, turn out and show support at key events
- Come out and learn about choice. Tell us your stories about why choice is important to you and your children. Repeat those stories to reporters and lawmakers. Attend rallies, protests, legislative briefings and interviews.
- Families/students who have benefited from school choice to act as spokespersons
- Get involved with local groups, become more vocal.

Media

- Provide balanced reporting of all aspects of education reform, including choice
- Cover education issues from a parent's perspective, tell the human face stories of parents in need of educational options, report accurately on the need for change and reform in the education system
- Become better informed about school choice issues and sources. Understand the vested interests that public school groups have.
- Visit the affected schools/communities and meet parents
- Meet parents. Visit choice schools. Visit public schools in those same inner-cities. Share what you see and hear about choice with the public.
- Cover profile stories of successful students
- Print/run both sides of story, use us as source, put parent stories in articles.

Grassroots Activists

- Get educated and trained
- Organize grassroots school choice groups that would push for school choice
- Participate in training to advance school choice at the local and state levels

- Find new and creative ways to make parents the center of the choice movement. Research and write and speak to advance the issue. Work together as a team so we each use our strengths; if we win, there will be more than enough glory to go around.
- Lobby for candidates who support school choice

Teachers/School Administrators

- New teachers should protest the union pay scale for being overly generous to tenured, veteran teachers
- Consider how choice helps their students and their schools, especially public school choice

Private School Leaders

- Make your voices heard by decision-makers, but always from the perspective of parents

Business Leaders

- Demonstrate support for choice to legislators, media and the public from the economic perspective: the business community needs well-educated employees and school choice will help
- Come out visibly in support of choice

Influentials

- Spread the word about how school choice is benefiting children
- Learn the facts share the news with 10 friends (at a lunch or dinner we will host - organic marketing)

Voters

- Vote for candidates that support school choice
- Supporting ballot measures
- Learn the facts, don't be afraid and don't swallow the party line.

Funders

- Support specific initiatives and general support of effective organizations

III. Promotional Efforts Used in the Past

Media Relations

- Op-eds (6)
- Media appearances (3)
- Cultivating media relationships (2)
- News releases/other public relations (2)
- Sponsor forums for education writers and editorialists.

- Capitalize on and create major news hooks - particularly key moments in litigation, but also other hooks like legislative battles, new reports, etc.
- Use the right messengers, whether the organization's spokesperson or parents and allies.
- Package compelling story for reporters - identify most compelling and articulate parents and kids, as well as administrators, and gather their stories. Combine human face to the story with the best research and pitch reporters.

Relationship-Building, Personal Interaction

- Develop broader relationships with community, business, grassroots and non-traditional supporters,
- Take community leaders to Milwaukee to learn about the benefits of that city's school choice program.
- Word of mouth
- Outreach to parents, community leaders and like-minded organizations - usually involves direct, in-person communication, often in partnership with a local organization.
- Follow-up with parents and new allies to keep them informed and effectively involved is critical.
- Provide guidance on legal and media matters to state and national like-minded organizations.
- Keep contributors and allies constantly informed on developments and research.
- Affiliations
- One-on-one meetings
- Develop partnerships

Publications/Research

- Publish books, research papers and other publications (10)
- Articulate the message simply and creatively with user-friendly publications
- Advance school choice proposals, create the intellectual environment for adoption of these policies
- Target message to specific audiences with various publications and communications

Legislative Outreach

- Legislative testimony (2)
- Outreach to legislators - includes one-on-one counseling to improve legislation and protect school choice programs from potential litigation
- Free subscriptions to elected officials

Events

- Speeches (5)
- Conferences/workshops/meetings - both academic and grassroots (5)

- Rallies (2)
- Public debates (2)
- Dinners
- Events
- Small meetings with Milton Friedman

Other Media

- Radio ads, newspaper ads, other paid advertising/media campaigns (4)
- Website (3)
- Direct mail (2)
- E-mail newsletters
- Education reform blog

IV. Primary Strengths of Approaches + What Works

Messages

- Message must be different for different audiences
- All information should be presented in a "Reader's Digest" style rather than a think-tank style.
- Education is a very personal, emotional issue that requires you to be just as personal with people.
- Talk almost exclusively about children
- Real numbers debunking the "official" numbers
- Change the terms of the discussion and using the opposition's terms against them.
- Advance arguments for choice in a comprehensive way, addressing the economic, educational, and moral cases for choice.
- Include in the messages real stories of people seeking quality educational options. It helps establish a connection with the audience.
- Go for your "PHD": Personalize the message you're delivering to the audience/reporter we're speaking to; Humanize the message by showing the issue at hand is about real-world people, and share specific stories; and Dramatize the message, communicating the most simple and outrageous facts you can about the issue at hand. PHD: Personalize, Humanize, Dramatize.
- Facts that portray the Hispanic education crisis are effective. Personal parent stories are also effective.

Media

- Media outreach - best and most cost-effective approach
- Putting parents first - Empowering parents to voice their support for school choice by providing effective training in advance and creating opportunities (in the media, before legislators and other audiences) to be heard puts a human face on the issue - the one thing school choice opponents don't have

- Putting a human face on choice, lining up key national media/columnists at key times, and projecting the organization's spokespersons as credible authorities.
- Ensuring consistency of message - Preparation is key - creating the right messages and ensuring they stay consistent across time and messenger
- Becoming "information central" - Developing comprehensive background materials, making it easy for reporters to access all the facts needed to cover the story; if a reporter needs more, find a way to get the answer quickly or refer them to an ally who can
- Responding quickly - Be the first to respond to news, good or bad, to set the terms of debate
- Leveraging your expertise - have a unique angle to add to any story
- Target high-profile television and newspaper media. Radio generally is feeble (except for intensive work in local markets and major shows like Rush Limbaugh). News conferences are hit-and-miss. Generally, the movement has not succeeded well in getting the message out in terms of media coverage and understanding of the issue. PR firms are generally disastrous in this field.
- Pairing the right message with the right messenger. Hispanic parents and Hispanic business leaders have been our best messengers.
- Work with beat reporters, editorial boards, write op-eds, and speak on talk radio.

Standing Up to Teacher's Unions

- We've attracted the ire of the teacher's union to the extent they publicly label us a threat, credit us with "enormous influence" in education policy, sue us, and set up their own "think tank" to study our studies. We have a reputation for a certain fearlessness in saying about the union what no one else in the state is willing to say.

Legislative

- Through research and advocacy, convincing various top state leaders, to introduce school choice legislation.
- Speaking to conservative staffers and policymakers. Op-eds, papers, and e-mail newspapers generate interest in policy ideas.
- Lobbying

Successful Outreach

- Conferences targeting African-American pastors and other key urban minority leaders
- Developing solid relationships through mailings, media outreach, events, and key staff.
- Rallies

V. Main Weaknesses of Outreach/ What Has Not Worked

Difficulty Engaging Parents

- Successful parent outreach is incredibly difficult and time-consuming. Low-income families can be very skeptical of outsiders promising change. It is much easier to find parents willing to make their voice heard when they already have school choice and it is threatened (as with a lawsuit against a program). It is much more difficult to get parents already overburdened with supporting their families to devote time to a movement that might, eventually, result in educational choice.
- Sustaining engagement of inner city parents is a challenge given the other demands in their lives.
- Have not broken through the general public's entrenched inertia/suspicion about choice.
- Main limitation has been a lack of a clear successor as parental spokesperson. Hoped to see more parents stepping up and speaking out.

Difficulty Maintaining Relationships

- Inability to sustain follow up efforts - get a lot of people excited, and then the next crisis happens and sometimes don't go back and follow up on success.
- Maintaining relationships and working to find new ones takes time and systematic efforts. These are not things that seem to be on everyone's focus every day despite knowing they are important.

Resource Limitations

- With limited staff, it is difficult to continue to devote all the man hours necessary to maintain the momentum and continuity of school-choice projects in addition to all other issues
- Capacity, response time
- Organization staff not the right messenger

Results Below Expectations

- Extent of reach not as large as desired
- News conferences and widespread media coverage of significant events.
- Disappointment comes when ideas are not implemented as advocated
- Training of grass-roots choice advocates has been disappointing.
- Direct mail and email has been expensive and difficult to measure.

Messages

- Combating false information delivered by groups who have built-in allegiance from low-income families. i.e. - teachers unions, NAACP, ACLU
- Need to do a better job at applying our message to help change peoples' minds on this issue. It is unlikely that papers and reports are changing the hearts and minds of American voters / parents.

- Competing voices, internal debate among like minded groups.

VI. Key Messages to Different Audiences

General

- It's about the children.
- Choice is available to the upper and middle class, but not the poor.
- School choice is the civil rights issue of the 21st century.
- School choice promotes racial integration.
- School choice is the most economically efficient way to educate a child-- when the dollars follow the scholar, school districts have more money to spend better educating the children who remain in public schools.
- Competition between public, private and charter schools improves all of them.
- Facts about commonly held beliefs (myths) about schools, education, teachers, administrations.
- Remind people that poor people can learn too and if there is any justification for government-provided education, it is to teach poor children so they can become fully participating citizens.
- Attain, and maintain, the moral high ground in the choice debate: "Parents ought to be able to choose the safest and best schools for their children."
- Every parent deserves to have access to a quality education for their children, regardless of income.
- School choice provides an educational life preserver for children who desperately need it and provides a powerful incentive for public schools to improve. Using the same message with all groups, sometimes emphasizing different terminology (e.g. "competition" for conservatives, "social justice" for liberals).
- School choice is about helping kids.
- Our children can't wait any longer.
- School choice isn't about hurting the public schools. Not taking money away from education. Money still goes to educate the child.
- Choice works. Public schools improve with choice. Choice is Constitutional.
- School choice works. School choice is fair. School choice will help the public schools improve.
- When students/families are provided a choice, then the resulting competition will force schools to raise their performance in order to attract students. This will result in higher standards of performance by schools and teachers, more efficient use of resources, and better outcomes for students.
- Freedom to Choose benefits all. Each subgroup gets a variation of this theme. For example, legislators get freedom to choose improves public

school performance. Business leaders get freedom to choose saves money and so on.

Parents

- Address deficiencies of public schools: Too many schools are still failing to meet even basic requirements. Parents need options. To Parents in some communities, it's more positive and "ecumenical" Your children deserve a great education. Make sure they get it.

Policymakers

- Address deficiencies of public schools: Too many schools are still failing to meet even basic requirements. Parents need options.
- Remind them about quality problems: Despite NCLB, most conventional schools are still not accountable -- school choice is helping all schools get better (i.e. the competition message)
- Since universal voucher proposals have failed several times in California, persuade lawmakers and the public that there are too many schools that have failed to improve under California's current school accountability system. The system's sanctions must include a school choice component, like Florida's, to enable students trapped in the state's worst schools to escape and receive a better education at private schools. This more targeted approach seems like a more realistic strategy in an increasingly liberal and union-dominated state.
- At the federal level, advocate for school choice as a more efficient way of improving educational opportunities for children across the nation.
- Advance the argument that school choice is gaining bipartisan support, in hopes that this will provide courage for more lawmakers to support school choice initiatives.

Media

- It's reaching critical mass. X number of kids choosing, more than x number of programs now in place. You need to be watching this.

VII. Biggest Obstacles to Efforts

Opposition of Teachers Unions and Other Special Interests

- Teachers unions are the most powerful force in state politics and that makes it extremely difficult to enact a school choice law, even a limited one.
- The tremendous teacher union lobby -- even if law makers and community groups trend toward understanding, implementation is very rare.
- State teachers union with revenues in excess of \$1 billion (counting their teacher insurance subsidiary).
- State government school system.

- Laws that favor compulsory unionism.
- Without a doubt, the biggest obstacles to school choice are the well-funded interest groups that oppose it - most importantly the teachers' unions, but also school boards associations, ed schools, and groups like the ACLU, PFAW, Americans United, NAACP, and so on. Many of these groups, particularly the teachers' unions, are also far better connected in state legislatures, with the media and other places, increasing their influence.
- Opposition by powerful teacher unions and school boards. Simplicity and potency of the opposition's message (school choice hurts public schools).
- Teacher union funded legislators and interest groups are very powerful.
- Teachers unions
- Also, the local political influence of our opponents.
- The teachers unions have been a huge force against school choice. They continue to outfund our efforts here in California. We need to find a way to weaken the financial influence of the unions.

Limited Resources

- Having limited resources to hire top-notch professionals is one obstacle. Even top-notch professionals don't get it, meaning, they don't understand real communications on how to get the message out.
- Certainly money, lack of coordinated effort -- though the latter has more to do with the fact that we are all stretched for time rather than we don't want to coordinate.
- More funding to add manpower to increase our ability to fight the school choice battle on more fronts.
- Funding.
- Time.
- Finding and developing young leaders

Lack of Consistency Among School Choice Advocates

- Not everyone in the movement is on the same page. Some people think our goal should be X not Z.
- The lack of looking at a public policy issue as a product to sell using professional sales tools.
- The Movement's lack of a clear organizing slogan(s)... eg. opponents have a five word statement that we have a 50 word answer for and we don't have a "got milk" slogan.
- Narrowly tailored, flawed, school choice proposals advanced by others

Lack of Interest Among Parents/Public

- Parental involvement. The parents that have the most to gain are also the least likely to be involved in their child's education.
- A complacent public that is too willing to accept the mediocre status quo, rather than push for excellence.

- Most parents are so busy and so stressed that they don't have time to realize how far behind our education system is falling compared to other nations; as a result, they don't realize how important it is for them to take the time to demand better performance from their schools, or lobby their legislators to give them more choices.
- Low-income beneficiaries rarely vote.
- Inertia of the status quo

Nature of Business

- Turnover is major - seems like just when someone gets trained up they go somewhere else.
- Having a business-like system that institutionalizes the work we do is a priority but a constant challenge in a business that operates mainly on intellectual capital.
- Propensity of media to cover losses and adverse developments but not successes and positive developments.

Lack of Knowledge

- Most people don't even know what school vouchers are.
- Lack of depth of understanding of the issue.

Perception of School Choice as Partisan Issue

- Our main purpose is to affect the debate on Capitol Hill. Advocating for school choice at the federal level presents a serious challenge and many politicians are unwilling to risk the political capital to invest in such a difficult reform effort.
- Breaking through the partisan perception of choice.