

Building Better Schools for Maryland's Neediest CER Project Overview

Since 1998 CER has actively pursued school reform in Maryland. Having learned about our neighbor (and for many staff, our home) and the condition of its schools, CER brought its expertise to bear on curriculum and standards efforts which eventually led to the removal of the much-flawed state-wide MSPAP test. Even more important, CER gave a home to the hundreds of local activities and concerned parents who were trying hard to influence the enactment of a charter school policy.

As public schools of choice that are accountable for their performance charter schools are serving well more than 700,000 students across the US. Some of the best charter schools are clustered in urban communities. From Washington, DC with 15 percent of its population in charter schools to Kansas City, with 17 percent and all across the country, children of color and with special needs are over-represented in charter schools as compared to similar public schools. The fact is that charters have become lifeboats for families most ill served by traditional public schools in failing school districts.

Charter schools are permitted now in Maryland, thanks largely to a grassroots uprising and constant educational campaign that CER first started back in 1998. CER briefed the Lt. Governor, provided testimony and ongoing fact sheets, mobilized grassroots in support of charter schools, and provided access to federal officials in support of the effort. We engaged the press, the people and thus, were able to move people on this critical issue.

Despite its long-standing, strong reputation for quality schools, Maryland is in need of more and better educational opportunities for children. Sadly, the only voice heard for years in the state halls was that of the Maryland State Teachers Association (MSTA) and its colleagues representing various levels of school administrators. In fact, in Annapolis during the legislative session, the MSTTA holds 'free' lunches for busy lawmakers on the go. The teacher's union, which formally opposes all forms of school choice and greater accountability, is the strongest lobby group in the state house. It is no surprise, then, that the charter school bill eventually passed in Maryland is among the nation's weakest and provides little, if any incentive for people to create new schools.

We are proposing to change that.

The Maryland Charter School Project

CER will launch a new division aimed at recruiting, nurturing and developing strong charter schools in target neighborhoods. While utilizing the vast resources and expertise of the Center's 10 years, the Maryland Charter School Project will work as an affiliate with its main office in Baltimore. Its objectives are as follows:

- To inform parents and educators (primarily) about their rights and opportunities available through establishing and choosing charter schools.
- To identify strong applicants and help them navigate through the educational morass to obtain approval.
- To cultivate community leaders to support proposals so that approval is assured once a group goes through the copious process of writing their application and seeking approval.
- To maintain a database of strong schools and provide information to parents about education reform, on their level and in easy to understand formats.

Some of the approaches and tools CER will use to accomplish these objectives include:

- Community outreach efforts, including church dinners, family picnics and breakfasts with early childhood providers.
- Meetings and ongoing introductions to well-regarded local school leaders and social entrepreneurs, such as the New School and transformation school leaders.
- Introducing to school leaders and parents charter school "stars" from around the country. Former NBA star Kevin Johnson (Phoenix Suns) started a charter school in Sacramento; the Indiana Pacers supports one in Indianapolis. There are terrific charter leaders who grew up in the inner cities who captivate audiences and would gladly attend any session we felt important enough to warrant their attention.

There will be many additional tactics employed. A conservative estimate of the impact of this project, after one year, will be **to have secured five successful charter school applications in areas of greatest need**, and have helped to recruit the maximum enrollment for each. With a start date of September 03, it is possible to have this accomplished for the next school year, assuming the political obstacles are not greater than currently identified.

CER Background

The Center for Education Reform is a national voice for more choices in education and more rigor in education programs, both of which are key to more effective schooling. It delivers practical, research-based information and assistance to engage a diverse lay audience—including parents, policymakers, and education reform groups—in taking actions to ensure that U.S. schools are delivering a high quality education for all children in grades K-12.

CER was founded in 1993 to increase access and accountability in schools. Since then, major reforms have transformed the way many communities perceive education and what they've come to expect. More children than ever before have a choice in their education and access to better schools. While the crisis persists, particularly for America's most disadvantaged, much is being done and accomplished to transform education away from a system dominated by government rules to a system dominated by parents and communities in control.

CER's three core Strategic Goals are as follows:

- To support the advancement of and inform diverse national and local lay audiences about **school choice through vouchers**, with a specific focus on audiences in Washington, DC and New York City.
- To support the advancement of and inform diverse national and local lay audiences about public school choice through **chartering and charter schools**, with a special focus on how chartering is renewing American Education.
- To grow and mobilize **the grassroots** in America's communities to support education reforms that improve the quality of K-12 schools.

Each of these goals is deployed in key states and communities where CER's help is sought or where there is a void that can be filled well by CER programs and expertise.

Current Initiatives

CER's goals are being pursued through several core initiatives. These are the top three:

- 1) Targeted state efforts to build/recreate charter school networks to support and advance the concept in states facing challenges internally and externally, so that more children have opportunities to choose high quality, accountable public schools. Tier one (priority) states are Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan and Washington, DC;
- 2) Building national awareness of parental choice and the crisis in public education across the states and throughout communities, by delivering high quality, timely materials, news alerts, conferences and community forums;
- 3) Grassroots Action Center via the CER website to give a greater and more immediate public voice to the parents, teachers, and citizens in any state. Hundreds of state groups communicate about this tool to their members, who in turn are more readily able to communicate with their lawmakers on issues of importance.

Objectives

In each initiative CER's work falls into four categories:

- *Outreach* — Seeking and cultivating new supporters and routing them to local efforts where they can contribute. CER staff met with parents during a Buffalo, NY based choice conference last year. CER President Jeanne Allen and staff visited with Baltimore community activists and sought their help in building a statewide coalition to support charter schools. CER identifies and nurtures in excess of 3,500 new contacts each year, who in turn have their own networks and outreach potential.
- *Information* — CER's unique publications – from the *National Charter School Directory* once a year, to *Parent Power! Helping You Make Sense of Schooling Today*, which comes out eight times a year, are just two of our two dozen informational materials that are targeted toward timely and clear explanation and marketing of the issues.
- *Advocacy* — Communicating with policymakers at all levels and training others to do so is part of ongoing efforts to ensure that lawmakers are making decisions based on factual knowledge, and understand the public sentiments toward those considerations. When CER conducted its poll on school choice during Back-to-School time last September it provided a counter-balance to the traditional anti-choice polls that are released annually at the same time. The results were shared with leaders in Congress and across the state legislatures.

Objectives, continued

- *Networking* — CER is invited to participate in more than 100 conferences and seminars each year and we provide materials to distribute, guidance on how to format the conference, and speeches that contain key messages. The attendees to these events are, in turn, connected to our greater network and to other groups where they can collaborate on issues.

CER's Organizational Set-Up

It is important to convey the process by which CER manages and achieves its goals:

Through the CER Communications department messages get developed and delivered to new and potential parties regularly. As well, the grassroots outreach programs are created and used to fuel the fires in states where activity among real people is needed.

The Policy and Planning Department analyzes all of the information including reports and studies distributed throughout the nation on policy and research of importance to our goals. This division both catalogues this information for CER constituencies as well as decides how best to disseminate important findings.

The External Affairs team fosters relationships with leaders and groups in each state to best help CER determine opportunities and to disseminate and extend our work and initiatives through the states and communities where they are most needed.

Together with the Executive leadership and various contractual employees, these departments help make up the institution which serves more than 1.5 million people through all of its services each year.