

Building on a Strong Foundation and Looking to the Future

A Compilation of Essays on the
Charter School Movement



ABOUT THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the public charter school movement. Our mission is to lead public education to unprecedented levels of academic achievement by fostering a strong charter sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty years is a very long time. Think back to 1992. The internet was only two years old. Email and text messaging had just arrived. There was no Netflix (1997), no Google search (1998), no Facebook (2004), no YouTube (2005), no iPhone (2007), no Airbnb (2008), no Uber (2009). ([Source](#))

And no public charter schools. That is, until the fall of that year when City Academy Charter School opened its doors in St. Paul, Minnesota, after Minnesota's adoption of the nation's first charter school law the year before.

We have come a long way since then and have much to celebrate:

- Forty-four states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam now have charter laws.
- There are 7,700 charter schools and campuses operating nationwide.
- We employ more than 205,000 teachers.
- We serve 3.7 million students. Nearly 70% are children of color, and more than half come from low-income families.

Today, charter schools are a strong part of the fiber of public education in America. During the pandemic, they were the only type of public school that showed enrollment growth. And based on a survey conducted by [The Harris Poll](#), 75% of parents of school-aged children would consider placing their child in a charter school if one were available.

Decades of research proves high-quality charter schools can deliver life-changing results, especially for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.

Charter schools began as a novel idea that took root, grew, and thrived. Our sector learned as we matured and today we are a lifeline to millions of families.



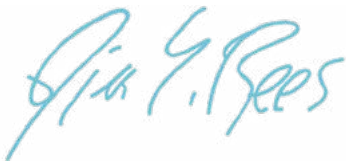
The following essays tell the story of our sector's accomplishments, drawing on a variety of perspectives—from some of our leading pioneers as well as current educators, advocates, and students.

Just as important as celebrating our movement's growth, these leaders help point the way forward. Their insights help us build on the lessons of the past, overcome new challenges, and suggest fresh ways to create opportunities for the millions of students and families who depend on us, now more than ever.

As many contributors note in their essays, charter schools have had a great run at demonstrating that all students can learn regardless of their socio-economic status and the color of their skin. They have also proven they can have a positive impact on the way school districts operate. If we want charter schools to continue to thrive in the next 30 years, we need to remember the reason we were conceptualized in the first place – regardless of what moved people to our cause, it's safe to say that our constituents are students (not adults) and our future depends on how well we serve these students and how well we continue to challenge ourselves and push back against excessive rules and regulations on behalf of the families we serve. If we fail at this task, we will be no different than the traditional system.

If the past 30 years demonstrated the value of our governance model, the next 30 will be about taking this model to scale confidently, aggressively, and passionately.

That way, 30 years from now, we can look back with pride at even greater achievements.



Nina Rees
President & CEO
The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

CHARTER SCHOOL RESEARCH

Most recently, a 2021 meta-analysis of research on charter school effects and competitive influence by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) highlighted trends from three decades of research. [Top findings](#) include:

- Charters located in urban areas boost student test scores, particularly for Black, Latinx, and low-income students.
- Attending some urban charter schools increases college enrollment and voting.
- The competitive impact of charter schools on traditional public schools suggests a small beneficial influence on neighboring schools' student achievement.

A 2020 study from the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University found [greater academic gains for students in charter schools](#), with the difference amounting to almost an additional half year of learning for students in charter schools over the course of the study. Black students and students from low-income backgrounds made the greatest gains. Overall, eighth graders attending charter schools showed learning gains that were three months ahead of their district school peers from 2005 to 2017. Black students, in particular, were an additional six months ahead. Given that one in three charter school students is Black, this is especially noteworthy. Additionally, children from the bottom 25% of the socioeconomic distribution demonstrated nearly twice as much growth as their peers in district schools.

Similarly, the widely cited 2015 Urban Charter School Study, published by the Center for Research on Education

Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, found that students in urban charter schools gained an average of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days of learning in reading per year as compared to their district public school peers. The longer a student attends an urban charter school, the greater the gains; four or more years of enrollment in an urban charter school led to the equivalent of 108 additional days of learning in math and 72 additional days of learning in reading per year. In urban charter schools, low-income Hispanic students gained 48 additional days in math and 25 additional days in reading per year. Low-income Black students gained 59 additional days in math and 44 additional days in reading per year.

The autonomy of the charter school model can also mean charter schools have more flexibility to cultivate a diverse workforce that more closely reflects the students they serve. A Fordham Institute study of schools in North Carolina, for example, found that Black students in charter schools were about 50% more likely to have a Black teacher and that, proportionally, charter schools employ about 35% more Black teachers. Research shows that having teachers that reflect their students' diversity benefits students, including by reducing the probability of dropping out of high school.

Charter schools often deliver these results despite having fewer resources than district-operated schools. Research published in 2020 by the University of Arkansas highlights these funding inequities. The study shows that in 18 urban school districts, students attending district-operated schools receive about 33% more per-pupil funding than students in charter schools. Lack of access to local funding was the greatest cause of this gap.

More than 30 Years of Impact

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 1991 | Minnesota passes the first charter school law |
| 1992 | The first charter school opens in Minnesota |
| 1992 | California passes enabling charter school law |
| 1993 | Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, and Wisconsin pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1994 | The federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) is enacted to help seed the growth of charter schools |
| 1994 | Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, and Kansas pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1995 | Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Louisiana, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Texas, and Wyoming pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1996 | Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and South Carolina pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1997 | Nevada, Ohio, and Pennsylvania pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1998 | Missouri, New York, Utah, and Virginia pass enabling charter school laws |
| 1999 | Oklahoma and Oregon pass enabling charter school laws |
| 2001 | Indiana passes enabling charter school law |
| 2002 | Iowa and Tennessee pass enabling charter school laws |
| 2003 | Maryland passes enabling charter school law |

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 2005 | The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is established |
| 2008 | Estimated nationwide charter school enrollment passes 1 million students |
| 2009 | Guam passes enabling charter school law |
| 2010 | CSP funding surpasses \$250 million |
| 2010 | Mississippi passes enabling charter school law |
| 2011 | Maine passes enabling charter school law |
| 2011 | The number of charter school students surpasses 2 million |
| 2012 | Washington passes enabling charter school law |
| 2013 | Total number of charter schools surpasses 5,000 campuses |
| 2015 | Alabama passes enabling charter school law |
| 2017 | Kentucky passes enabling charter school law |
| 2017 | Estimated nationwide enrollment surpasses 3 million students |
| 2018 | Funding for the CSP reaches \$440 million |
| 2019 | West Virginia becomes the 44th state to pass a charter school law |
| 2021 | Puerto Rico passes enabling charter school law |
| 2021 | The charter school movement celebrates 30 years of success |
| 2022 | The number of charter schools reach 7,700 serving 3.7 million students |

Charter schools have served more than 12 million students since 1992.

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ONE

A Revolutionary Idea

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30 Years of Chartering History Powerfully Informs Our Future

Senator Ember Reichgott Junge

When charter school legislation finally passed in 1991 in Minnesota after a difficult three-year journey, I thought, as lead Senate author, that the bill was so severely compromised, a charter public school would never open. I was wrong.

As we look back 30 years, we celebrate the many successes of chartering. At the same time, I fear important history has been lost. We must refresh that history to inform today's conversation around chartering.

Chartering is bipartisan. Lead house author Representative Becky Kelso and I were both Democrats. The Minnesota House and Senate had Democratic majorities. The governor was Republican. On the key vote for passage of chartering in the House, 56% of minority Republicans voted for the bill; 42% of majority Democrats voted for it, including the Democratic Speaker of the House. That kind of vote hardly ever happens anymore in statehouses or in the U.S. Congress.

Chartering wouldn't have spread beyond Minnesota and across the nation without the exceptional leadership of two other Democratic lawmakers. State Senator Gary K. Hart made California the second chartering state in 1992, and State Representative Peggy Kerns sponsored chartering into law in Colorado in 1993. Sadly, both lawmakers recently passed, but their legacy remains. We were three Democratic lawmakers committed to making chartering a reality despite opposition from our union colleagues. We sometimes forget that Democrats, including Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado and President Bill Clinton, led the way for chartering in the 1990s, and that it has always been a bipartisan initiative. That's what has sustained the movement for more than 30 years.



SOMETIMES THE
BEST THING THAT
POLICYMAKERS CAN DO
IS STEP BACK, REMOVE
THE BARRIERS, AND LET
CITIZENS TAKE THE LEAD.

Chartering is a pathway to innovation and ideas. The innovation of chartering was the law itself; it was not about any single school. Chartering is a system redesign that allows innovation to happen. As chartering pioneer Ted Kolderie described, “Innovation is letting people try things. Chartering creates space where different can be tried.”

In 1991, as in 2022, not every child was served well by traditional district schools. Some were falling through the cracks, many of whom were children from low-income families or students of color. The chartering law allowed parents and teachers to take the lead to try something different, with the state holding them even more accountable for performance than their counterpart district schools. Sometimes the best thing that policymakers can do is step back, remove the barriers, and let citizens take the lead.

The inherent autonomy of chartering allowed new innovations to emerge from entrepreneurial chartering educators. Teacher-powered schools allowed teachers to lead and thrive. Some charter schools allowed personalized, child-centered learning, letting students guide their own learning on topics of interest to them. During the recent pandemic, the autonomy of charter public schools allowed their leaders to quickly pivot and turn to other alternatives. This responsiveness relieved their enrolled families and attracted other families in the process.

More broadly, over the decades, the key foundational chartering policy of accountability for performance (and even closure as a consequence) moved beyond chartering into the mainstream in some district schools. And the data systems developed to demonstrate chartering accountability are now being used to inform instruction, share best practices, stop poor practices, and improve school culture in all schools, rather than merely measure individual teacher performance in charter schools.

Chartering empowers teachers and students. As a union-endorsed Democrat, my primary motivation for introducing charter school legislation was the opportunity to empower teachers. I feared the K-12 education system was holding back talented teachers as well as talented students. I applauded the teacher-powered schools that evolved from chartering, as well as the creation of the nation’s first union-initiated charter school authorizer in 2011 in Minnesota.

Empowered teachers
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Empowered teachers empower students when they set high expectations for all. A case in point is Friendship Academy of the Arts in Minneapolis, a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence with 98% African American students, located just one mile from George Floyd Square. Another is former charter school student Darnella Frazier, the teen who recorded the murder of George Floyd on her mobile phone and earned a Pulitzer Prize for her citizen journalism. Charter schools empower young people where they are, right in their neighborhoods.

Today's chartering myths are the same as 30 years ago. All of us must challenge the relentless misuse of language across the nation that has reinforced the myths of chartering for three decades. For example, many Americans still think charter public schools are private schools. Why? It starts with language. How many times have you heard the phrase “charter schools and public schools” in media, in communities, or from your own colleagues and school parents? Let's change that to “charter public schools and district public schools,” a small change with enormous impact.

We also can help our ambassadors use effective positive language to describe chartering, such as the concept of opportunity. As part of the 30th anniversary year, The National Charter Schools Founders Library developed a [tool kit for messaging](#). Chartering stakeholders are encouraged to create their own positive school stories (two minutes or less) focusing on a single student—her status upon enrollment, how they helped her grow, and her success today. That's powerful.

The Founders Library is also a resource for creating fact-based conversations about chartering. Users can share with others compelling oral histories straight from the mouths of pioneers. Or create their own state's pioneering charter school story with their historic leaders.

Sadly, today's debate around chartering reflects the divisive nature of today's politics, including the challenge of adhering to truth. As chartering faces myths from both the right and left, it is critically important that we preserve, record, and disseminate the facts around the origins of chartering from the bipartisan pioneers who were there. Our history will inform a powerful future and help sustain and grow chartering for another 30 years and beyond.



Ember Reichgott Junge is a former Minnesota state senator who authored the nation's first charter school law in the state.

Where It All Started: Minnesota

Ted Kolderie

I was present at the creation of chartering: first, the Itasca seminar in October 1988 where Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), got Minnesotans interested in letting teachers start small schools; then, in the 1991 session of the state legislature when Senator Reichgott and Representative Kelso got chartering into law; third, until about 1997, talking with legislators and others in some 25 states.

Since then, I have stayed involved in the charter school movement, mainly in Minnesota. Its program is the one I know and I think it offers important lessons, so I will focus my essay there.

Chartering was an institutional innovation—a reformation in the church of public education. It makes systemic change possible.

There have always been good ideas for better schools, but districts were not equipped to change existing schools or to create new and radically different schools. Chartering created a non-district space within public education that allows the different to appear.

The laws did not create schools; teachers, parents and others emerged to start schools. Chartering tapped a deep discontent with traditional schooling. So the focus and operations of charter schools vary. A charter school is not, pedagogically, a kind of school.

Minnesota now has 179 chartered schools, with 14 more set to open in 2022. Most are fairly small. Minneapolis has 34 and Saint Paul, 38. There are 58 in the suburbs and 49 in non-metropolitan Minnesota. The sector enrolls about 68,000 students. Relative to all students, more are on free and reduced-price lunch, significantly more are of color, and about 13% are students with disabilities. A few schools are mostly single-ethnicity (Hmong or Somali), the result of choices often made by first-generation immigrants.



MINNESOTA'S
INNOVATIONS
ADDRESS THE MAJOR
PROBLEMS AFFLICTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION.

By law, the schools are part of the state system of public education. They are public schools; Minnesota's program is not congenial to commercial involvement. Revenue comes from the state and is used for operations, special education, and building leases. Teachers are licensed. Early on in the charter school movement, difficulties with financial management closed some schools. In 2009, the legislature tightened authorizing and accountability.

As with the religious Reformation 500 years ago, this educational reformation quickly split into subgroups. Some are creating new schools that aim to do conventional education better. Others want to try different approaches to teaching and learning. We see the results of their innovations in Minnesota as well as nationally. But innovation is conspicuous; the motto of the state association is "Unleashing education from convention."

Minnesota's innovations might be of national significance. Consider:

Authorizing. Unlike the bureau model in districts, which run schools they own, chartering is a contract arrangement between the authorizer and independent, self-governed schools. Term contracts build in accountability.

Initially only districts could authorize. The legislature quickly added post-secondary institutions, then large nonprofits, and in 2009, single-purpose authorizers—newly created nonprofits, approved by the commissioner, whose only role is to receive, review, and act on proposals and to oversee schools they approve. All authorizers are now individually approved by the state.

Minnesota currently has 13 authorizers. Colleges, universities, and nonprofits have a sizeable share of the schools. Districts have almost totally left the field. The five single-purpose authorizers now oversee almost half the schools. An innovative non-staff model has appeared in which authorizers simultaneously broaden their oversight competence and reduce their costs by contracting with experts paid per assignment.

Enlarging teachers' professional role. In 1993, educators organizing the school chartered by the LeSueur School District formed a worker cooperative and contracted with their own school's board to run a project-based learning program. This innovation "flipped the pyramid" of the district boss/worker model, applying a partnership arrangement common in white-collar businesses but not in schools. It works in practice though not in theory.

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To spread the professional-partnership model locally, Louise Sundin, former president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, organized, with help from the AFT, a single-purpose authorizer, the Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools, in 2011. It now oversees 16 schools.

When the Teachers Union Reform Network became aware of teachers gaining control of professional issues, it was intrigued. Its interest led a Minnesota policy nonprofit, Education Evolving, to begin a national initiative to enlarge teacher professional autonomy. Its fifth national meeting, likely again to draw mainly district teachers from about half the states, is set for Minneapolis in November.

Student-centered learning. Adults determine what's taught; students control what's learned. That reality has led some schools, especially those in which teacher roles are larger, to give students greater responsibility for their own learning. Motivation matters for raising performance. These schools also find relevance and relationships important, especially for students lacking the advantages of well-educated parents and/or pressure from home to do well with what conventional schools require.

Some schools have all their students on what are effectively individual education plans. Some do this with projects. Starting with the student's interests, teachers (known in some cases as advisers) add the dimensions that satisfy state subject requirements.

The strategy for change. Minnesota's chartering does not look to replace districts. It wants its innovations to stimulate districts to change. Innovations appearing in the charter sector pass into general policy discussion; districts draw from that.

Change is hard in a structurally inert system. Owning and running schools, boards feel pressure for sameness. They cannot easily create a portfolio of different schools as charter authorizers do.

Two Twin Cities area districts, Farmington and Spring Lake Park, found an ingenious way to enlarge teachers' professional autonomy. District leaders began some years ago to tell individual teachers that, to graduate young people with the characteristics the board wants, they may change how they work with students in any way they wish, if they wish.

It helps that some former district people have moved into the charter sector. The superintendent of Minnesota's largest district became head of its largest chartered school. Robert Wedl, a former commissioner, coordinates a discussion group for superintendents to talk about innovation.



In summary, Minnesota's innovations address the major problems afflicting public education:

- Successfully implementing the portfolio model.
- Discovering the teacher-union interest in a professional future.
- Appreciating the importance of grounding performance in student motivation.
- Understanding that innovation is letting people try things.

Ted Kolderie is a co-founder and senior fellow at Education Evolving, a Minnesota-based nonprofit dedicated to improving public education.

Resources

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Great Minnesota Schools website.

The MN Association of Charter Schools website.

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The Minnesota Guild website. The Guild is the authorizer created by teacher union leadership to extend the teacher-professional model.

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Finding a New Bipartisan Consensus

Bruno Manno

I've been lucky to have had a front-row seat for one of the most important movements in American education: the birth and growth of the public charter school movement in the past 30 years.

I was at the U.S. Department of Education when charters first emerged as one of the ways to strengthen American education in response to the Nation at Risk report's warning about the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American schools. Charters represented an important mix of system reform and consumer-driven reform. I co-wrote an early overview of the movement, *Charters in Action*, in 2001. More recently, I helped oversee philanthropic investments in the sector while at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Walton Family Foundation.

No one anticipated the rapid growth in the numbers of schools -- now more than 7,500 -- serving 3.6 million students. On the flip side, none of us imagined we would still be arguing that these are public schools or that so many people would still be so opposed to giving more kids and their families options like these. Nor did we foresee the growth of networks and brand names such as KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools. At the beginning, few knew anything about authorizing and the complexities of performance contracts. We also didn't fully understand the difficulty of closing low-performing schools—easy to say, much harder to do.



MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO
OPPORTUNITY BASED ON
STUDENTS' PASSIONS
AND PURPOSES COULD
FORGE THE NEXT
BIPARTISAN CONSENSUS
ON EDUCATION.

By and large, public charters still operate according to some basic rules that apply to all public schools, including being free, open to all, and bound by basic health, safety, and civil rights requirements. The federal government did the right thing in the beginning by creating a startup charter school grant program with few strings attached. They wisely gave communities wide latitude to create the schools that best meet their needs in return for accountability for results. The sector always promised to be innovative, though it didn't always succeed in that aspiration. But its responsiveness during the recent pandemic is the latest reminder of that promised flexibility; many charter schools developed new online learning programs or stayed open when traditional district schools closed.

While much has remained the same in the past 30 years, we are seeing some important and welcome changes. There is more focus on working with local communities early on in new school development, with deeper immersion and engagement in community processes. Philanthropies are more committed to funding home-grown approaches instead of importing brand-name networks. Parents have a much easier time learning about their choices. In the early days, if a school wanted to educate families about their options, it had to pack up and visit the community. Today, through a mix of smartphone apps and Zoom conversations, families can go online and learn about multiple local school models in a matter of minutes. This initial exposure can then lead to more in-depth discussions and research that yield better choices. Finally, common enrollment systems eliminate the multiple applications that parents had to submit to schools in order to apply for admission in over-enrolled schools.

Importantly, the charter sector has created a more robust, broader set of education options. Not every school needs to offer a college-prep model. We are seeing many more performance-based schools, the high school equivalent of the Julliard School of Music or the Rhode Island School of Design, where success is defined primarily by the quality of the music or art, not solely on the results of a sit-down reading or math test. We are seeing more specialty schools, such as the DaVinci School, which features partnerships with local employers and community colleges.



Public charters historically benefitted from bipartisan support, but unfortunately that support is fracturing. While higher standards, more choice, and greater accountability helped improve student achievement, especially for Black and Hispanic students who had long been marginalized in American education, it also generated a backlash. But abandoning a “college-for-all” mentality in favor of multiple pathways to opportunity based on students’ passions and purposes could forge the next bipartisan consensus on education.

This multiple-pathways approach to education recognizes that students need:

- The academic core and a recognized credential
- Exposure to work and careers
- A strong system of advising
- Authentic education-business partnerships
- Supportive policies

Given their history of innovation, public charter schools are well-positioned to deliver on this broader vision of educational opportunity.

Providing young people with a greater range of pathways to pursue the knowledge and networks they need to achieve their aspirations and live productive lives is an agenda that conservatives, moderates, and liberals alike can embrace. It offers a chance to put aside the divisive recent school reform debates and forge new and diverse coalitions of policymakers, advocates, funders, and other civic entrepreneurs. It is, ultimately, a new civic equation that gives the nation’s schools a key role in building new pathways to the future. Charter schools have led the way before. It is easy to imagine them doing so again.

Bruno Manno is a senior advisor for the Walton Family Foundation’s education program and a former U.S. assistant secretary of education for policy.

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Growing a Thriving Bilingual School

Daniela Anello

What does it take to run a successful public charter school? There's no simple answer to that question. My shorthand answer: love. That includes a passion for excellence, an unswerving commitment to results, and close connections to the community.

DC Bilingual Charter School was born out of our Columbia Heights community in 2004 when Centro Nia, a Washington, D.C. neighborhood nonprofit organization that specialized in early childhood and adult education, wanted to create an elementary school pathway for its preschoolers. From the start, our bilingual school was a joyous, nurturing place for students and families. But the early academic results weren't there; only 3% of students met the city's standards in math and only 30% in reading.

I joined the staff in 2009 as a specialist in literacy and curriculum design, with a mission to help turn around children's academic achievement. Our team has succeeded. Today, we are rated one of the top-performing elementary schools in the city while serving a very diverse, low-income student population.

Along the way, we've learned a lot about bilingual education, notably that:

1. Students need at least six years of immersion before reaching proficiency (which means student retention is key).
2. Our teachers must be native speakers who can also teach key academic skills such as phonics.
3. A 50-50 instructional model works best, with half our classes taught in Spanish, half in English.



IT ALL COMES DOWN
TO RESULTS. CAN
WE CONTINUE TO
SHOW WE'RE DOING
RIGHT BY KIDS?

We’ve also found that content in either language, if taught really well, can translate into results. For example, even though our students learn science in Spanish, they consistently outperform the city average on the city’s English-language science tests.

Working closely with the community to meet the needs of both students and their families continues to be central to our success. Since branching out from Centro Nia in 2015, we have dramatically expanded our community partnerships. We took over a low-performing D.C. public school building and in the process committed to enrolling any student interested in our program. Many of these students had never studied Spanish before. Over time, their success in our program has demonstrated convincingly that bilingual immersion can work for all, even those who get a late start in learning a second language. With these new students joining our school, DC Bilingual became an even more diverse community of Black and Brown families.

We respond to the needs of our community with non-stop support and creativity. For example, our food and wellness program is the centerpiece of our school. Every day, students benefit from a nutritious breakfast, morning and afternoon snacks, lunch, and after-school food—all prepared by a full-time chef in our state-of-the art kitchen. Our school garden is the second largest in the city. We offer gardening and cooking classes to families and neighbors. We have regular food events where families share recipes from their home countries and show how to cook everything from pupusas and tostones to collard greens and candied yams. Our partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank allows us to distribute 8,000 pounds of leftover food every month to the community.

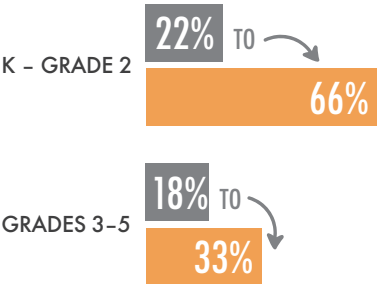
Each month we bring our community together for schoolwide celebrations to foster connections among families, staff, and students. For example, in October, families and community members volunteer for Book-O-Ween where each volunteer dresses up as their favorite childhood book character and reads the story to a class of eager young readers. In December, every student in the school performs in The Nutcracker, a holiday ballet, which is live-streamed to the community and is a hallmark of our commitment to the performing arts.

Being responsive to the community means pivoting daily. Our structure as a charter school encourages and allows this level of creativity. Academics come first, but never at the expense of providing a well-rounded comprehensive system of support to children and their families.

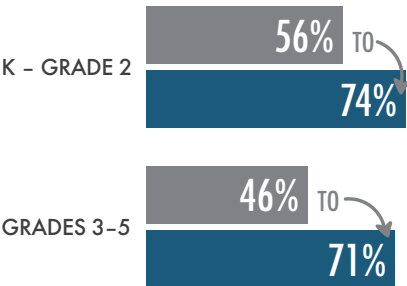
READING LEVELS ARE IMPROVING

(Percentage of students on grade level, comparing fall 2021 to spring 2022)

IN SPANISH



IN ENGLISH



I've learned another important lesson in my 13 years at the school: being willing to address uncomfortable truths and challenging politics is crucial to creating an inclusive school environment. A couple of years ago, caregivers and staff raised concerns about equity at our school. While these conversations were painful and emotional, DC Bilingual forged ahead with the help of some equity experts to address staff concerns in a meaningful, transformative way. Through this process, we created an equity committee with stakeholders from all levels, established new human resources practices, and formed a three-year partnership with a consultant to help guide our work across all aspects of our school. The work has been hard and humbling. But the council is now an important part of our day and has strengthened our school family.

What does it take to scale a successful program? We are about to find out.

Currently, we can only accept one to two new students a year from about 1,200 applications; most slots are reserved for children of staff and siblings. We are committed to changing this. With the help of Bellwether Consulting and Education Forward DC, we have developed a growth plan that will allow us to double our enrollment to more than 700 students by 2028. Starting in fall 2022, we will begin adding two additional pre-K3 and pre-K4 classes, and then continue to add two more classes per grade each year. We are one of the few schools in the city to commit to equitable access, meaning that, moving forward, all our non-sibling and staff openings will be prioritized for students who qualify for the equitable access preference. This preference grants entry to students who are experiencing homelessness, in the foster care system, or receiving TANF or SNAP benefits.

We would like to grow more. Clearly the need is there. But good schools can't be replicated like cookies. They have to be organic, people-centric, and always responsive to the community. Before letting us expand further, our Latino and African American communities first need to see results.

Have we met our goals? Are families satisfied? Are children achieving? Are we retaining students and staff long term? Have we done what we said we would do? Those are the kinds of measures we should be held to. Only time will tell if we succeed. I'm a super-optimistic person, but it all comes down to results. Can we continue to show we're doing right by kids?

Resources

[Catching Up with School Leaders Navigating COVID-19: Daniela Anello](#) (video). Bellwether Partners.

[DC Bilingual Welcome Back Expo](#) (video). DC Bilingual Public Charter School.

["How One School Leader is Keeping Her Teachers."](#) New Leaders.

[Presentation on innovative school models](#). National Charter Schools Institute.

Daniela Anello has led DC Bilingual Public Charter School since 2015.

Mobilizing Armies of Parents, Community by Community

Sarah Carpenter

I want to be clear from the start. I'm not a cheerleader for charters. I'm a cheerleader for parents having more choices of great schools in their communities. Period.

That said, public charters have helped my own family get a better education. My oldest granddaughter cut the ribbon at KIPP Diamond Academy in 2002. She did well there and went on to become the first in four generations to graduate from college. Three of her sisters also attended KIPP; one already has graduated college and the other two immediately joined the workforce. It started a chain reaction that rippled through my whole family.

But KIPP has work to do in Memphis to bring it back to where it used to be. They just hired a new executive director, which is a good sign. Meanwhile, my daughter has moved her kids into a smaller public charter school, which is doing okay. But we're still looking for something better.

I also want to be clear about this. All of the schools in Memphis have a lot more work to do. Only 17% of our children are on grade level in reading and math. That's criminal. And it won't change unless more parents become more knowledgeable about schools and keep pushing to make them better.

That's why I started The Memphis Lift in 2015—to make the powerless parent understand their power. In the first six months, we trained more than 40 fellows and knocked on 10,249 doors—making parents aware of what was happening in their schools. Our voice has been missing for decades. Schools always shut us out. They didn't want parents to know what was happening in the schools, especially in the Black community. When organizers from Nashville first approached me in 2014 to join the fight, I didn't know what "education reform" was. I just knew that something was very wrong with our school system.



THIS WORK IS NOT ON
ME, IT'S IN ME. AND I
CAN'T PULL IT OUT.

Since then, I've learned a lot—and so have thousands of other Memphis parents and grandparents. In the past seven years, we've knocked on tens of thousands of doors. We've helped register hundreds of voters. Our 10-week fellowship program has trained more than 500 Memphis families. They have learned everything about the school system—where the money comes from; how it is spent; what their children should be learning in reading, math, and other subjects; how to find a good school; and how to hold educators accountable for keeping their promises. We've also held many workshops for parents of students with special needs.

We have mobilized busloads of families to protest the NAACP's call to place a moratorium on new public charter schools. We have publicly shamed elected officials such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who opposes public charter schools but sends her own children to private school. We have called out the hypocrisy of school board members who are against parent choice, but somehow find a way to get their own kids into the city's best schools.

We're having an impact—and not just in Memphis. Our model has expanded to communities such as Nashville, Atlanta, St. Louis, and San Antonio, where families also are getting smarter about their local schools.

But that's not enough. We need to build an army of parents and families to fight for parent choice. The unions have built an army opposing choice. There are 3.6 million students in public charter schools. That means at least 3.6 million family members who need to join the fight. Not just parents, but grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and plain old citizens who are willing to advocate for better schools. As a 501(c)(3) organization, we can't participate actively in local and statewide elections. But we can work with 501(c)(4) groups such as Stand for Children that do this political work. And we can speak out as private citizens.

This work needs to be local and led by parents. We live here. We know our communities. We're trusted. We have relationships. We need to keep nurturing those relationships, even after parents no longer have their own children in school. They're still part of the fight. And we can't just be calling folks the night before we need them to show up for a school board vote. We need to be checking in with them regularly. We need to educate them and then keep reminding them why they're marching, what they're fighting for. That's what it will take to mobilize our army.



National organizations such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools can support this grassroots work by listening to us and trying out some of our ideas. My current vision: Have parents open their own school, not to run it day to day, but to set the vision, hire the school leader, and help interview teachers.

We need to be relentless. I had brain surgery earlier this year and was back at work the next day. I like to say this work is not on me, it's in me. And I can't pull it out.

Sarah Carpenter is the executive director of The Memphis Lift and a longtime education advocate in the city of Memphis.

Resources

[The Memphis Lift at Teach for America's 25th Anniversary](#) (video).

[Missing in School Reopening Plans: Black Families' Trust](#). Eliza Shapiro, Erica L. Green and Juliana Kim. The New York Times.

[Rally Cry For A National Parent Movement: Sarah Carpenter](#) (video). TEDx Memphis.

Lessons from a Successful Authorizer

Rick Cruz

Serving as a public charter school authorizer is the highest impact volunteering I have done and likely ever will do. It's also challenging, in no small part due to the many public misconceptions about the role.

Authorizers play many roles—deciding who can start a new public charter school, setting academic and operational expectations, overseeing school performance, and ultimately determining whether a charter should remain open or close at the end of its contract. But one thing we don't do is run the school—that is the biggest public misconception. Nothing could be further from the truth.

One of the most powerful attributes of the charter school movement is the way that it has democratized the leadership of local schools and school networks. Nonprofit charter school boards—including parents and community members—those closest to the students, are the true decision-makers. Authorizers create the conditions for success—we serve as the gatekeepers to entry, set the performance metrics and policies, and establish the necessary infrastructure. In Washington, DC, for example, it is up to the 69 separate local education agencies to set the direction for the 135 public charter schools they oversee. The different roles of authorizers and charter boards aren't just an important distinction, they are a critical element to the success of schools and students.

And, it's a focus on student success that should inform the decisions being made. In DC, although public charters enroll nearly 50 percent of the city's students, our priority has never been growth of charters simply for the sake of growth. Our goal has been to serve the maximum number of students with high-quality educational offerings. But how do we define high quality? That's a large part of what authorizers do, looking to academic outcomes as well as more holistic measures that capture the growth of students.



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One of the things I observed in my time on the Board of the DC Public Charter School Board, is the value of integrating the academic and social-emotional development of our children.

The teachers I met during hundreds of school visits know that these skills are not at all mutually exclusive, but in fact are reinforcing—that children who feel safe, heard, and loved will do better in math and reading and come to love learning. It's easy to pit academics and social-emotional learning against each other, but that makes no sense.

We know that the highest-achieving schools are attentive to the social-emotional health of their students. Academic indicators are easier to measure, but test scores paint an informative but incomplete picture. Although we still haven't found the magic formula to measuring the quality of the school environment, school culture, and other indicators of students' social-emotional well-being, we authorizers can learn a lot by having conversations with school leaders, talking to parents and spending time in classrooms.

Indeed, the key to being a successful authorizer is being a good listener. We have to be willing to ask hard or uncomfortable questions. We need to be interested in building relationships with people who work inside the schools. We need to have lots of conversations with school staff. And we need to come to know the communities of parents and families we serve.

Authorizers need to help nurture and strengthen the community and family partnerships that are at the heart of a quality education. Frankly, the charter sector hasn't always been good at this. We haven't listened to the community's needs and wants. Too often, charter leaders have come with "the answer" and not recognized how important it is to enlist families and communities in the work of improving educational outcomes.

It is easy to forget how deeply schools are based in their local communities. We authorizers need to speak to both hearts and minds. We've been a little too clinical at times, focused too much on data and analytics. That hasn't served us well. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that schools are community creations, and a reflection of the community's identity and well-being. The best of our schools know this at their core.

Moreover, let's be humble. Public education in Washington, D.C. has made great progress in recent years, and charter schools have frequently led the way. But there is so much more work to do to address deep-seeded and systemic achievement



and opportunity gaps. Teachers and schools can do a lot to address these challenges, but they can't do it all. Partnering with the larger community—libraries, behavioral health experts, doctors, community centers – is really hard work. There are so many daily connection points, and it is easy to overlook the comprehensive needs of students and families. We need to keep listening and learning.

Strong partnerships must include cooperation between the charter sector and local school districts. This is far easier said than done. At the teacher and principal level, there is an encouraging amount of collaboration—with educators often moving seamlessly across sectors. It has been a lot harder at the institutional level where politics, budgets, and control can so easily get in the way.

At the end of the day, however, we all have to recognize that most parents don't care about the governance structure of the school. They mainly want to know "Is my kid going to get a great education?" That is the right question to ask, and one that authorizers need to keep top of mind in every policy decision.

Rick Cruz served as Chair and two-term member of the DC Public Charter School Board, the sole charter school authorizer in the District of Columbia.



Appealing to Latino Families and Students

Moctesuma Esparza

Latinos are the future of America. The charter school community must embrace this reality in order to keep thriving.

Consider this. Latinos account for more than \$2 trillion of the nation's gross national product. We are the youngest and fastest-growing population in the country. Our average age is 26. About 30% of people under 30 are Latino. We make up anywhere from 30% to 50% of most major metro areas, from Boston to Albuquerque. In California, the school-age cohort is more than 53% Latino.

Our emerging dominance is not new. In many ways, we are returning to the ancient reality of North America, which was largely populated by Native Americans or indigenous people. Today, many Latinos can trace our roots to the original inhabitants of North America. For millions of us, this is our ancestral homeland. My name, Moctesuma, is a Nahuatl word, the language of the Aztecs, which was dominant from Utah to Guatemala. It was like the Latin of Europe or the Swahili of Africa. Although history has largely tried to erase this reality, many of us are not immigrants. We are from here.

These demographics make it clear that the future of the country is influenced and dependent on the educational success of Latino children—as contributors to our economic prosperity, cultural richness, and political stability. It is in everyone's self-interest to do whatever we can to help these students fulfill their potential.

Unfortunately, the United States is still failing these students. For example, based on data from the 2020 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 23% of fourth-grade Hispanic students were proficient in reading, compared to 35% overall; only 22% of eighth graders were proficient, compared to 34% overall. The picture was the same in math, with only 28% of Hispanic fourth-graders and 20% of Hispanic eighth-graders meeting the standard, compared to overall averages of 41% and 34%, respectively. 2022 is likely to bring another sobering round of NAEP data for Hispanic students.



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In my mind, charter schools offer two main advantages over traditional public schools: 1) more local control and 2) greater investment in educational programs.

When the first public charter schools were introduced in 1991, I quickly became a champion of this new type of public school because it was student-focused, locally controlled, and offered curriculums that encouraged all students to go to college and fulfill their dreams in leadership. Charters inspire students to be successes, and they create a higher standard of public education, lifting up the education sector for all.

Especially powerful is that local community members, parents, teachers, and students are in control. The board of a charter school is often filled with local leaders, not the traditional school board members who often do not live in the school's community. Charter schools give Latino families a choice and an opportunity to become involved in a meaningful way in the education of their children. They can be part of the governance of the school. They can influence what the school offers. They can influence the faculty and the administration in a way that is not readily available in district schools. Their needs are listened to directly.

To maximize these advantages going forward, the charter sector must do more to appeal to Latino families. In particular, we must accelerate efforts to nurture, support, and advance a new generation of Latino school leaders. The charter movement is a place where talented Latino educators can find a home and make a difference for their communities. But we need to make more focused efforts to empower and include them at every level of the work.

My hope is that in the next 30 years the charter sector will be a more permanent part of the educational landscape. In that world, our schools will not be threatened every five years when their applications are up for renewal. We will no longer be stigmatized by the destructive fiction that charters take away money from public schools. Instead, it will be more widely recognized that charters are public schools, and generally offer an excellent education.

I am optimistic. Even in the Los Angeles Unified School District, whose school board has long been hostile to charters, many people of good will are collaborating with their charter school counterparts on what matters most: an excellent education for all students. Indeed, I am confident that we are at a collaborative pivot point, where the well-being of students is paramount. When students come first, everyone wins.



Moctesuma Esparza is an American producer, entertainment executive, entrepreneur, community activist, and charter school advocate who founded the Los Angeles Academy of Arts and Enterprise.

Learning from our Mistakes

Howard Fuller

Because I was here at the beginning of the charter school movement and am now 81, I'm often asked what I am most proud of. Given all the ongoing suffering, especially in the communities we serve, it's sometimes hard to say.

Clearly, charter schools were a breakthrough. We created something different. We have helped a lot of kids. But along the way, I think we also made quite a few mistakes. Starting with that very first meeting I attended in Roy Romer's mansion when he was governor of Colorado in the early 1990s, there were always too few Black and Brown people in the room. I was the only one at that Colorado meeting.

I also was the only person of color at Eli Broad's office in Los Angeles in 2006, when many philanthropists and other leaders of the movement made the decision to throw major support behind charter school networks, rather than single-site schools. Don't get me wrong, I support networks, and they have done a lot of good for a lot of kids. But they are not the only way to grow. I think that decision was a big mistake politically. It made it much easier for Black and Brown legislators to choose not to support us. They had been many of our biggest and most important supporters. But then we became too easily labeled a White movement, part of the so-called "billionaire's boys club."

Or look at New Orleans. I spent three days there after Hurricane Katrina when state leaders were remaking the district as an all-charter district. I interviewed about 18 Black people and took 63 pages of notes. They each had very different views about the proposed changes. But one common theme in all the conversations came through loud and clear: "this was done to us, not with us."

I don't want to belabor our mistakes. But going forward, we need to learn from them if the charter movement is going to continue to grow and flourish.

One central reality that may have been lost in the past three decades of success is that charter schools themselves were not the innovation. The real in-



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novation was the process used to create them. For the first time ever, someone other than the district's school board was empowered to create public schools. Giving local communities the ability to create their own schools was the real revolution.

Going forward, I hope we return more to those community-based roots. Networks have their place, but so do single-site schools that reflect the hopes and dreams of their local communities.

I approach this work as a community organizer who appreciates the need for both urgency and patience. I love what the great UCLA basketball coach John Wooden used to say: "Be quick but don't hurry."

Bottom-up growth is hard. Building community takes time. It takes humility. It takes a willingness to fail. It takes a lot of listening. It takes advocacy, starting with parents who are engaged in the day-to-day work of school itself, then building out from there. There's always just a very small group who will storm the Bastille. A somewhat larger group will hold their coats. And an even larger group will cheer on the coat-holders. Advocacy is figuring out who's who and how to use each group. I think Eva Moskowitz, founder of Success Academy, has the best model of how to organize. She was able to galvanize her parents in ways that many charter schools and charter networks have never done.

Sometimes all this listening, educating, and building understanding and trust gets in the way of the understandable desire to grow quickly in order to serve more kids and families. We have to find a balance between scaling up quickly and sustaining ourselves over the long term.

I worked with a group of community leaders to co-found a school in 2004 that converted to a public charter school in 2011. This school offers an excellent educational experience to local families who were not being well served by the schools their children were zoned to attend. It's very hard to sustain a single-site model, but they are essential, the heart of the movement.

For one semester, I taught at my school two days a week because it helped remind me how difficult teaching is. It's not fair to run my mouth at conferences without also doing the hard work of teaching and learning. It makes me much more humble. If I talk, I want to talk from some sense of what's actually happening on the ground. I want to better understand the incredible stresses that children, families, and teachers are under every day, especially since the pandemic.

I do think the pandemic can be helpful to the charter school movement. But only if we learn the right lessons. Of course, we all wanted to get back to



in-person learning as soon as possible. But at our school, a few students actually did better with online learning over the past two years. Can we identify those handful of kids and actually restructure the school to allow them to continue learning this way? That's the kind of flexibility that's central to what charter schools are all about—or should be.

I speak at a lot of conferences these days. I'm reluctant to tell younger educators what they should be doing. They have to continue pushing ahead, learning from our mistakes. They need to maintain their commitment to the purpose of charter schools—providing a high-quality education, especially in communities that have been under-served for decades. But they need to be careful to not get caught up defending specific institutional mechanisms. We need to continue supporting charter schools, but only if they work. Many of them have. Many more are still needed.

Howard Fuller is a former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools and the founder of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University.

Resources

[No Struggle No Progress: A Warrior's Life from Black Power to Education Reform](#). Howard Fuller and Lisa Frazier Page. Marquette University Press.

We Need a New Generation of Quality Innovation

Karega Rausch

Working to ensure excellence in authorizing and charter schooling is not new for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). We have and always will be focused on creating excellent educational opportunities for all students. But over the last two years, as we have worked with and supported a wide diversity of stakeholders during the pandemic, it's clear that more and different work is required from all of us.

One major challenge is to find new, rigorous, more holistic ways of measuring school success. Of course, students need to know how to read, write, and do math at high levels. High standards for literacy and numeracy are foundational. We refuse to return to days when few paid attention to the unequal performance of students from low-income families and students of color. Too many of these students were invisible and floundering even in otherwise high-performing schools.

Today, students, families, and communities are rightly demanding high levels of literacy and numeracy...and more. They need schools to help prepare students for success in life. Public charter schools need to lead a new wave of innovation by expanding the definitions of excellence, rooted more in the aspirations of the communities they serve. What do communities want for their students? Are programs aligned to this mission? Are schools delivering on their promises? These are the questions that should be at the center of authorizing going forward.



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Let's give students and families access to a broader array of schools and many kinds of high-quality learning opportunities. For example, I love the work of The Oakland REACH, creating new curriculum options led by Black and Brown parents. I welcome Memphis Lift's advocacy led by mothers, grandmothers, and others to ensure that family aspirations are being met. In Minnesota, New Mexico, Hawaii, and other places, charter educators are creating schools focused on maintaining the language and culture of indigenous communities. Our role as authorizers is to help provide educators like these the tools to measure whether they are doing this work well.

When we tap into the brilliance in communities—particularly those that have been overlooked and undervalued—powerful, innovative, sustainable, and highly successful student learning opportunities emerge. NACSA will continue to create tools and frameworks for building from community aspirations, advocating for policies and practices that share power with under-resourced communities, and amplifying those doing this well.

Charter school authorizers are in an ideal position to support this new wave of quality innovation, especially when we reflect local communities.

After all, charter schooling and authorizing have been one of the most important educational innovations of the past half century. The best way to ensure the growth of different models and ways of organizing learning is to have a broader range of people leading these local efforts, people with deep lived experiences in the communities their schools serve. We must diversify our ranks.

We have some work to do. A NACSA survey of larger authorizers found that only about one-third of authorizing leaders self-identified as people of color. While that isn't the only way to measure diversity, it's a critical marker of under-representation, particularly when national estimates indicate that about two-thirds of students attending charter schools identify as students of color.

Getting different kinds of people involved and thriving as authorizers isn't only about diversity for diversity's sake or righting historical wrongs, as important as that is. Diversity is a quality strategy. A more diverse workforce leads to smarter and better decisions; more creative and effective solutions; and better relationships with a wider diversity of schools, families, and communities. We must elevate authorizing to a more diverse audience, prioritize people of color and those with closer ties to the lived experiences of students, and work with authorizing institutions so a more diverse workforce can thrive.



Authorizers also can be proactive in curating new community-based opportunities with transformative results.

I recall working in the Indianapolis mayor's charter authorizing office in the late 2000s. As part of our many neighborhood listening tours, we heard from a number of students, families, and advocates that the GED option was inadequate; over-age and under-credited students wanted opportunities to earn a real diploma. Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana responded to our call for a new approach to this problem, stepped up, and submitted a charter school application to provide a rigorous academic program while also addressing the many barriers getting in the way of student success, from childcare to transportation to flexible scheduling. Today, there are 15 EXCEL centers in Indiana, and more in Washington, D.C., Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Texas with further expansion plans.

Families want quality innovation, and authorizers can help deliver.

A recent survey by the National Parents Union found that 63% of parents and 78% of Black parents agree that: "Schools need to focus on rethinking education and coming up with new ways of teaching and learning as a result of COVID-19." Who is better positioned than the charter sector to lead in showing how to meet this demand? There are also a range of important lessons on innovation emerging from the pandemic, when, out of necessity, many local communities found new ways to organize learning. Among the most eye-opening to me is the continued family demand for "smallness," where students are more in charge of their own learning and development, and known and deeply cared for by adults. Authorizing must play a critical role in figuring out how to better foster innovative options built from family aspirations.

We cannot regulate our way out of the pandemic. We must create our way out of this learning crisis. Let's expand existing high-quality programs. Let's create new excellent innovative opportunities. Our experience, our policies, and our practices have never been more essential. Our work has never been more urgent.

Karega Rausch is president and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).

Resources

[Communities Are Demanding Excellent Educational Opportunities. It's Time We Do Something Different.](#) Karega Rausch. Ed Post.

[High-Quality Charter Schools Can Help Drive Student Recovery from COVID — If They're Allowed to Grow and Expand.](#) Karega Rausch. The 74.

[New NACSA Chief Karega Rausch's Mission for Authorizers: Make Charter Schools More Responsive to the Communities They Serve.](#) Beth Bates. The 74.

[Working with communities is hard and complex—and vital.](#) M. Karega Rausch. Flypaper blog, The Fordham Institute.

Learning to Become an Advocate for All Children

Jessica Rodriguez

When my child left day care and was ready to transition to the first grade, I had to make a choice. I knew my neighborhood school in Miami's Liberty City was not good enough. The schools here unfortunately aren't the greatest, and I didn't want my child to be a statistic, another kid from a low-income neighborhood who was underserved.

I was ready to drive to Hialeah, about 30 minutes away, where I started school myself. Luckily, I didn't have to. I was able to enroll him in a local public charter school. I liked that the school had all the answers to some of my most concerning decision-making questions. I loved that the school valued students, both educationally and socially; a place where they are heard and cared for. And I loved that the school makes sure "the village" is a village, that they actively involve parents in the education of their children.

My son is my WHY; I'm involved in every capacity. I challenge him all the time, but I'm also his biggest cheerleader and supporter. I'm always there when he needs me. His friends are always telling him, "I know your mom will be here at school." That makes me feel good. It's important for your kids to know you have their back!

I'm also the school's number-one lead parent. When they ask me to do legislative work, I'm there. When they want marketing help, I do it. When they want an article, I write it. I'm a change agent—a representative of advocacy. Your child needs to know you're involved. When it comes to education, you can't be an innocent bystander. You can't allow choices to be made for your family. You have to get up and get active!



WHEN IT COMES TO
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BE AN INNOCENT
BYSTANDER.

My former job in the NeighborhoodHELP Program at Florida International University taught me a lot about community engagement and what was the true definition of a humanitarian. I learned to look at the community from a different perspective, with different lenses to connect with families right where they were. The job led me to engage with many other networks, including Public Schools 305, a nonprofit that teaches parents how to be involved in their children's education. Parents learn about school board meetings and how the decisions being made directly impact their students. A resource to learn about the difference between neighborhood schools, public charters, and private schools. Equipping them with the right tools to do the work they needed to do in order to secure the right place for their child's needs. In teaching others in the community, I was also teaching myself. I learned to exercise my right as a parent and that we too have a seat at the table!

So, by the time my son was ready to start school, I was equipped with the right tools and information. As an active, skilled, and resourceful parent, I'm now trying to share what I've learned with other families. Our children are the future of this country and if we truly believe that statement, let's be actively involved in the security of CHOICE.

We deserve to choose how our children will thrive and secure the deliverance of excellent education. Charter schools are chosen by a lot of families, because they offer a better option than the schools in our neighborhoods. Our neighborhood schools have dropped the bar immensely by derailing from traditional programs and the creation of innovative ones. Culturally affirming environments and dual language immersion programs are some ideas, but most importantly, we value being part of a vibrant and diverse community, here in Miami Florida.



Jessica Rodriguez is a charter school parent and education advocate.

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Build a Bigger Tent

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Trying to Regain the Political Center in Polarizing Times

Myrna Castrejón

California has been a beacon for the national public charter school movement for 30 years. In 1992, we were the second state to approve legislation allowing charter schools. We have the most charter schools—more than 1,300. And we have the most charter school students in the country—nearly 700,000. We have educated more than 9 million in the past three decades. That’s 9 million students whose life trajectory was transformed by a public charter school education! Historically, enrollment has increased significantly year after year, though the pandemic accelerated enrollment losses across California that respond to broader demographic shifts we have seen coming for a while. That said, we are more popular than ever; according to our 2022 annual survey, California voters support charter schools by a wide margin (55% to 24%) and parents even more so, particularly parents of color—with support as high as 76%. Fully 64% of parents surveyed said they would consider sending their child to a public charter school.

Our schools overwhelmingly serve students who have historically been underserved by traditional public schools. For instance, while Black students make up about 4% of the state’s school population, they account for 7% of charter school enrollment. Statewide, California’s charter school enrollment is predominantly Latino, serving 53% Latino students and 15% English language learners statewide, with much higher concentrations in urban areas like Los Angeles, where the proportion of Latino students rises to near 80%. After the state effectively banned bilingual education in 1998 via Proposition 227, courageous charter schools continued to offer bilingual education and developed deep expertise in dual language instruction until Proposition 58 overturned the ban in 2016.



WE ARE MUCH MORE
ACTIVELY BUILDING—AND
JOINING—COALITIONS.

Most important, historically we have had great results for students. On average, Latino and Black charter school students are closer to reaching grade-level proficiency than their peers in district schools and graduate with significantly better access to four-year colleges. Black charter school students outperform their district peers in both math and English language arts (ELA); Latino students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities outperform district peers in ELA and match district peers in math. The pandemic has made academic assessment challenging due to suspended testing protocols and waves of absenteeism. Yet the Center for Research on Education Outcomes confirm that charter schools in California have responded more urgently than their district peers, as measured by the average of four-day deployment of remote learning after closures in March 2020, the number of touchpoints with students, and units of learning completed. In fact, many of those peers struggled to pivot to distance learning altogether in 2020.

There are several reasons for our success. We have a very diverse system or rather a series of microsystems. There is the urban core, mostly coastal—in Los Angeles, Orange County, Sacramento, Oakland, and much of the Bay Area. We also have schools in other kinds of communities, centered in the Inland Empire, serving students from Stockton, Fresno, Riverside, San Bernardino, Indio, and the like—many of them serving rural and suburban families. Much of our sector’s growth has been in innovative programs that offered project-based learning and hybrid learning well before the pandemic.

Until recently, we have enjoyed bipartisan political support. Indeed, our existence was the result of a compromise between those who wanted a more controversial type of school choice (such as private school vouchers) and those who did not. Charters were the middle ground. We represent choice, but we are still public schools. We also have benefitted from robust financial support, both from the federal Charter Schools Program, created in 1994, and private philanthropy. In addition, we were able to capitalize on the overall boom in public school enrollment over the past three decades and to keep on that trajectory even as district school enrollment began to decline in recent years in some areas. We offer the quality choices that parents and students have been seeking.

But the politics have changed and our movement is having to adjust to these new realities. The shifts began about 10 years ago when the California



Teachers Union declared all-out war on charter schools. Public charter schools became Public Enemy Number 1, the supposed “home of profit-seeking billionaires seeking to privatize public education.” Or so the allegation went. The 2016 election, especially at the presidential level, led to a further political radicalization and polarization that seems to have only worsened since then. The 2018 California elections were a “blue tsunami,” sweeping super-majorities of union-backed Democrats into the state legislature. Sacramento went from blue to navy blue.

By January 2019, seven days after I took over leadership of the California Charter Schools Association, 17,000 people were blocking our buildings, accusing us of being the “playground of billionaires.” Strong anti-charter bills were introduced in the legislature. We literally were fighting for our survival. We managed to preserve academic achievement as the primary indicator of success, our North Star from the start. We also limited the ability of local school boards to eradicate our growth or put established charter schools out of business altogether.

We succeeded in the legislature, but it was close. The reality is that we were alone in Sacramento, with few vocal allies other than the thousands of parents who showed up to rally on our behalf in support of their children. We can’t let that happen again.

As a result of this near-death experience, we have shifted our strategies. We are much more actively building—and joining—coalitions. We are making common cause with others who share our commitment to equity, access, and educational opportunity for all students even if they do not share all of our specific priorities.

The pandemic has reinforced the reality that we are all in this together—and that the predominantly low-income communities we serve are especially vulnerable. So we are standing together with local progressive groups to support causes not directly tied to education but that rightly put the focus on the human needs of our families at the center—food banks, health clinics, and the like.

We also are meeting with rural school superintendents, who regularly deal with the same problems of scale that challenge many of our smaller charter operators. We can learn from each other.



Traditionally, our sector's ability to survive and thrive was tied to pro-charter candidates being elected to office and winning their races and keeping their seats. But as a former volunteer parent organizer, I recognize our advocacy needs to go beyond the next election cycle to focus on a broader array of issues; after all, people don't have "issues," they have lives. They connect with us because they want a good life, good schools, safe neighborhoods, and a future for their children that is better than their own. They want to have a fair shake and an equal shot. The condition of justice doesn't exist in compartments.

In Sacramento, we historically focused only on charter school bills. We did not even sign on to broader education reform bills that were advanced by many of our allies. This concept of lanes made for good management clarity, but it did nothing to build alliances. We can't afford that kind of myopia. Last year, we publicly backed more than 25 bills in the legislature, addressing issues from gun safety to fair housing.

All of us in the education reform movement need to recognize that policymakers and philanthropists are prioritizing the more immediate threats to society—pandemic survival, social justice, environmental justice, income inequality, food, housing, and health care. These are existential threats to our communities.

Yes, we need to continue prioritizing academics. But charter schools also need to be in the middle of solving these broader societal challenges or at minimum providing context and allyship when needed. That makes the work of advocacy more complicated for all of us. But helping address these interconnected priorities is the only path forward for us. We can't survive as an island.

Charter schools started as a big tent, the result of a bipartisan compromise. Some say such bipartisanship is no longer possible. We're doing our best to prove them wrong—even if our arms sometimes hurt from trying to hold the political center, where the vast majority of Americans live. And coming out of the pandemic, when we are reaching historic highs in favorability, all eyes are on charter schools to lead the way beyond the learning losses and parental frustration with our education system to lean into recovery, transformation, and a new wave of innovation.

Resources

[Are the Kids OK? How California Charter Public Schools Support Social-Emotional Wellbeing Schoolwide.](#)
Portrait of the Movement 2021.
California Charter Schools Association.

[California Charter Schools Association website.](#)

[Las escuelas charter de California website.](#)

Myrna Castrejón is president and chief executive officer of the California Charter Schools Association.

Focus on Long-Term, Systemic Change

Shavar Jeffries

The education reform sector over the last three decades has made significant progress in growing public charters throughout the country, particularly in a series of bellwether cities serving large numbers of students, such as New Orleans and Washington, D.C. But from an advocacy perspective, this progress, at least in heavily unionized largely Democratic communities, has been achieved primarily through opportunistic investments in individual campaigns and candidates as opposed to more systematic attempts to shift the policymaking ecosystem.

The pro-charter sector has generally identified leaders who both recognized the need for new ideas about education policy and had sufficient political capital to advance education reform policies in the face of often entrenched opposition. In so doing, the charter sector did not create the political conditions for the choice issue itself to win. The sector instead made strategic investments in extraordinary individuals who either had independent access to a longstanding political operation or had an extraordinary ability to finance and build their own. That is, at least in urbanized, more liberal cities and states, the education reform sector depended largely on political heroes, not the long-term political investments that re-shape the prevailing political ecosystem.

The next phase of charter growth will require a shift from a hero's approach to an ecosystem approach. This strategy should focus on three core elements.

First, **the sector needs a permanent political infrastructure** with: a) the capacity to invest competitively and consistently in both candidate donations and independent expenditures in key regions; b) the resources to effectively lobby and advance reform policies among elected officials; and c) a robust candidate pipeline so that we consistently have a critical mass of quality, values-aligned potential leaders. No longer can we afford only to play opportunistically in a handful of races and



THE NEXT PHASE OF
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skip cycles. Nor can we continue to hope that values-aligned candidates decide to run for key races. We must actively recruit and train them.

Our sector has made strides in this direction in recent years in certain key regions. But these efforts are generally funded year by year and thus reflect comparably short-term strategies, which as a rule are hero- rather than ecosystem-focused. Donors too often make small, one-year grants to a handful of groups, which undercuts their ability to engage in medium-, let alone long-term, planning. Even when donors make larger grants, they are generally specific to a particular election cycle and tend to arise out of a donor-driven, due-diligence process. As a result, several months of campaign-by-campaign (and usually candidate-by-candidate) information gathering leads to funds being released very late in electoral cycles, in some cases, mere weeks before election day. This approach further reinforces the short-term hero mindset, as each particular race is effectively framed as life or death.

Even more, this short-termism creates a scarcity mindset among peer advocacy groups that undermines collaboration in the context of a pro-charter advocacy environment that is still relatively small and nascent, particularly compared to the decades-long advocacy infrastructure of anti-charter organizations in blue states. With annual funding cycles and strategies overly focused on individual races, advocacy organizations face make-or-break campaigns that inhibit the collaborative long-range planning essential to transforming the policymaking environment.

Second, **our sector must more aggressively convey the life-changing impact of public charters and more assertively debunk misinformation.** We need to elevate the voices of students, families, and community members to celebrate the impact that charters are having on young people, especially low-income students of color. A strategy involving national, regional, and social media, as well as ongoing engagement with credible local organizations and influencers, needs to convey how charters are changing lives. The charter sector over the last few years has too often responded defensively to critiques. That must end immediately. Our sector surely has significant room to grow in terms of academic and life outcomes, but we generally have provided significantly better educational outcomes than traditional alternatives. We must communicate that message confidently, clearly, and repetitively.



We also must more aggressively debunk false critiques and become much more comfortable with calling out the special interests whose policies and actions have undermined progress for low-income students. We must invest in rapid-response resources to quickly rebut the increasing barrage of falsehoods. Even more, we must invest in playing offense to put charter opponents on the defensive.

Finally, **the charter sector should cultivate partnerships and build alliances with persuadable influencers and organizations that advocate for the children, families, and communities we serve.** Because quality public charters exist at the forefront of the country's efforts to break cycles of inter-generational poverty, our sector should have durable, long-term relationships with peer organizations that share this agenda. Such coalition building not only will pay dividends when inevitable charter policy fights arise, but also will promote education-adjacent policies, from housing to wages to healthcare, that will accelerate educational gains by strengthening the families and communities where our students live.

The charter sector has been instrumental in creating pathways beyond inter-generational poverty for millions of students for years. We should be proud and bullish about our impact on educational opportunity and equity in a country that denies both to so many. Yet yesterday's tactics will not yield the necessary next level of growth and impact.

The good news is that our sector has within it the resources, talent, and capacity to build upon the successes of the past, learn from missteps, and unlock the world-changing potential of millions of young people who continue to be trapped in a quagmire of inter-generational poverty. With a well-funded, long-term, and ecosystem-level advocacy strategy, our sector will create the policymaking conditions that are critical to realizing that vision.

Shavar Jeffries is the CEO of the KIPP Foundation, geared towards training and developing educators to lead KIPP Public Schools. Jeffries is the former national president of Democrats for Education Reform, a national political organization that supports elected Democrats and candidates for office who seek to expand policies and practices that work well for America's students.

Resources

[Is the "Education Voter" the New Swing Voter?](#) The Harris Poll, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

[Charter Schools Make Gains, According to 26-State Study](#) Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO)

[Charter Schools Show Steeper Upward Trend in Student Achievement than District Schools](#) Education Next

Good Policy is Good Politics

Patricia Levesque

In 1991, Republican Gov. Arne Carlson was the first governor to sign a charter school bill into law, with bipartisan support. A year later, again with bipartisan support, Republican Gov. Pete Wilson made California the second state to offer charter schools. Matter of fact, many of the nation's charter school laws share a similar history: Republican governor with bipartisan legislative support. But today, five out of six states that prohibit charter schools are traditionally “red states.” And, of the 10 smallest charter school programs in the nation, seven have Republican governors.

Why is this? And, what does it mean when looking to build a more diverse education ecosystem for every student?

Much of the Republican opposition to public charter schools rests in rural Republicans – places where the traditional public school system is often the largest employer. For a variety of reasons, a zero-sum game mentality remains place – where Republican elected officials view any alternatives to the traditional public school system as a threat, rather than what's best for individual students.

While this thinking was pervasive for much of the past 30 years, there's evidence that it's changing, and Republican elected officials should take note or risk being put on notice, because good policy is good politics.

Nationwide, educational choice is overwhelmingly popular – especially emerging from the pandemic, where families rushed to find schools that remained open and serving their children. A recent [poll](#) found 74 percent of parents would consider sending their child to public charter school, with 77 percent of parents expressing demand for increased public charter school offerings in their area. While not every parent will choose to exercise school choice, 84 percent of parents believe charter schools should be an option for other students and families, even if they don't choose to exercise the option themselves. With support this strong, politicians who block this right risk the political consequence of being out of step with their constituents.



KEEPING REPUBLICANS
ENGAGED IS CRITICAL
TO THE FUTURE.

It's a choice that matters because charters schools have proven to produce high-quality outcomes for students. In the latest [26 state study by the Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes \(CREDO\)](#), charter school students made significant gains compared to those in traditional public schools. And, research from [Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance found higher reading scores for charter school students compared with peers in traditional district schools](#).

This doesn't mean that every student should attend a charter school, nor does it dismiss the terrific traditional public schools serving students throughout the country, rather it's proof that charters work. And most of all, the latest evidence should cause legislators to work to expand, not limit access. Because, if educational outcomes are what matters – Republican legislators must embrace charter schools.

Finally, charter schools are a necessary part of the future of education. Two hundred years ago, our nation's education system was designed to meet the industrial revolution, where a factory model, one-size-fits-all education mirrored the economic needs of the day. Today, students are entering global economy with a workforce that is constantly evolving – and they need a personalized education that can match their individual needs. Charter schools are an important part of our nation's educational ecosystem that leverages the benefits of pluralism.

In 30 years, Republicans have been bold, and it's paid off as millions of children all across the country have found new hope in their charter school. As we look toward the next 30 years, I encourage Republicans and all policymakers to be bold, to embrace all forms of choice, and seek every opportunity to raise outcomes for every child because good policy can truly change lives.



*States missing charter school laws: MT, NE, ND, SD, VT

Patricia Levesque is the CEO of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd).

Families Cannot Afford to Wait

Congressman Ritchie Torres (NY-15)

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that school segregation was unconstitutional. Yet, 68 years later, school segregation still plagues our education system. New York City schools are among the most segregated in the country—even more segregated than they were a decade ago.

When I was a New York City public school student in the 1990s, I witnessed firsthand the growth of unassailable achievement gaps for many of my peers. Today, my home borough of the Bronx still has the lowest educational attainment rates of all five boroughs in New York City. I know that my mother, like any other parent, wanted nothing more than for her three kids than to attend adequately funded and well-staffed schools. Even after decades of effort from lawmakers to fundamentally reinvest in our schools, many children, especially children of color, cannot access the high-quality education and support they need to become tomorrow's change agents and leaders.

Educational disparities among people of color are of particular concern to me. Without access to a rigorous education and supportive services, students from overburdened, underserved communities like mine cannot succeed later in life. The answer to the achievement gap issue is not limiting the range of schools that students can attend, but increasing public school options for residents of underserved communities. Public charter schools can fill this immediate need and begin to level the playing field for historically disadvantaged students.



CHARTER SCHOOLS
ARE ONE OF THE MOST
POWERFUL TOOLS WE
HAVE TO REVITALIZE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Charter schools are one of the most powerful tools we have to revitalize public schools. With equity and innovation at the core of their mission, charter schools provide rigorous academic instruction to students and offer individualized support that may not be otherwise available in traditional public schools. This inclusive, productive environment delivers long-term benefits for children that outlasts their time as students. For example, the higher scores among charter students on ELA and math standardized tests alone increase their likelihood to complete college by fivefold. These success rates demonstrate that charter schools can and should coexist with traditional public schools to ensure that every child has the opportunity to obtain a robust, transformational education.

Some progressives are reluctant to support charter schools because they fear an increase in charter school funding will lead to further divestment in district schools in low-income neighborhoods. I could not disagree more. The debate over funding public schools may continue for years or decades to come, but the children in my district cannot afford to wait another moment. More public charter schools means more opportunity for students from low-income families to access upward mobility, which will build a stronger bridge to a more inclusive middle class. Public charter schools can shape a steady pipeline of tenacious, capable young leaders from historically underserved communities who enjoy successful and stable careers because of their educational experience—not in spite of it.

The federal government needs to recommit to supporting students of all ages, even outside of the K-12 system. Universal pre-K is a foundational tool that ensures more children are supported during early childhood and are set on the right path to success from an early age. Universal pre-K will create a more diverse and inclusive classroom and help children to develop important cognitive and emotional skills early in life.



Access issues remain critical after the completion of pre-K through 12th grade. With the skyrocketing costs of higher education, college students today are facing a major affordability crisis that needs urgent federal intervention. With an unequal burden falling disproportionately on Black and Brown borrowers, the student debt crisis is an issue of racial and economic justice. Generations of systemic racism prevented millions of Black and Brown families from building wealth, forcing them to take on more debt to finance the same degrees as white families. In New York City, more than 40% of City University of New York (CUNY) students face housing insecurity and more than 50% deal with food insecurity because of the crippling costs of higher education and the years to come of insurmountable debt. These inequalities only exacerbate existing cycles of poverty across generations. Canceling student debt would dramatically narrow the racial wealth gap, giving millions of families a fighting chance at long-term financial security. It would also relieve an unprecedented economic burden on working families and fulfill the people's right to an accessible, affordable education.

We cannot substantively address the disparities in our educational system without addressing the underlying root causes of systemic poverty. As a member of Congress, I legislate from an intimate place of lived experience. My district has both the highest poverty rate estimate and the lowest median income of any Congressional district in the United States. When I was growing up in public housing, my neighbors struggled with food and housing insecurity. Twenty percent of children in the Bronx experience food insecurity and 40% live in poverty. Students who grow up in poverty struggle to escape it even as they get older, and we owe it to the most vulnerable Americans to make our government and our institutions work for them.

As a member of Congress, my highest priority is strengthening the social safety net for every American—no matter their zip code, background, or size of their wallet. I believe that there is no tool more powerful than the Child Tax Credit (CTC) to permanently eradicate child poverty. The Child Tax Credit would slash the national child poverty rate by 40%, cut the Black child poverty rate in half, and benefit 98% of children in my district. More than 30 million families received monthly checks last year thanks to the enhanced and expanded CTC in the American Rescue Plan, a once-in-a-generation investment that uplifted families who were struggling long before the pandemic hit in 2020. It is my mission in Congress to make this expansion permanent so that no child has to grow up shrouded in poverty.



The dual crises of COVID-19 and systemic racism have laid bare the economic inequality that plagues our country. As we face the worst economic crisis in a century, we need to focus on alleviating the economic burden for working people and investing in families that are struggling to stay afloat. By expanding educational options, making education more affordable, and investing in direct economic relief for working people, we can create a more flexible, durable social safety net for every American and take bold steps towards a brighter, more prosperous future for our nation.

Congressman Ritchie Torres is the U.S. Representative for New York's 15th congressional district.



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Building New Models Through Partnerships

Michael Crow

At Arizona State University (ASU), our charter is to “assume fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural, and overall health” of the communities we serve. This shift from functioning as a public institution designed to “do for” the community versus a public enterprise designed to come alongside and serve with the community is critical. Rather than simply incubating and curating knowledge and resources within the university, we actively seek opportunities to employ university assets creatively in service with and for students, families, businesses, community groups, and the broader public.

While ASU is applying resources in many fields, education is our heartbeat and a central focus for our entrepreneurial efforts, as it is also the heartbeat of any town or city in the world. We begin by looking at the students themselves, especially students with less access and resources for their entire educational experience, from preschool to college. We think about what each student needs to progress successfully through school and life. What barriers need to be removed? Are they financial? Social? Cultural? Where would extra support make the difference, and where do barriers need to be removed altogether?

Then we ask: How do current models need to change? What needs to be eliminated, modified, or enhanced? Where are entirely new models needed? Building new models requires thoughtful and imaginative partnerships across the P-20 spectrum and even outside of it. Our K-12 network of public charter schools has been partnering with local communities to produce a whole menu of imaginative models that offer families multiple avenues to meet their child’s needs.

For example, in our site-based, immersive learning programs, we now offer a hybrid model, where students work from home on Monday and Friday and spend Tuesday and Wednesday in a blended learning classroom. Thursday is a flex day for project-based learning, field trips, extra tutoring, or enrichment. A virtual teacher and a site-based learning advisor share instructional support, while a learning success coach provides social-emotional support, and college and career guidance.



PARTNERING TO BUILD
NEW MODELS REQUIRES
A LEVEL OF SCRAPPINESS
AND AN ABILITY TO
PAY ATTENTION AND
PIVOT QUICKLY.

In another model, designed to address the looming teacher shortage, a highly experienced blended learning instructor provides daily, synchronous instruction virtually via an iPad swivel that rotates through the room. The virtual teacher works directly with students at various small-group stations, while the onsite learning facilitator provides additional instructional support and daily face-to-face interaction. With [teacher shortages rising at an alarming rate](#), this model allows schools to tap the talents of experienced teachers both locally and across the country.

A partnership between ASU's Learning Enterprise, one of the university's three core pillars that is dedicated to creating pathways for lifelong learning, and ASU Prep bridges the K-12/college divide by providing high school students a way to earn stackable Google IT certifications, offering competitive wage-earning benefits and routes into IT-related majors. In addition, students earn both high school and college credit through this innovative program, while employers gain potential employees who are motivated, trained, and ready for further education.

ASU Prep Digital, our vehicle for building and scaling innovative K-20 solutions nationally, partnered with Phoenix-area Pendergast Elementary School District, a Title I district where leaders wanted to give students a way to earn high school credit. Rather than creating a gifted program for a limited few, they wanted to open wide the doors for acceleration, giving their students equal opportunities and support like those from better resourced districts.

Virtual algebra and geometry courses were initially offered. ASU Prep Digital provided the instruction and trained a local facilitator for daily onsite support. The program has given elementary students a significant high school head start. For example, one student, now in high school, entered his freshman year having already completed two years of high school math requirements, so he could begin college math courses in his junior year, also provided through the ASU partnership, thus saving time to and cost of an eventual degree. Pendergast was recognized by the National School Boards Association for [this creative model](#).

When COVID-19 thrust our nation's teachers into remote teaching with no training and limited resources, it was clear they would need both immediate and ongoing support. The Arizona Department of Education was eager to assist, so a partnership was formed to adapt the training that ASU Prep and the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College already had and scaling it statewide using state-of-the-art technology. Since spring of 2020, more than 17,000 teachers have benefited from this free program, which equips teachers with rich blended learning instructional strategies and tools specific to supporting effective digital learning environments.



Building new collaborative teaching and learning models requires a level of scrappiness and an ability to process and pivot quickly. It also requires patience and a commitment to the often-messy process of brainstorming, listening, planning, and fine-tuning. Innovations, like children, are not born fully formed. Rather, committed leaders design strong feedback loops and evaluation strategies that must be applied with discipline in order to mold good ideas into great ones.

Our nation's teachers, parents, and students have all had a taste of what digitally supported learning environments can do, and many families do not want to be shoehorned back into status quo models, especially when the child has benefitted from the virtual or blended learning experience.

The number of families choosing to homeschool has doubled over the last two years, with a majority of growth coming from communities of color. [Micro-schools](#), [pandemic pods](#), and [hybrid models](#) are growing.

Rather than pressure those families to go back to a model that, for whatever reason, did not work for them, how can we partner with and support those families and, in doing so, remain connected and in community with them? We have an opportunity to connect with parents and schools that are courageously testing new models; optimize their engagement and willingness to experiment; and lend support, resources, learning design and research expertise, and quality digital assets.

When we work from a belief that we are, in fact, stronger together than we are working in isolation, we can design more thoughtful, nuanced, and innovative models that increase quality and provide high-capacity support for our nation's families and our school systems. Most importantly for ASU, we can fulfill our mission to enhance, improve, and enrich the communities we serve.



Michael Crow has been the president of Arizona State University since 2002.

Charters Help Improve Quality in All Schools

Reed Hastings

“**E**very child is different.” Say this basic fact to any parent, teacher or coach in America and I imagine you’d get heads nodding in resounding agreement. Despite this reality, for decades American public education functioned as if every child learned the exact same way.

In 1998, I was fortunate enough to partner with a team of amazing educators, led by Don Shalvey, as they opened Aspire, one of the first public charter school networks in California. Our beliefs were pretty simple. Every child should have the opportunity to attend a public school that meets their unique needs.

Wealthy families had been doing this for decades, whether by paying for private schools or buying homes zoned to the most desirable public school. I believed then, as I still do now, that the ability to attend the public school that best meets your child’s needs shouldn’t be a privilege afforded to the few, but a basic right for all.

Over the nearly 25 years since that first school opened, millions more families across the country now have the opportunity to find the public school that’s the best fit for their child. This is the direct result of the growth of public charter schools, and the movement of dedicated and selfless educators running them.

Unfortunately, as public charter schools expanded, so too did tensions, debates, and political battles. Debate and discourse in a democracy is a good thing, but I think it’s fair to say that the dialogue surrounding charters has at times veered into destructive toxicity. At the root of many of these debates is a disagreement over a simple question: does creating new public school options hurt the ability of existing schools to meet the needs of their students?



BUT WE STILL HAVE
SO FAR TO GO.

Fortunately, after 20 years we're beginning to get answers that should put this debate to bed. **Public school systems that have grown the number of high-quality charter schools available to families have seen a rising tide of increased graduation rates and improved student achievement that's benefited both charter and traditional public schools alike.** All schools have gotten better.

There's arguably no greater example of this than in Washington D.C. Fifteen years ago, D.C. was home to one of the worst public school systems in our country. It was fundamentally failing a population of disproportionately low-income Black and Brown students. Things were so bad that, in 2007, then-Mayor Fenty took oversight of the schools and ushered in a series of sweeping changes. Most significantly, D.C. invested heavily in educators across all public schools and expanded the number of high-quality public charter schools available to families.

Today, D.C. is the fastest improving urban school system in the nation, [according to the Council of Great City Schools](#). Even when controlling for demographic changes, [researchers at Mathematica](#) found that D.C. students made learning gains faster than students in other states over the last decade. This shouldn't be surprising—when every child is able to attend the school that's the right fit for their needs, all schools ultimately improve.

I'm deeply proud to have been a small part of this change in public education that has brought so much good to so many families across our country. But we still have so far to go. Millions of students, disproportionately students of color, are still in desperate need of great schools that meet their widely varying needs.

Over the past two years, as we've grappled with a pandemic, the wide chasm between what we want our public school systems to provide for all children and what they're currently offering has been laid bare for the entire country to see. We all know the story. Parents of school-aged children have lived it. Slow-moving bureaucracies struggling to adapt in the face of an unprecedented crisis, our most vulnerable students languishing without technology or meaningful instruction for months on end, poorly supported educators being pressured and burdened like never before, and countless parents stuck idly by watching their children fall behind.

But there are also real signs of hope that can guide our path forward:

1. Educators at KIPP New Jersey found a way to create an evening kindergarten so that working parents could be present to help their students during the early days of remote learning.



2. Schools across the country gained free access to curriculum, lesson plans, and more to improve online learning from Uncommon Schools, one of the highest-performing charter schools in the nation.
3. Lakisha Young and the parents at Oakland Reach created a learning hub so their students could stay on track amidst an unprecedented loss of instructional time from the traditional system.

I could cite countless other examples. From each example, a pattern emerges: **Empowered educators and passionate parents coming together to create school and learning experiences that meet the unique needs of each individual student.**

Those two elements were the foundation of that first charter school back in the 1990s in California, and they've been the foundation of thousands of schools since that have made a real difference for kids across the country. Now more than ever we must embrace this lesson. We have to work together with educators and parents to keep expanding the high-quality public charter schools that help make sure every child has a school that meets their needs. If we can do that, I deeply believe we'll build a better public school system for all students, a school system where all children can thrive.

Reed Hastings is the co-founder, chairman, and co-chief executive officer of Netflix and a long-time supporter of charter schools.



Realizing the Potential of Career and Technical Education Charter Schools

Tamar Jacoby

The public charter school revolution began 30 years ago. The modern-day career and technical education revolution dates back more than a decade. But until recently, there has been little overlap. That's too bad.

I remember a few years ago asking a colleague in the charter movement for a list of his favorite career and technical education (CTE) charter schools. His response: "I think there's one in California." This prompted me to compile my own list, culled from the web, of charter high schools that offer opportunities for work-based learning or prepare students to earn industry certifications. I identified about 200 schools.

Most of them are single-site schools, such as Comp Sci High and the Urban Assembly's New York Harbor School, both in New York City and the Purdue Polytechnic High School in Indianapolis. In recent years, the KIPP network has also begun to strengthen its CTE offerings.

This meager portfolio is not nearly enough—for two reasons. First, the need for quality CTE education has never been greater. As recently as 1940, fewer than 5% of American men or women had completed four years of college. In 1980, only one-third of jobs required more than a high school diploma. Today, two-thirds of jobs require some postsecondary education or training—but not necessarily a four-year college degree.



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A growing number of parents, students, and policymakers recognize the limitations of the “bachelor’s or bust” mentality that has prevailed in American education for the past several decades. The [new economy](#) is creating millions of well-paying, middle-skill jobs in manufacturing, the skilled trades, IT, and healthcare that do not require a bachelor’s degree. Meanwhile, fewer than half the students who enroll in college complete a two- or four-year degree. Life gets in the way—usually work or family.

CTE programs can be a practical alternative for the millions of students who prefer hands-on learning or have their sights set on a technical career. The hallmarks of a high-quality program include opportunities for work-based learning, instruction that prepares students to earn industry certifications, and on-ramps to high-paying, high-demand careers.

Second, public charter schools are uniquely positioned to deliver on the promise of CTE. They have the flexibility to be innovative. They can create hands-on, project-based, and experiential programs that capture students’ interest. They have more leeway to rearrange students’ schedules to make room for workplace experiences that make learning relevant. And they can hire teachers with industry work experience—essential for preparing students to succeed in the workplace. Most traditional high school programs and state education authorities emphasize academic preparation and teaching certificates. Industry work experience is less valued, if at all.

Building and sustaining a CTE charter isn’t easy. CTE is still stigmatized in many quarters as second-class education. I once appeared on a panel with a well-known charter educator who warned me, “Don’t you dare. I’m educating students for Swarthmore and Harvard. Don’t you dare show up and tell them that the best they can do is be a welder or a nurse.” I get it, given the low expectations that have hemmed in so many low-income students and students of color over the decades. But today’s CTE is not yesterday’s shop or home economics class.



Still another obstacle is the deep cultural differences between education and industry. All too often, in my experience, employers are from Mars, and educators are from Venus. Employers almost always want to move faster than the educators they partner with to develop CTE programs. Employers focus on outcomes, educators on process. Employers use meetings to make decisions; educators seek to get input and gain consensus. Employers are often impatient—perhaps too impatient to build the trust needed for sustainable partnerships. But educators often don’t listen, especially when the subject is instruction.

There are changes needed in many quarters to reap the full potential of CTE charters. Local education authorities can start by waiving requirements that make it difficult for high schools to hire instructors with industry work experience.

They should also reconsider one-size-fits-all academic standards. It’s not about lowering standards for CTE students—that’s unacceptable. But it may not always make sense to hold them to exactly the same standards as traditional academic students. One promising example from New York State: every high school student in the state must pass five Regents Exams to graduate, but CTE students can substitute an industry certification assessment for one of their five exams.

Within the charter school movement, local authorizers should be more open to innovative applications that go beyond traditional academic offerings. And the charter sector can do a better job of recognizing and scaling successful CTE programs.

In the wake of the pandemic, students, families, and policymakers are rethinking K-12 education and looking for new options for students. CTE charter schools are ideally situated to respond to this opportunity.

Tamar Jacoby is president of Opportunity America, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit working to promote economic mobility.

Resources

[A Match Made in Heaven: CTE Charter Schools](#). Opportunity America.

[Career and technical education and the soft bigotry of low expectations](#). Tamar Jacoby. Flypaper blog, The Fordham Institute.

[Career Technical Education](#). California Charter Schools Association.

[High School Choice](#) (video). C-Span.

[Peer-to-Peer Roundtable: CTE Charter Schools](#). Opportunity America.

Charter Sector Needs to Be Bigger, Bolder, and More Innovative Than Ever

Robin Lake

Beyond a doubt, when their programs are implemented well and overseen effectively, public charter schools can meet student needs. They also can provide results at scale, which is important. One can always find isolated examples of effective schools, but the charter movement is truly a governance reform, not just a classroom reform. The incentives to replicate success are there, and the barriers are absent.

In particular, the rise of charter management organizations (CMOs) showed that good practices can be systematized so that multiple schools can benefit from effective and consistent practices. CMO leaders have told us that they succeeded because their boards weren't political, but instead were focused solely on the schools' mission: educating students. We've also seen the benefits of charter-district collaborations in sharing best practices. That has been an important element in the maturation of the charter movement.

More recently, we saw charters respond much more effectively than district schools in pivoting to remote learning and other innovations during the pandemic. Networks such as Success Academy and Cadence Learning used creative approaches to leverage the expertise of their teachers. Their master teachers provide whole-class instruction, freeing up others to provide more personalized support to students, families, and communities. Schools such as the Proyecto Vimenti Charter School in Puerto Rico leveraged the trust they've built with families and communities to offer a broad range of supports to students and their families, from wi-fi and iPad access to employment training for parents. Charter-district partnerships also have been active; for example, Indianapolis Public Schools worked with local charter schools to offer virtual learning options, while the nonprofit Mind Trust hosted learning hubs to provide tutoring and other supports to students.



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Going forward, however, the charter sector cannot rest on these accomplishments. It needs to be bigger, bolder, and more innovative than ever.

It needs to reinvent itself to serve the next generation of students, who are facing unprecedented challenges. Coming out of the pandemic, the kids are not alright, especially in the communities where charter schools tend to be located. Students need more help than ever—academically, socially, emotionally. Charters are ideally positioned to deliver, but only if they are willing to rethink their approaches and reinvent themselves.

I worry that the charter movement's success over the past 30 years could lead to ossification and institutional protectionism. I worry that many traditional districts will face disaster once the federal government's pandemic funding ends; districts will once again accuse charter schools of causing these financial hardships. I worry that charter schools will be on the back of their heels defending against these and other criticisms, as inaccurate as the charges may be.

The reality is that, if we keep thinking of school in traditional ways—XX teachers, YY students, ZZ programs working in a box we call “school”—we'll fail. The enormity of the challenge is just too big for traditional strategies. It's time to rethink everything. And if not charters, who? The question is whether the charter sector can reinvent itself in the moment.

The good news is that some schools already are leading the way. GEO Academies, for example, are thinking outside the traditional boundaries of school and offering career prep and social-emotional and mental health supports. The Proyecto Vimenti Charter School is looking at multi-generational approaches for attacking poverty, leveraging community assets to help students and their families. Micro-schools such as Great Hearts offer a mix of virtual school plus on-site support two days a week for everything from tutoring to band class. Other micro-schools are specializing in math and humanities, and not trying to offer a full portfolio of high school electives. Innovations like these were emerging before the pandemic, but they have expanded significantly in the past two years.

Maintaining this momentum will require charter authorizers to rethink their roles, too. They'll have to rework their traditional measures of success and develop new oversight and accountability structures that meet the moment.



Researchers like me can help, but we'll have to adjust as well. We'll continue to identify potential innovations and track their effectiveness, not just with data but with stories that bring to life schools' impact on students, families, and communities. We'll try to understand the differential impact of the pandemic on different students and how schools are responding. Are students being repaid what they are owed for their past two years of learning loss? Are they getting placed on the right path? Are they being well-prepared for the new world of productive work and active citizenship? What are the leapfrog innovations that can catapult us forward?

We're not so interested in proving that charters can be effective in the old ways. Instead, we'll be looking forward to how charters rise to this moment.

Robin Lake is the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.

Resources

[Brave New World at Success Academy.](#) Steven Wilson. Center on Reinventing Public Education.

[Crisis Breeds Innovation: Pandemic Pods and the Future of Education.](#) Center on Reinventing Public Education.

[Proyecto Vimenti Years Two and Three: A Lesson in Resiliency.](#) Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz. Boys and Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico.

Time to Double Down on Innovation

Diane Tavenner

I was introduced to charter schools as a graduate student at Stanford earning my master's in policy and school administration. At the same time, I was an administrative intern and high school teacher in a local school district. I recall a guest speaker talking about how she and her colleagues were about to start a charter school, and vividly remember feeling very defensive and telling myself that there was no way they would succeed. Of course, a few years later I found myself in the same position, starting a school myself and feeling equally passionate. By the way, a ton of people acted really defensive and told me I would fail.

Looking back, I think charters have proven two really important things:

- Schools can be run more efficiently and effectively when released from a lot of the bureaucracy.
- More importantly, all children, specifically Black and Brown students and students from low-income families, are capable of becoming college ready. When charters started in the 1990s, that wasn't a proven fact, and today, thanks to charter schools across the country, we have definitively proved it to be true. Charter schools were the first high schools in America to systematically prepare low-income Black and brown students for admissions to four-year colleges. Full stop.

More specifically, when I go back to California's original charter law, charter schools have made significant progress on five of the seven intended outcomes:

- Increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.



IF NOT CHARTERS,
THEN WHO OR WHAT?

- Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.
- Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.
- Hold the schools established under this part accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes, and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.
- Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.

I think we all have to be really honest about the two aspirations from the original law where the evidence is more mixed. One, I cannot make a compelling case that charter schools have actually improved pupil learning across the board. I think we've given access and opportunity to a lot of students who didn't have it before and therefore, far more students are learning. But we have yet to see the science of learning truly applied in all school models and the type of personalization that is possible and so desperately needed. Second, the law said charters would "encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods." I think our innovations have been far more about mindset and efficiency than innovations in how learning occurs. I don't think we've really contributed innovations in the teaching model.

If the pandemic proved anything, however, it was that K-12 education across the board desperately needs innovation in teaching and learning methods. I think we've done important, foundation-setting work here and charters can play a profound role over the next one, two, three decades.

To be sure, we'll have to overcome some obstacles. For one, the competition has gotten so vicious that charters spend most of our resources and creative energy just trying to stay alive. More importantly, to prove yourself as a charter, you have to just keep doing better on the state test scores, since these are the measures everyone has bought into. Regrettably, they are far too limited and are the greatest single obstacle to innovation.



That said, given the profound contributions charters have made over the last 30 years, we absolutely should double down in these areas. If not charters, then who or what? There aren't lots of options for innovations in teaching and for improved student outcomes. There is one: charters. To stop investing in charter schools would mean giving up on the possibility of transforming our public education system. In my view, that would mean giving up on America. Which is not an option.

Diane Tavenner is the co-founder and CEO of Summit Public Schools, a public school network that operates 11 schools in California and Washington.



SECTION

FIVE

Prepare Students and
Alumni to Lead

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Encouraging My Peers to Take Risks

Gitanjali Rao

I've had a passion for science ever since I was three or four, and my uncle gave me a science kit. Today, I'm a senior at STEM School Highlands Ranch, a public charter school outside Denver. My charter school is the perfect place for me because it gives me the flexibility to pursue my passions. I am taking classes here and at the University of Colorado-Denver, conducting research, traveling, and completing an internship at the Colorado Department of Law, where my research focused on the racial and age disparities associated with opioid use in Colorado.

I love how my school teaches real-world skills and problem solving. It's so personalized. The teachers are very supportive and help me navigate all these opportunities.

For example, I've written a book, [A Young Innovator's Guide to STEM](#), which teaches students, parents, and teachers how to be innovative. It focuses on the five main techniques that anyone can use to create: Observe, brainstorm, research, build, and communicate. I added a sixth step—iteration. The book includes advice on how to come up with an idea, encouragement to run with it, and information on technologies you can use to do the work. I help readers enter and succeed in science competitions—everything from interviewing tips to setting up a poster board.

I'm also pleased that I've had a chance to share advice like this online or in person through my series of mentoring workshops. So far, I've reached about 68,000 young people, including rural schools in the United States, Canada, Kenya, India, Afghanistan, Philippines, Australia, the United Kingdom, China, Nepal, Chile, Ghana, and other West African countries, and that number grows every week. Recently, I worked with other organizations to enhance a maker space in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. I mentor these students for different world contests, so that they can create their own platforms to share their ideas.



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My message is that everyone can innovate. You just need to be willing to take a risk and follow some basic steps with a growth mindset. I have had the pleasure to present at many education conferences on the need for schools to encourage a problem-solving mindset. I have a long journey to go in influencing a K-12 education curriculum that includes innovation, but I believe I am on the right path with the right support.

I think a lot of kids my age are scared of failure, especially in the United States, partly because they're worried about their grades. Once they get a bad grade, they too often shut down. Bad scores have become so stigmatized. We need to change that mindset.

I tell other students not to be afraid of taking that first step. You can't change what other people say about you. But you can change what you say about yourself. Stick with what you are passionate about.

Of course, it helps to have great teachers. For example, my physics teacher at STEM Highland is awesome. I used to hate physics, but he keeps telling me, "Don't worry so much about getting the right answer. It's okay to fail. Just make sure you learn something and do better the next time." I love that. I am not scared of physics anymore and have challenged myself to take the next level course.

In a way, I've been a risk-taker my whole life. I remember I was the only kindergarten student in a K-5 science camp in Ohio. I was so scared, but I pushed myself and loved it. I also used to be terrified of public speaking, which is ironic since I do so much of it now. In 3rd or 4th grade, however, I entered a competition that required me to give a speech. I was so scared, but I just forced myself to get up on stage. And it went okay.

One of my innovations is the [Kindly | UNICEF Office of Innovation](#) technology. It uses machine learning to help teenagers resist the temptation to bully other kids online. I've read that it only takes seven seconds for a teenager to want to "unsend" a message. Kindly helps them not send it in the first place and also understand their mood and why they might want to bully in the first place. I call it the "spell checker for cyberbullies." I'm so pleased that UNICEF partnered with me and the technology is now rolled out world-wide.

Thanks to *TIME* magazine, my work is getting a lot more visibility. I was named [TIME's top young innovator of 2020](#) for my work and, then in December 2020, was featured on the cover as the magazine's first ["Kid of the Year."](#) I'm so



humbled by the honors. I have no idea who nominated me, but I'm so proud that I was able to compete against 5,000 other kids from all over the world. And I'm gratified that I now have more of a voice to share my ideas and passions with so many others.

I'm looking forward to college. In many ways, my current school is like a college. We have so much support and freedom to pursue our interests. But after I graduate in 2023, I plan to attend an actual college. I'm not sure exactly where yet, but I know what I want to study: genetic engineering, product design, and public service. I really want to work in public service, influencing policies that have such a strong effect on our lives. That's been my mission for as long as I can remember—to create a global community of young innovators to solve problems all around the world. I'm eager for the next steps in my journey.

Gitanjali Rao is a 16-year-old aspiring scientist, young innovator, and a student at STEM School Highlands Ranch, a public charter school outside Denver.

Resources

[Gitanjali Rao](#). LinkedIn.

[One girl's commitment](#). United States Patent and Trademark Office.



Why are We the Future of Education?

Stephanie Robinson

According to the Brookings Institution, statisticians predict that by 2045 Whites will make up only 49.7% of the U.S. population, in contrast to 24.6% for Hispanics, 13.1% for Blacks, 7.9% for Asians and 3.8% for multiracial populations. When the United States is no longer predominately White, it will largely be due to the growth of the Hispanic/Latino community. But to maximize the potential of this new reality, the country will need to overcome some challenges. For example, the Latino community has the highest percentage of college enrollment, and yet one of the lowest percentages of college graduates. This is due to several factors, including many high schools that fail to prepare us for postsecondary success, and the high cost of college. According to UnidosUS, 65% of Hispanic students received a Pell Grant in 2016, and the average award was \$3,855—not enough to adequately cover college costs. As a result, most cannot afford to attend good colleges to get higher education. But let's backtrack a bit first.

As of 2018, there were 60 million Hispanic residents in the United States, and of those, only 11% (roughly 4 million) had a bachelor's degree. Millions of Latino immigrants come to the United States without a postsecondary education, and there is a direct correlation to the number of their children who are set up to succeed in college. These parents are raising the future. However, it is known that culturally, the Latino community does not share the same views and values as typical American parents.

Immigrants from places such as Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, and El Salvador, just to name a few, have lived very different lives and have a different mindset about what it takes to be successful. Living in these kinds of countries, many are taught at an early age not to take an education for granted. Students who are able to attend a good school and study hard and obtain a proper education will have a better chance to live comfortably, provide for their families, and enjoy life.



WE ARE GROWING.

WE ARE PROGRESSING.

My parents are from northern Mexico, Guaymas, Sonora. Their experiences in life shaped the way I was raised. This survival instinct is what pushes many students from Spanish-speaking countries to work hard. They know that once they graduate, there will be nobody to hold their hands or support them in the real world. Hispanic students who attend college recognize this, as they worked and lived through the process of studying for a better future, and therefore pass it on to their children.

Fortunately, I have a parent who is part of that 11% of Hispanics in America who have a bachelor's degree. My mother is a chemical engineer. This led her to search for the best schools for me and my siblings, providing the best possible chance at success in higher education. This meant learning about the American education system, types of schools, what STEAM/STEM meant, and other issues. She also had special insight into what I personally could gain from attending certain schools. Today's immigrants who are college graduates see the value of education and, just as my parents have done, will push their children to work just as hard to have the best education possible, and take advantage of all possible opportunities.

My parents always told me that parents want the best future for their kids, a better life that they are afforded by being born in this land of opportunity. Not out of necessity, but out of the discipline necessary to succeed in any aspect of life. Not because their children will face the same obstacles, but because these parents have confidence that their children can overcome any future challenges. These parents opened the door by coming into this country, and now they set their children toward a successful future that will continue opening doors for future generations.

By contrast, lesser educated immigrants may be less equipped to navigate the system for their children. This makes it harder for these children to achieve the "American Dream." And yet these young people are also the future of this country. They deserve our best, and should have access to a great education, even if their parents did not have great opportunities themselves in their home countries. Regardless of their family income, where they live, or where they came from, these young people also deserve a chance to make it in America.

The main struggle for immigrants is assimilation. The priority for promoting Latino educational success must be to proactively reach out to our community. Educators must use advertising and other tools to promote opportunities and point to helpful resources. With these resources, Latinos will be able to take the advancements in politics and education even further than the community has already extended them. Bringing diverse mindsets, perspectives, and ideas to light, politically speaking, is what creates additional chances for success.



Being in a public charter school, as of middle school, was a huge help in my path toward academic success and leadership. I have been offered and informed of more opportunities and specialized programs or events that have enriched my experience.

Why are we the future of education? We are growing. We are progressing. From Romualdo Pacheco, the first Hispanic American U.S. California Representative (1877-1879), to Katya Echazarreta, the first Mexican-born American woman in space (June 28, 2022), the Latino community has been paving the way for future generations to thrive.

Stephanie Robinson is a senior at Coral Academy of Science Las Vegas, and is a part of the Rising Leaders Initiative, an advocacy training program at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.



Modeling Alumni Leadership

Kalan Rogers

I know first-hand the power a school's alumni can have. I'm now leading Calhoun Falls Charter High School in South Carolina, the school I graduated from in 2012. I was very involved as a student: serving as senior class president and participating in basketball, track, cross-country, and band. After attending the University of South Carolina Upstate, I taught for two years in Union County. But when I had a chance to return to my hometown in 2018, I jumped at it.

Our school serves 160 students, grades 6-12. Sixty percent of them are African American, the remainder Caucasian. About 90% are considered low-income. Our school couldn't be more home-grown and community-focused. It was formed by families and community members in 2008 when the traditional high school closed and Calhoun Falls students were going to have to attend schools in neighboring towns.

There was no way I was going to an out-of-town school. All of my family – my parents and four older siblings had graduated from Calhoun Falls. I wasn't about to break the tradition. I was part of the first class at the new charter school, along with my older sister who entered as a senior. I'm proud that our family connection continues; one of my nieces attends Calhoun Falls, another will start in the fall, and I'm sure more will follow.

I've also worked hard to retain and attract school alumni to our staff. My front office manager was at the school from the start in 2008. So was my assistant principal and guidance counselor. Calhoun Falls graduates who have returned include our middle school social studies teacher, athletic director, school nurse, English language arts teacher, and business teacher. Our PE teacher had retired but came back and taught for three more years here. I like to bring them back whenever I can.

Engaging alumni is tough. It's a fight every year. They graduate and move on with their lives. About 70% to 80% of our students go to college after they graduate. And even though about 60% end up coming back to Calhoun Falls, it's a real challenge to get them involved. The attitude is, "I did my years there. It's not my problem



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now.” I get it. I felt the same way when I went to college myself.

But their voice is so important, and we have too many ongoing challenges for our alumni to remain on the sidelines. The public charter school community had two big wins in the state legislature this past year. First, we got permanent funding. Instead of having to apply to the state from scratch every fall, we now can budget ahead of time and then have our actual student count monitored twice a year, just like traditional public schools. Second, money now follows the child, so if a student transfers to our school mid-year, we get the full amount instead of just a partial payment. These were huge wins for us.

But we have big fights ahead. For example, our priority this year is to ensure that charter schools get access to local tax funds. Now, we get nothing even though we enroll over 90% of the community’s students. All the local tax money goes to the traditional schools elsewhere in the county. That’s not fair.

Alumni advocacy could help make a difference. I always tell students, “You have the opportunity to use your voice. Study the issues, get the data, cite your source.” I also am always reminding them that someone fought for them to make this school happen. They can help the next generation.

Part of it is leading by example. When we were trying to recruit families, for example, I once drove to Oklahoma to pick up a used school bus and then started the local bus route. We picked up rural kids for free. It’s one of the ways we’ve grown the school to serve more families. It’s all about a service orientation and loving what you do.

Indeed, community service is a hallmark of our program. All students do a minimum of 20 hours a year—everything from helping fix up the school and serving at athletic banquets to cleaning up downtown and fixing our “Welcome to Calhoun Falls” sign. Service is one way they’re giving back.

I’m hopeful we can do a better job of getting more alumni involved in giving back as well. I’m the only one in my graduating class who went into teaching. My classmates are nurses, truck drivers, mill workers, servicemen and women, and mechanics. But we all share a love for our school and community—and can all contribute to making it even better.

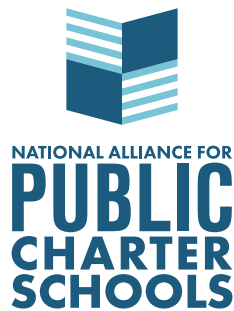


The school board has talked about starting an alumni foundation this year. I'd love it if they did that. It'll take a team effort to accomplish our goals. And alumni are in the best position to make our case. They are the first-hand beneficiaries of the charter school law that allowed us to get started in the first place and makes it possible for us to continue to serve our hometown 15 years later.

Kalan Rogers is the principal at Calhoun Falls Charter School in South Carolina.







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