

Minnesota Charter Public Schools Essay Writing Contest 2008

Winning Entries

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...The very talented student writers who shared their ideas and opinions with all of us through their insightful essays. You've reminded us that we all can learn much by listening to the voices of our youth.

...The many educators, family members, and friends who support and encourage these emerging young scholars, artists, and writers.

With Gratitude,

The Center for School Change
Joe Nathan, Director

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Kindergarten/ Elementary Division
(5-7 years old)

Special Award

Ms. Hovde's Kindergarten Class (Concordia Creative Learning Academy)

FIRST PLACE

Christopher Kwolik (Riverway Learning Community)

SECOND PLACE

Grace Schillewaert (Swan River Montessori Charter School)

Meredith Perry (St Croix Preparatory Academy)

THIRD PLACE

Cullen Hamilton-Gomez (Concordia Creative Learning Academy)

Muhsin Muhammad (Twin Cities International School)

Aliyana Davis (New Visions School)

Aubrie Filanbrinos (St Croix Preparatory Academy)

Abigail Irving(Nova Classical Academy)

Special Award: Ms. Hovde's Kindergarten Class

Kindergarten/ Elementary Division (5-7 years old)

First Place Winner

Christopher Kwolik

Riverway Learning Community

**I Would Like Our Next President to Know
About Our After School Program**

My name is Christopher. I am 7 years old. I am in 2nd grade. I attend Riverway Learning Community in Minnesota. We have an after school mentoring reading program. We meet Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 2:15 to 3:30.

First we have snack. It is usually bagels or English muffins. We can choose plain, cream cheese, jelly, or apple butter that Dave, our cook makes. Then we have lessons with our mentors teaching sounds. After that we do a fun activity. We learn to read. I am a mentor now. I help the kindergartners and 1st graders.

I was so happy when my teacher asked me if I would be a mentor. I love to read.

Kindergarten/Elementary Division (5-7 years old)

Second Place Winner

Grace Schillewaert

Swan River Montessori Charter School

Hi. My name is Grace. I like to make a lot of creative stuff. I am seven years old. I have a little sister named Anna. My mom's name is Tina. My dad's name is Brad. I think that the president should lower the taxes so that the teachers can have more fun materials and so that the kids can grow up to be creative and smart. I also think that the president should ask some builders to build a store. The store should have materials that are low prices; somewhere in the twenties, thirties or forties. I think that the president should also give more money to the teachers so that they can have money to send back materials that are broken in order to be repaired.

Kindergarten/Elementary Division (5-7 years old)

Second Place Winner

Meredith Perry

St Croix Prep Academy

Kindergarten/ Elementary Division (5-7 years old)

Third Place Winner

Cullen Hamilton-Gomez

Concordia Creative Learning Academy

Kindergarten/ Elementary Division (5-7 year olds)

Third Place Winner

Muhsin Muhammad

Twin Cities International Education School

I would tell the next president of the United States that my school has mostly Somali student and some African Americans like me. I would like him to know that we are Muslim students and that he should learn more about Muslims.

Kindergarten/ Elementary Divison (5-7 years old)

Third Place Winner

Aliyana Davis

New Visions School

I would like the next president to know that New Visions Charter School is a great school because we do morning meeting. My favorite part is the game. We play a game everyday in morning meeting.

Sometimes we sing a song. Sometimes we play the copycat game. We sit in a circle. Someone goes to the door. The leader claps hands and other things. Then the person guesses who the leader is. It is a fun game to play. I like morning meetings!

Kindergarten/ Elementary Division (5-7 year olds)

Third Place Winner

Aubrie Filanbrinos

St Croix Preparatory Academy

Kindergarten/ Elementary Division (5-7 year olds)

Third Place Winner

Abigail Joy Irving

Nova Classical Academy

Dear President,

Nova is fun and exciting! It is big and challenging. It is enjoyable. It is the best school in the world. I think you will like this school because it is fun. There are lots friends. My favorite friend is Emma. I like Libby, too. You won't believe how many friends there are. Friends are the best.

There are lots of things that you can do in Nova. For example, you can play outside. You can do math. You can do art. You can do music. You can do the gym. You can write. You can learn history. But I like math the best. Other people like math, too. If I had a magic lamp, I would wish for math to last all day!

Elementary Division
(8-10 year olds)

FIRST PLACE

Emelia J Beldon (Metro Deaf School)

SECOND PLACE

Katie Mulhern (Eagle Ridge Academy)

Andrew Johnson (Seven Hills Classical Academy)

THIRD PLACE

Carston Swenson (Yinghua Academy)

Abby Meyer (T.C German Immersion School)

Ka Lia Lor (Community School of Excellence)

Alphonso Cooper (Concordia Community Learning Academy)

Tatiana Peng (Concordia Community Learning Academy)

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

First Place Winner

Emelia Jeal Beldon

Metro Deaf School

Hey, Mr. President this is what you should do! This will help kids learn if they have good communication to understand people easily. Kids should learn different languages so that they can understand people from say, Egypt or another country. They should get good grades to go on field trips. And you should give more gym time to keep kids healthy.

Good communication is important in order to understand people easily. Good communication is important so that students could talk to other people clearly or when on television people can understand you easily. If you can talk to diverse groups of people, then you can understand them and they can understand you. If you teach students sign language, many more people will understand different people more easily. Mr. President, I think that kids who get good grades should go on field trips. If students get good grades that means they are smarter. So kids who are working hard to get good grades deserve to be on field trips or maybe a reading party!

I also think that you should give more gym time to kids so that they can stay healthy. I also think the teachers should get involved in gym time! I hope that you will like these changes and rules I am proposing! I think they would make our schools much better. Thanks Mr. President and please come to our school!

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Second Place Winner

Katie Mulhern

Eagle Ridge Academy

Who will be the next president? I don't know, but these are some things I would want the future president to know about our school:

Almost all schools are splendid, with the possible exception of the awful boarding school that the Baudelaire siblings attended in Lemony Snicket's books, A Series of Unfortunate Events, but I think my school is inimitable.

I attend Eagle Ridge Academy, and I've never been more content in my life. I've lived in three states, attended 5 schools (including home school), and I've never seen a school like this. At this school I've experienced several things that I thought I would never have happen to me, much less in a school. Here we have Focus Studies, where I can attend two activities of my choice, from ice-skating to book club, bowling to Creative Works Magazine, cartooning to volleyball. We also have numerous convenient differences from other schools, such as Honors Level Classes and mixed grade levels for my math class. That way, no matter how old you are, you are able to learn at the level and pace of mathematics you require.

For final exams, we use Bluebooks, which are usually reserved for college students, which makes it much easier to be creative and reach our full potential. Our school also teaches Latin as part of our classical education. I find that very helpful, as 5 different languages (romance languages) are derived from Latin. In the last two years of education the school provides, you are offered the choice of learning Spanish in place of Latin. Spanish is one of the Romance Languages, so the students here are whizzes at Spanish and the other Romance Languages after our years with Latin. Our school is up-to-date with science, as scientists have proved that students can function better with uniforms than without, and our school readily provides those for the better interest of our learning abilities. Have you ever had a real fire at your school, or perhaps a mercury spill? Well we had one, a real mercury spill at our school this year, and I was there. Most kids would have freaked out, but we held together. Apart, we are individuals, alone, with only our separate

abilities, but together we are the student body. During that time, we were able to laugh and hold together, able to listen to instructions and perform them properly, able to remain calm.

Part of the reason this was possible, was that our teachers are trained persons, capable of difficult decisions in tight places. They all have advanced degrees, unlike some schools. At the school I formerly attended, the teachers there had perhaps no degrees at all, and were incapable of the correct decisions at the right times and places. I believe that my school is special because it knows how to best teach us, rather than what is most convenient for the staff, what to do when they needed to, and how to unite 300 separate individuals into one, fully functioning, advanced school.

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Second Place Winner

Andrew Johnson

Seven Hills Classical Academy

WHY I LIKE MY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

My name is Andrew Johnson, and I am 10 years old. I am a 5th grader at Seven Hills Classical Academy in Bloomington, Minnesota. My school is a public charter school that is two years old.

I am a type 1 diabetic and sometimes I don't feel too good. My teacher understands this, and is always available to help me have the freedom to do my blood testing and snacking when I need to. She makes it so much easier for me to be like everyone else in my class, and be a part of my group. I feel accepted for who I am, in spite of my special needs.

Our school encourages us to be good citizens, to be kind and considerate of everyone. I think it is a good school for me because I don't stand out as different like I might in some other places. The academic expectations are really high in all our subjects. Some of the subjects are hard to understand, but my teacher is always willing to help me by answering my questions until I understand. Our teachers are very smart, and have many interesting things to tell us and show us when we are learning something new. Our school expects us to be respectful, helpful, and caring to everyone we see. Because of this, we have a quiet room and quiet halls so it is easier to concentrate on our work.

I am very thankful to have the chance to be a student at Seven Hills Classical Academy, and to have such a nice teacher who cares so much about me.

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Third Place Winner

Carston Swenson

Yinghua Academy

What I would like the president to know about my charter school

My name is Carston Swenson and I am in fourth grade at Yinghua Academy in St. Paul Minnesota. Yinghua Academy is a Mandarin Chinese Immersion school. The school opened last year as a K-3rd grade and will add a year until 5th grade.

My school is fantastic! We get to learn lots of different things. My favorite subjects are Singapore math, social studies and science. I have also made lots of new friends. We have fun playing football at recess. In Chinese class, we can only speak Chinese. During class we get to play Chinese games and learn to read and write Chinese characters. My teacher's name is Chen Laoshi. Loashi means "teacher" in Chinese.

In gym class our teacher can only speak Chinese. Everyday we get to choose what game we want to play. My favorite game is dodge ball. Finally, we have a nice principle. Her name is Betsy. Sometimes she reads to us in the morning meetings. She makes rules fair. She teaches us to be safe, learn and have fun.

China is growing fast. It is going to be the world's powerhouse soon. Chinese is an important language to learn. I am glad that I have the opportunity to learn this language at my school

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Third Place Winner

Abby Meyer

Twin Cities German Immersion School

I would like to tell you some stories about Twin Cities German Immersion School. First of all, I think are school is really fun. Not only do you learn German really fast, and you get to do lots of really fun things while learning. Every year we make a garden with one of the parents that volunteered. We have lots of fun and get to participate in a little of everything. When we are done then we make a salad out of the vegetables we grew in the garden and get pizza because the tomatoes make tomato sauce and we get pizza and salad for lunch. We have library on Friday and we get to read books in the language we are learning – “German”. When you get to third grade you get to make projects about animals and bring them to the Minnesota Zoo’s German Day.

With a group of your choice to work with, actually your group chooses to be with you, we make a project! When you get to the zoo there are a whole lot of high school students roaming around everywhere. Of course there were parent chaperones and teachers with every two or three kids.

Our class had four animal posters and almost all the high school students had posters too. There was a prize for most creative posters and one of our posters won 2nd prize! We have very nice teachers that are very creative. For example we have a carnival every year that we can make masks and were them on carnival day. In art we make clay sculptures. We are encouraged to read German chapter books because we can already read English chapter books well.

I think it is really cool that I’m learning German because my great grandparents were from Germany.

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Third Place Winner

Ka Lia Lor

Community School of Excellence

In this essay I will tell you about what I would want the next president to know about our charter school. Our charter school is a Hmong school. It is very cultural. In the following paragraphs it will be about Community School of Excellence's education, teachers, and Community School of Excellence's celebrations.

Community School of Excellence in my opinion has a really good education. Since it is a Hmong school there is Hmong class. In Hmong class we're learning how to write and read in Hmong. That is very important to us because we're Hmong and we need to know how to read and write in Hmong. In art class we're learning how to print pictures by hand. If we don't know how to print it, the art teacher would come to our group and help us highlight it and teach us how to print/draw it. In science class we're learning about using salt water to plant seeds. If we don't get it then the science teacher would come to our group and help finish the experiment. Community School of Excellence has a really good teaching program. In the next paragraph, I'm going to tell you about Community School of Excellence's teachers.

Community School of Excellence's teachers are really nice. The teachers are really nice in my opinion because their heart is open for our feelings. My teachers right now are different from my other teachers at my old school because my teachers at my old school are not that close to their student. We're not that close because the teachers over at my old school only talk to the students that they like. The teachers at Community School of Excellence are very organized for the day and they give us twenty to thirty minutes a day to tell them how we feel. I love the teachers at Community School of Excellence.

I'm going to tell you about Community School of Excellence's celebrations. Community School of Excellence has had lots of celebrations. At Community School of Excellence there is a dancing group and a group of blowing Hmong flutes (qeej). In the dancing group there are ten people and in the group that blows the Hmong flute there are two people. The dancing group includes four second graders, five fifth graders, and one sixth grader. The group that blows the Hmong flute includes a sixth grader and a fourth grader. Whenever Community School of Excellence has a celebration the performers will always have to perform. The celebration at Community School of Excellence is always fun. Community School of Excellence has just been open in September 2007.

Even though it just got opened it is still really amazing. It's been really amazing because of the close friends that we have. If you want to come to our school for one of our celebration, you're welcome to come. If you want to come for just a visit you are welcome to come and visit our friendly school. We are expecting to see you there. We will serve you good delicious Hmong food and my friends and I will be performing for you.

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Third Place winner

Alphonso Cooper

Concordia Creative Learning Academy

My name is Alphonso Cooper. I would like to tell you about our Charter School. Our School is very special. At CCLA my friends help me with words I don't know, I just moved here from Africa and I really like my school. The teachers here spend more time with us. They think about new things for us to do. The school also cares about others. We raise money and have food drives for needy people.

At my old school nobody liked me. Now, I have many friends and I am learning a lot. I have gym, music, and art too. I am happy to be at this new school because anybody can come. I love this school because we have a small classroom with only a few students.

Elementary Division (8-10 years old)

Third Place Winner

Tatiana Peng

Concordia Creative Learning Academy

Hi! My name is Tatianna Peng and I go to Concordia Creative Learning Academy. I am 10 years old and I'm in the 4th grade. My teachers name is Ms. LeAnn and I like her a lot. If you meet her you would like her too. CCLA is a great school.

My school really wants us to have a great education so we can go to college and have a great life. The teachers here are all kind and love us kids and our school very much. They all go above and beyond for all the kids. My favorite teachers are Ms.LeAnn, Mrs. Leah, Mrs, Molde, Ms. Lisa, Mrs. Brown and our great loving principal Mrs. Donaldson.

At CCLA we don't just sit in the classroom all day. We do lots of other things too. We go to art, music, and gym too. We go on field trips like the zoo, the Renaissance Festival, musical concerts, and we even went on the Mississippi River on a big boat and learned about the history of the river, the wildlife, and water ecology. A couple more things we do here at CCLA is every Friday we get together as a whole school and recognize students for their work and following the rules. We also use the "Peace Builders Program" at our school. This is a program that teaches us how to be a peace builder and to be kind to others.

I really love my school a lot and I know if the president could come here or anyone else they would love my school too. Mr. President I like you a lot and I want you to come to our school.

Mr. President I like this school a lot. We will love to see you!!

Middle School Division

(11-14 years old)

FIRST PLACE

Covasia Martin (Community of Peace Academy)

SECOND PLACE

Jared Kaufman (Beacon Preparatory Academy)

Aisha Adan (Minnesota International Middle School)

THIRD PLACE

Drew Skog (Eagle Ridge Academy)

Alesha Horn (North Lakes Academy)

Sergio Gonzaga Cruz (Aurora Charter School)

Cedria Williams (Harvest Preparatory Academy)

Tanijah Jacobs-Hurtubise (Southside Family Charter School)

Middle School Division (11-14 year olds)

First Place Winner

Covasia Martin

Community of Peace Academy

Throughout my nine years at Community of Peace Academy I have learned many things and have changed in many different ways. This has lead me to strongly believe that Community of Peace Academy is better than other schools. What I would want the president to know is when you compare our school to other schools we have more advantages in being a peace builder, our class sizes, and the respectful attitudes. I would also want him to know, unlike other schools our school is based around peace, from the people, our actions, our words, and the way we solve things. So here is what I would want him to know, Community of Peace Academy is a great school.

Starting at Community of Peace Academy, it was difficult at first to become a peace builder, and I struggle with it now but I have improved with this area since I came to this school. A teacher wrote to me in a card, “I have been meaning to tell you that I have noticed a real change (positive) in your attitude at school this year. I’m not sure if you are working on that on purpose BUT WOW what a mature growth...” I felt really proud when I read this because at first, I was afraid to ask for help in many different situations. Throughout my time here so far, I have gained confidence in seeking a wise person to guide me through my problems. Part of being a peace builder is accepting people no matter what race, gender, or background they are. On the other hand the kids at other schools are separated by these things to form their cliques and groups and usually don’t mingle outside their comfort zone. At Community of Peace Academy they encourage us to mix it up and choose new people to sit by; otherwise our school would end up like other schools where the

kids don't interact with other kids.

Considering ourselves as humans, our brains have lots of room to grow. Community of Peace Academy has a positive environment and the people to help you when you are stuck. At our school we create a balanced and positive learning place for kids at all different levels. This allows our school to make sure no kid is left behind because of the pace they work or learn at. So by sending your child(ren) to a bigger school you set your kids up for failure because they can't get the one on one attention they need in a class 40 or more.

At first when I came to this school I was encouraged by my aunt and cousins if I was in situation where someone hit me I should hit them back. After attending the school for awhile I learned that to receive respect, I would have to give it first. Usually I would wait for someone to give me respect but it would turn out the other person was doing the same thing, so nothing would get accomplished. But at other schools teachers would be so busy with other issues that they wouldn't be able to set students down and teach them about these things or have mediation with the students to set aside their differences and solve the problem using wise knowledge like respect that all schools don't teach. Why? Because they are too busy with the other basics like math, science, social studies, or language arts. But our school teaches outside the basic box.

After attending Community of Peace Academy I learned that Community of Peace Academy is a great choice of school. The influences on your kids are positive and the peace builders, class sizes, and respectful attitudes are based around peace. And that, is what I would want the president to know about our school.

Middle School Division (11-14 year olds)

Second Place Winner

Jared H. Kaufman

Beacon Preparatory School

Dear President,

As I reflect on my 6th grade year at my charter school, Beacon Preparatory School in Plymouth, Minnesota, all of the unique activities that have occurred come to mind. Although this is my 4th year at Beacon, and the academic curricula are mostly the same (Core Knowledge, Saxon math, and daily Spanish), there are numerous new opportunities for me this year. I would like to share them with you to convey how Beacon has incorporated fun into its rigorous, academic focus.

First, in January I participated in the National Geographic Geography Bee. Even though I did not win, I studied hard and learned a lot about our world. My Social Studies teacher, Ms. Burke, held study sessions where she made available all of her atlases, maps, and geography bee study guides. I remember that the competition consisted of many rounds, each having a different style of question. I also remember the question that put me *out* of the contest. It went like this: *When the trade winds blow in, clouds form over a crater in which state?* I'll always remember the correct answer – Hawaii.

Second, towards the beginning of the year, my English class was reading [The Midwife's Apprentice](#) by Karen Cushman. After the book was completed, my teacher, Ms. Morris, led a mock trial debating whether the midwife should take back Alyce as an apprentice. Alyce was suing to regain her apprenticeship. For everyone, there was much preparation to be done. For example, my role was a professor named "Magister Reese." I had to know the story well enough to be a quality witness for the prosecution side (Alyce). All of the students on the prosecution side argued the case well and the jury (parents and some other teachers) voted in our favor.

Third, at the beginning of this month, Ms. Burke coordinated a 1920's party for 6th and 7th graders to enjoy. The 7th graders were learning about that time period and a few of them came into my class to give the 6th graders background information on the 1920's. At this party, we were allowed to dress like the people of that era, whether a gangster, a flapper, a paperboy, or in an everyday 1920's outfit. Different games were available to play and dances were being taught by dance professionals. I learned the Fox Trot as well as other dances. We ate fun treats and each attendee received a Pez dispenser, which were newly-popular at that time.

Lastly, there are two events coming up to which I am looking forward. On March 15, I'll be one of five students to represent Beacon Prep at the Math Masters of Minnesota competition. I've never participated in a math competition before and am excited for the opportunity. In addition, at the beginning of April, I'll be one of 11 students attending the Concordia Spanish Language Village. This is something I have wanted to do for a long time, because I've never been able to find an intermediate Spanish-speaking learning experience (outside of school). All of the classes I have tried end up being a beginner level, even the one with the description of "Advanced Spanish." So, I am sure both the math competition and the Spanish weekend will be fun, yet challenging experiences.

I hope that this essay has told you a little bit about my charter school and how its teachers and administrators can still incorporate fun into the content-rich academic environment. Good luck with your Presidency. If the stress of your new job is getting to you, come visit us at Beacon; I'm sure we'll have something fun on the calendar.

Middle School Division (8-10 years old)

Second Place Winner

Aisha Adan

Minnesota International Middle School

Education: **Investing in the Future**

Who are our second parents? Where is our second home? Of course, school.

School plays an important role in our society. School is a great environment for students. There are many ways the president can help students more in school. School can accomplish a lot if their budget was increased. First they can pay teachers more. Second, have more after school and activities that students can engage in. They can afford to buy more books and computers, which makes it easier for students to access information. Schools can have more educational field trips where the students can have fun at the same time learn about society.

The first step the president can assist in is to give more money to schools in poor areas in the country with low academic achievement. I say poor schools for a specific reason. Imagine if I was born in poor neighborhood received a poor education, than got a poor job. I would just be in the cycle of being poor. To break this cycle I believe students in poor neighborhoods should be given high quality education. Than can get decent education and prepare the future generation for a brighter future and high quality of life Also poverty affects students learning process. Students come to school unprepared to learn. This is also has an impact on teachers, students come in class and they don't have their assignment completed and don't study for their test. In my opinion if the president supported the low academic achieving schools in poor neighborhood than poverty would be reduced or eliminated in America.

The second step is to include a multicultural curriculum in our education. What I mean is that more languages should be taught in our schools, Such as Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic. Also we should learn more about different cultures in the world such as Chinese, Spanish and Arabic. Also we should learn more about different cultures in the world so that when we see it being practiced, we as students are not surprised. These cultures could be Somali, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabian, African, European and other cultures as well. A multicultural curriculum should teach us more about different religions in the world so that when we see people practicing it, we would not feel ignorant and scared but should tolerate it. A multicultural education would help build bridges and understanding among different students.

One example is our school had an intercultural delegation where Jewish students and Somali students come together and engage in activities together where we can learn about each other more. At first I thought our discussion wasn't going to be smooth because of what is happening in Palestine and I thought they would hate us because they probably think all Muslims are crazy terrorist, but I was wrong. They were kind people who were interested learning about our culture and religion. We learned that both of our religions have many similarities that were beyond my thoughts and predictions. This raised our awareness on what is happening around the world. A wise man once said "man is hateful to what he is ignorant of". I admit that I was ignorant and poorly informed about their culture, but at the end of the day I destroyed a wall and built a bridge and created new friends.

If all schools had this, then there wouldn't be so much chaos in this world. If the president would implement this multicultural curriculum, then students would understand the world better, remove our misconceptions of other people and the world would be more peaceful. This might sound like a dream, but all ideas are born from dreams.

In conclusion, the most important things the president could help accomplish are more funding for schools in poor areas and have a multicultural curriculum in schools. Also it would help establish a generation that is successful in finding solutions to world problems such as global warming and wars. Of course once the problems are solved, we can move forward and help create a more perfect America.

Middle School Division (11-14 years old)

Third Place Winner

Drew Skog

Eagle Ridge Academy

The Government's Chance for A Nationwide Solution

What can be done for a student's education? I'm sure this question flows through the minds of the individuals in leadership and government positions. Many solutions have been discussed, but how can we *really* find a true solution to such a large problem? This essay just may be your prodigious ordered pair that fits the substitution equation. As you may know, education varies by the individual student's needs. The only way to help schools nationwide isn't to single out and help one school or even one student, but to change an independent variable in the school system. This crucial variable or element is simply called the schedule.

A statistic that may be unknown to you is that the average melatonin^ψ peak for teenagers is between one and two o'clock in the morning. This peak is significantly higher than an eight-year old. This demonstrates the reason for teenager's staying up late and sleeping late. The inevitable punishment for these late nights is the fact that most schools start around eight o'clock in the morning, which is also the main ingredient in our country's teenager's tendency to fall asleep in class. Lack of sleep doesn't just affect the attention span of these young pupils, but also a decrease in their immune system. This decrease causes the spreading of viruses such as influenza and strep throat to become very common. Not getting enough sleep can also deeply hurt a student's performance on homework, tests, finals, and even the SAT's. A student's teenage years are their own preparation for college and life in general. Another problem is if a student wants to get a job during the school year, it very hard to find work hours because of school. Even little problems like driving or carpool problems, and weekly obstacles can be demolished by a change in schedule. This change is just to make the schedule more flexible. A schedule that resembles a college schedule in terms of deciding on what days and what times your classes occur can change student's life. A

student could have eleven o'clock classes to provide sleep, or just leave room for an afternoon nap to provide that little fuel for everyday life. Students with driving problems can settle disputes for their parent's cars by having breaks in their schedule to transfer a parent or not have the car all day. Carpooling can be arranged for easier less-early times, and problems like not being able to attend classes on Fridays or any other day can be fixed by an extra class or two on the other days of the week. This same solution can be plugged into a student with a job who wants hours. A student could even have afternoon classes and work mornings. The possibilities are endless! Most problems with the long school day can be solved by a college-like schedule, which would also teach pupils preparing for college how to handle a more individual-friendly schedule. Flexibility is the answer to more problems than you can imagine.

So, back to the original question, "What can be done for a student's education?" A flexible schedule will definitely answer that question, in nationwide results that will make students happier, more attentive, learn more, and truly enjoy school. This question that is so general, has a simple solution, and now, I believe the phrase you are looking for is **problem solved**.

Middle School Division (11-14 year olds)

Third Place Winner

Alesha Horn

North Lakes Academy

Dear President:

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw what was happening! Last Friday we had a Fun Day at school. Fun Days are for kids that have A's, B's, or C's at the end of the quarter. I was playing Guitar Hero and my English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, jumped up on the brown table and started shredding like a rock star! It was insane! North Lakes Academy is so awesome!

I had a blast last Friday at the Fun Day! There were so many fabulous activities to choose from like, bowling/arcading, watching movies, playing dodge ball in the gym, and making pizzas. We had a little spa in school at which we could have our nails painted. My personal favorite was playing Guitar Hero in Mrs. Johnson's room!

NLA also has a ton of after school activities that I can participate in like chess club, guitar club, model building club, yearbook club, Lego club, Christian club and a whole bunch more. I was in chess club last year. I learned a lot about playing chess and how to outsmart my opponent. We also received pizza and soda so that was a plus. I was in guitar club last year too. I became much better at playing the guitar after joining guitar club. I'm in ski club this year. I snowboard. Ski club is awesome! There are some amazing snowboarders and skiers that go to NLA, even some of the parents ski and snowboard!

North Lakes Academy is small, safe, and successful. NLA is a very small school. Only about 200 students go to NLA, which made it really easy for me to make new friends. I know almost everyone that goes to school here. I always see my friends in the halls when I am walking from class to class. Since there are not a lot of student that go to North Lakes, I feel super safe. I don't even have a lock on my locker. That's how

safe I feel in this school. I have become incredibly successful after transferring to North Lakes Academy. I almost always complete my homework, I participate in classroom activities, and I love to help my fellow classmates with homework.

I love North Lakes Academy because it's like my home away from home. I wouldn't want to go to any other school. I look forward to coming to school everyday. I look forward to feeling safe no matter what the situation is. I absolutely love the feeling of being successful and having the teachers look at me and say, "Good work, Alesha. Keep it up!" The Fun Days are incredible, and it gives me motivation to keep my grades up. The teachers here are fantastic! They actually make learning interesting for the students. North Lakes Academy is just perfect for me, and I wouldn't change it for the world!

Middle School Division (11-14 years old)

Third Place Winner

Sergio Gonzaga Cruz

Aurora Charter School

Mr. President, even though you have a busy job I have two ways you could help students do better in school. However, before I tell you that, you have to know that our school works very hard and uses its time very wisely. My school is also bilingual and we are one of those schools that have teachers and children from different places. For instance, we have people from Columbia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, El-Salvador, and many more.

Now that I told you some things about my school, would you like to know two ways you can help students do better in school? First, this is what our school needs. We need a television, more books to read a library and computers. We need a television to watch DVDs about the American Revolution, science and history of America. The books will help us find out about information. It would also be fantastic if we had a library so that we are able to do our homework there. The kids could also get a library card to check out books. The school needs computers because that would also help us with our homework as well as find more information. If the school didn't have a television, books to read, library and library cards as well as computer lab, we wouldn't be able to do many educational activities that could help us find great information and learn about history, science and the American Revolution.

Secondly, our school needs an after-school program so that we can play games and sports. This will help us get very energetic and healthy. In addition, this program could help us get help with our homework and possibly even go on trips. Do you think that after all the hard work students can go on a cool trip? After all, we have been doing a great job and I think we deserve a trip! We can play games that help us learn math and science too. Students could also play sports that help them get energized and healthy. These sports include basketball, soccer and dodge ball. When it is not raining and it is sunny outside, kids could have more fun by playing these sports.

Mr. President, do you know what would happen if schools did not have an after school program? Students would not be able to get help with their homework, go on trips or even get the chance to play sports that are fun and healthy. They would struggle in math and science classes if they don't get the help they need in an after school classroom. This could also affect their grades and because of that, they would not be treated to a trip!

So Mr. President, if you give us an after school program, I promise you that we would be thankful. And I hope that after reading my essay, you are convinced and that you enjoyed it as well!

Middle School Division (11-14)

Third Place Winner

Cedria Williams

Harvest Preparatory School

The president can help and care about all children even the homeless children. At least provide money for them so they can get an education. Some of the homeless students are very smart and push themselves just like students that come from money. You would not be able to tell that some are homeless. Education should be an equal opportunity for all students.

The President should provide money for pencils, paper, notebooks, and text books. Many families can't get enough money to buy supplies that last a whole year. Why not give a huge amount of supplies to the teachers and everyone is good to go. The students who are homeless will feel better about being equal and get a good start.

The students do not choose to be homeless; many parents are losing their work and homes. The homeless students are trying their best, when everything is falling apart around them. The President should care about the high taxes that parents can't afford. Education is the way to go and the President should at least provide more money for all classes of students to get a good education. Finally, I hope he can open up his heart and educate everyone.

Middle School Division (11- 14 years old)

Third Place Winner

Tanjah Jacobs-Hurtubise

Southside Family Charter School

Hi my name is Tanjah Jacobs-Hurtubise. I am 11 years old. I go to Southside Family Charter School. I would like our next president to know that our charter school is really good.

Our charter school teaches us the truth like how Rosa Parks got taken to jail for not giving her seat up for a white person. She didn't give up her seat because she was tired, she did it because she was standing up for what she believed in. She was trained in non-violent civil disobedience. I think that's really cool. I think that the president should know that all schools should learn the truth about history! I think our charter school should have even more programs before and after school to learn history! I think the president should come and see what our school is like and what we learn and how it is really helpful to know the truth.

I would like our next president to know that it is helpful to have only a few kids in a class-probably ten kids or a few more that that because the teacher doesn't have to try to help thirty kids all at one time. I think it is also helpful to know that the teacher can help you when she is done helping another kid.

I also think it is helpful because when there are not a lot of kids it's easier to work on what you are working on! I think the president should think about how war and other bad things affect how kids think of the world. War changed how I thought of the world. I thought the world was a great place until my family and school started to talk about how the wars are going on. Then I started to feel unsafe. I think the president should stop the wars.

But I always look forward to going to school because I feel safe because everyone is nice and caring toward me. I think all the teachers in our school deserve a medal for being so nice and caring and not getting too mad if we do something wrong. I would want the president to know that a lot of kids need a good school to go to and our school can show people what our kids and teachers can do. I want the president to know even if a kid is small every one of them has kid power. I think kids should know that people, especially the

president, believe in them. That is what I would want our president to know about our charter school and other charter schools.

I think kids should know that their president is thinking of how they can help kids get a good Education! My mom says that we should stay in school and I think she's right because our charter school has great teachers and students they all care about us and each other. My sister and brother and I always look forward to school because we know we are not going to get bullied or picked on by other kids.

I think all kids deserve a good education and good teachers that care if kids get a good education. I think our next president should know why I and other kids love our school. Here are some things we came up with. ONE we think our president should think of how things affect our schools. TWO we think our president should know we look to our president for help some times and we want to know that what our president is teaching us is the right things to be taught. Those are the things that we came up with. I hope that you have liked reading what I think our next president should know about our school!!

**High School Division
(15 years and older)**

Special Award for Perseverance and Determination

Sara Stevens (BlueSky Online Charter School)

FIRST PLACE

Natalie Gaffney (BlueSky Online Charter School)

SECOND PLACE

Pa Chia Xiong (Community of Peace Academy)

Sidney Dean (Riverway Learning Community)

THIRD PLACE

Khou Thao (Hmong Academy)

Maddy Moore (Agricultural and Food Sciences Academy)

Jack Probst (Great River School)

Taylor Norton (St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists)

Jolene Bruska (Spectrum High School)
Holly Metty (BlueSky Online Charter School)

Special Award for Perseverance and Determination

SARA STEVENS

BlueSky Online Charter School

The reason that I have chosen to attend BlueSky Charter School is because I realized that I needed to do something better with my life. I never finished school because I got pregnant with my daughter who is now 8 years old. When I tried to go back to public school, they would not let me and so I never pursued my education. Well, now my family depends on me for everything because my fiancé lost his job and so now I'm the one that is making all of the money. And I realized that I can't make good money without a decent education. When I finally realized that I needed to finish my education, I talked to a few people and heard what they had to say about the schools that they were attending and I called some different schools. I thought that I had found the right one for me but I quickly realized that I had not. So I dropped out of the school that I was going to and started to try and find one that was right for me. That's when I found BlueSky.

Some of my family members were currently attending and they told me that it was a great school and that I should call and talk to some one about it and enroll. I thought about it for a while and realized that after some research that it was the perfect school for me. So I called and talked to someone and enrolled right there. It was so easy to do. I never thought that finishing my education would be that easy, but it was. I have been attending BlueSky for a while now and I love it.

My teachers are great and the classes are easy. I don't have all the books to carry around like I would in public school and the classes are smaller. The best thing is that for the most part they work with my schedule as a mother of 3 and a person with a full time job outside of the house. I really don't have people around that I have to defend my going to online school to but if I did I would tell them all of the benefits of

it. The reason that I chose going to school online is because it fits my lifestyle. I can get help with work at ten o'clock at night if I need it from teachers. I can't get that in public school.

I would recommend BlueSky Charter School to everyone that I know. It is never really easy to go back to school, but sometimes you have to do what is right for you and your family.

High School Division (15 years and older)

First Place Winner

Natalie Gaffney

BlueSky Online Charter School

My life changed the moment I became a real high school student. Through everything in elementary and middle school you're told how important these lesser years are, but you truly know deep inside that these years aren't as big and important as the high school ones, the years pushing you to succeed higher and graduate towards college. What they didn't warn you about was the extras that are involved with the homework and lectures. I thought high school would be a breeze; heck, I only had 4 more years left. It was the complete opposite. I became more involved with who I was to those surrounding me instead of the real objective...school. I hated the feeling of wanting everyone to like me and changing my actions just to feel more heard and needed. These thoughts swelled up and made my head hurt but were hidden under my need to be myself and the emotion of hate for those I felt I needed to be something else for.

Reaching high school soon became more of a race to be the prettiest and the funniest than a place to succeed in. I was failing at what high school truly is and began to want out like an animal in a cage. Of course the home life didn't add much to change my opinion and my need to fight. I was truly locked in a world I began to hate and let my imagination become my reality.

I went to a place everyday where I couldn't fit in because I wasn't allowed the same things; everything I was allowed in my younger years were taken away and more so I just couldn't open up and be myself. I was angry. I locked myself in a box because I couldn't deal with the world outside. Of course I had the best friends in the world, where I was only allowed to see in the building of "education". I began to be known as too talkative and too wild, yet what I didn't understand was why I was always yelled at for

needing to talk and needing to laugh so loud it hurt. I become a student who really had to be watched out for, but the girls with the pretty little faces and evil hearts and sour words, were loved.

My 10th year of school was no different. Well, I guess 'I' was slightly different. I became sick of the trash at home and then coming to the only place I was allowed any time away from it and being hated by the teachers. I was fed up with it all and became the little rebel no one wanted around. I decided that if they wanted a trouble maker and my parents wanted control of my life, they could eat the meal they made. I ran the halls like I owned them, I did as I pleased, smoked where I wanted, and said whatever crossed my mind. So far my life from school and home was just one big downward slide going nowhere, yet when I started getting into real trouble, I began to make a stand. At the end of that year, my dad decided to let me move in with my mom.

Once again, I decided to go to public school for my Junior year...Apple Valley High School...and like before, it was the same to me, but bigger. I came to the conclusion that every school was the same and you just had to be someone who dealt with it. Well, I couldn't just sit back and deal. Summer of my senior year rolled around and fall was fast approaching. I found myself talking to a fellow associate one day while on break from work. I began to confess my decision to not go back and try to graduate because it just wouldn't happen and I wasn't going to waste my time. Plus, I found enjoyment in working and doing something for me that gained a reward. She could relate from her high school year and not graduating, but she told me of an online charter school that her brother was taking. I looked it up that night and quickly made a new decision. My mom was all for it since it could be done on my time, with my schedule and took my own responsibility to succeed at it. Any choice other than attending Apple Valley again and never going or dropping out, seemed golden to her. I'm in my third quarter of attending BlueSky Charter School and couldn't have made a better choice. It's a fresh start and a good opportunity. I have a real chance of graduating and know that it's really my own choice. I get to be who I am and live my own life without having that interference with my school life. I've never been given so many chances and received so much respect as I do from the teachers at BlueSky. They let me be myself and though sometimes my lack of effort may be distracting, they never stop pushing me to succeed. I don't have to listen to how much college will change my life, instead I get to hear how good of a writer I am, how I'm smart and can do everything I want to do when I put my mind to it. I'm pushed, but not shoved. No judgment is made here, no dream hidden, no idea crushed. I can't believe that even with how terrible I've done in school and how many mistakes and

wrong turns I've taken, I'm this close to graduating, and that's my favorite and most thought about idea I've ever had in school.

Without my charter school, I don't think I'd be in the position I am, months away from graduating, having a good steady job, and having a close family relationship. The ones that thought I couldn't make it and looked down on me, don't even faze me anymore. What matters is I'm here now and have a chance at a real successful future.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Second Place Winner

Pa Chia Xiong

Community of Peace Academy

“Today I will choose peace and I will share peace at home, at school, and within my community.” These are the words that I think about everyday when I come to school. My school is called Community of Peace Academy, a school without a lot of students, but with students who are peace-builders and can show you what honesty, love, respect, peace, loyalty, justice, hope, and courage are all about.

In our society today we see war, violence, poverty, environmental issues, racism, and discrimination--gender, race, and age, just to name a few. We see many issues brought up that make us wonder “What if...?” At Community of Peace Academy we're able to talk about what we think, imagine what we would like to see, and ask those “what if” questions. Everyone here works together to try to find an answer. We all work as a team here. Near the beginning of the year we researched issues about the environment. One of the things we studied was global warming. We got to research about what it is and how it affects the world. It was a really great experience, because in a way it influenced me to change the way I live. Usually I don't recycle but ever since that project I've been recycling and influencing my siblings to do so too.

Divorce, death, marriage, and separation; families aren't always perfect in our world. Sometimes members worry that life won't be the same, but changes come and we all have to accept that. When my parents got

divorced, because of violence, I got help from my counselor, my teachers, and my friends. They were there for me when I needed help. After my parents separated I was scared to walk to my bus after school. I worried that my dad would appear out of nowhere and try to hurt me or kidnap me. I was frightened he might have his friends come and hurt me; I was fourteen years old, not ready to die. After telling this to my advisors at school they helped me plan ways to get out of the house if my dad came near and my teacher even offered to walk with me to the bus after school. It felt embarrassing to have a teacher walk with me knowing that I was 14 years old, but I knew that deep inside it made me feel safe and cared about. I wasn't the only one who had to go through a lot; I had friends who also went through a lot of hard times, and each of those times I've seen teachers come up to them and help them or friends. I've seen the amazing transformation of my friends from sadness and depression to happiness and brightness.

The staff at CPA listened and took each and every step I took to safety and to accepting my parents' divorce. They really take time out of their own lives to get to know everyone and to help each other through hard times. Even when we think that there is no one there for us, they are there to help us, guide us, and find ways to make the situation better. Every day when I go to school, I feel as if I am walking into the home of my second family.

CPA isn't just about teaching students and doing things about the world, we have goals and our main goal is to spread peace throughout the world. If peace was taken upon each and every one of us, the world would be better. No wars, no violence, no discrimination, and no separation. One thing you'll find at my school and no other school is the teachings of peace. At my school teachers take an hour each day to teach us just about peace, and other ethical principles such as justice, love, hope, loyalty, honesty, respect, responsibility, equality, and courage. Throughout the day you would find teachers modeling those principles to show students that if we follow the principles the environment and the air can really be a thousand times fresher and happier. If students learn about the principles as they move on to their own world, they can take the elements and spread the knowledge they learned or use it to make a difference in the world. At CPA we're taught that besides creating conflicts, we should solve them. Even if people are different from us, it's always better to see them with our hearts and souls instead of our eyes.

The people of Community of Peace Academy take every little issue into their own hands and try to find ways to fix it. At this school we want to take elements and teach them to whoever we find, whether it's a student, staff member, or parent. The world isn't always about crime. If we take time to listen, feel, touch,

and smell with our hearts, we can make the world a better and safer place; we just have to be willing to take those mysterious steps.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Second Place Winner

Sydney Dean

Riverway Learning Community

The meaning of “charter school” varies by the source. The definition you may find in a dictionary might say something like “a public school independently operated by the local school board” or “a school environment with a different philosophy in which students can learn using different curriculum”. But to me and many of my classmates, Riverway is so much more than what any dictionary could ever tell you. Our school is a place where we aren’t expected to learn at the same pace or in the same style as all of the other students. It’s a place where our teachers look at us as individuals rather than just another kid that passes through the doors into their classroom. A charter school is a good place for kids who are either being too challenged, or aren’t being challenged enough at a “regular” school. It is a great place for kids who aren’t “cookie cutter” learners.

If there is one thing that I think would be important for the next president to know about Riverway, (or even charter school in general), is how many lives this school has changed. I used to go to a conventional middle school. I never felt like I could succeed there because the teachers never really took the time to get to know me as a person. I felt like the only purpose the teachers served were to pile on the assignments and make me feel like I was in a hole and I couldn’t possibly find a way out. The classes were too fast-

paced and every night I would take home hours of homework. Eventually, I kind of gave up. I started doing only part of my homework each night and by the end of the quarter, I had so many missing assignments that I would get Cs, Ds, and sometimes even Fs. My teachers would hand me a printed out progress report and say “Sydney, I know you’re smart. You just need to apply yourself.” I remember looking at the progress reports and feeling like a failure. Seeing zeroes after zeroes next to the names of the assignments made me feel like I could never succeed. The look on my mom’s face when I would bring home some of those progress reports made me feel so horrible. My teachers knew I was smart. My mom knew I was smart. So why didn’t I feel smart?

At the end of eighth grade, my mom and I decided that going to Winona Senior High School wasn’t an option for me. At first I was really mad. I thought that my mom was trying to ruin my life by taking away my friends and the school environment I was so accustomed to. We started to look into a Lutheran private school but that was vetoed due to the fact that I didn’t share some of the beliefs that were required at the school. About two weeks before the school year was to begin, we attended an open house at Riverway. At first I was unsure about the school. The setting wasn’t familiar to me and I didn’t like the idea of being the “new kid”. I was more focused on what the change in schools would mean for my social life, and not focusing on what it would mean for my future.

Thankfully, my mom won the argument (as mothers usually do) and I started at Riverway the following September. Since I started school here, my outlook has changed 180 degrees. I now look at teachers like they are trying to *help* you with your struggles instead of adding to them. I actually enjoy coming to school and I respect all the students and staff here. I take the time to walk in each of their shoes because I know that’s what they would do for me as well. When I tell my mom about how I’m doing in school, I can feel proud instead of ashamed. I know that a lot of kids struggle in conventional schools, and I think that if there were a few more charter school, more kids could finally feel as successful as I do.

Currently, there are charter schools in 40 states. I believe that the next president should take the initiative to open charter schools in the remaining 10 states. I think that charter schools are a great alternative to conventional schools in many ways and that a lot of kids would really benefit from switching to one.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Khou Thao

Hmong Academy

Dear Mr. or Ms President:

Hi, my name is Khou Thao. I am 15 years old and I'm an Asian girl. I go to Hmong Academy Charter School in Minnesota and this is my second year attending Hmong Academy.

This school is a great school because of the awesome teachers, staff, and students. They respect each other and help each other when ever needed. I really like how the teachers teach us students because they explain better and give more details just to make is easier for us to understand.

Something I like about my school is that teachers give the students the time we need to learn the skills they are teaching. My teachers are patient with the students and they understand our needs. Hmong Academy teachers work very hard for the students. My teachers are nice to me and seem very friendly. They always have time to listen to my problems. The teachers at Hmong Academy show the students that they care.

I would also like to tell you about Hmong Academy support staff. They do much more than just keep the school clean and running smoothly. They also take the time to work with the students. The support staff has us drill the things we need to know in case there is a fire, tornado, or we need to lock down the school. They remind us of the rules we need to follow and they do this so we are safe. Because of this we know the support staff really cares about us and our success at Hmong Academy. The support staff are hard working, nice, and respect the students.

Now I would like to tell you about Hmong Academy students. As the name of the school suggest, we are mostly Asian and mostly Hmong. Most of the students get along with each other and are friends. Hmong Academy is like one big family. We help each other and we help our teachers. The students respect each other and the teachers most of the time! Hmong Academy is a great place to go to school. It is a safe place for us so we focus on learning.

Mr. or Ms. President, I wanted to tell you a little bit about a Hmong girl who lives in America and the school she goes to. I look forward to the opportunities I have in American and I hope you will support small school that help students like me.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Maddy Moore

Agricultural and Food Sciences Academy

Dear Mr. President:

I appreciate your active interest in charter schools. Its refreshing to find a person who appreciates them as much as I do. However, I feel that my charter school stands out from all the others. It is called the Academy for Sciences and Agriculture, or AFSA for short. Now before you jump to conclusions and think we're a school all about the understated American "farmer", I must contradict this stereotype. Our school is much more than farming! It focuses on all points of agriculture. Let me show you how our charter school is so different from all others.

First of all, I would like you to take a minute and think about how many schools have specific agricultural career paths. The only school I can think of is AFSA. In our school we have specific career paths in agriculture that will help students better themselves so they will be prepared for their future career. For example, I would like to go into animal science. AFSA lets me choose agriculture classes that will involve animal sciences. Therefore, I can be better prepared to choose a career once I get to college. Some of the

career paths include agronomy, farm management, and food sciences. There's an agricultural career for everyone, and the students at AFSA are better able to discover their places in agriculture because of our career paths.

However, finding a career isn't as easy as pointing and clicking. It takes a good amount of thinking about what you would want to do with the rest of your life! However, FFA is able to help students at AFSA. The FFA Organization, of Future Farmers of American, is an organization that helps high school youth develop their knowledge in agriculture. This can help people find their future careers as well as their career path. How, you ask? With the help of CDEs and SAEs. CDE stands for the Career Development Event. These are FFA events that allow members to compete against other in single or team events that have to do with agricultural careers. I completed at Nationals in one of the hardest CDEs—Agricultural Issues. CDEs give students a chance to learn more about a certain profession in a competitive way. These CDEs can also result in scholarship money for college, which also helps students in finding a career. However, competition isn't the only FFA activity that helps students gain insights to agricultural careers. SAEs, or Supervised Agricultural Experiences, are activities that an FFA member partakes in with the supervision of a mentor. It's like independent study with agriculture. Instead of teaching yourself math, you can learn to grow crops. Instead of tutoring elementary school kids, you can train seeing eye dogs. There's no limit to the possibilities! This is a great way for students to try their hands at a potential career, and possibly earn money as well. Anyway you look at it, FFA coupled with AFSA is a winning combination for the success of high school students.

However, students can't focus on school and future careers all the time. Frankly, we need a break now and again! Luckily, AFSA has taken notice of this need. There are two weeks of the year when students can partake in fun activities that are completely foot loose from the stress of school and grades. These weeklong breaks occur in October and May, and are rightly name O-term and M-term. The options for this weeklong vacation are incredibly varied, giving everyone a choice that they would like. For example, for M-term last year, I went on the Horse M-term. We saw the University of Minnesota's vet

centers, which I personally was excited to see, and we were able to volunteer at a horse rescue! Both nothing could compare to the three day trail ride at the end of the week. That M-term was perhaps the most wonderful vacation I had ever been on. There are many other options for students to do on these weeklong excursions. They can attend and art class, fly down to Costa Rica for a week, or even go to the FFA National Convention! No matter how much we have to study, our school can always find a way to have fun.

As you can see, AFSA is no ordinary school. It's a school that is full of knowledge in agriculture and wishes to prepare its students as such. AFSA is actively involved in the FFA, its CDEs and other activities. Yet AFSA also encourages its students to have fun learning, and just kick back and relax once in a while. AFSA is more than just a charter school, it's a place where students are happy to learn and where they are excited to learn about future careers. But most of all, AFSA is the step that future agriculturalists take to move on to their better and brighter futures.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Jack Probst

Great River School

Three and a half years ago, Great River School opened with 86 students in total. Less than 30 students were in the Senior High School. Fast forward a few years, and you have an organized school with 120 students in the close-knit high school community. Every student knows every other student, and all of the teachers have relationships with each and every one of the students. This makes the students feel comfortable with their environment. Nobody is afraid to ask questions. It is a friendly environment where everyone feels welcome. This is Great River.

By having such a close community, learning becomes easier. The students aren't forced to adapt themselves to the learning style. Instead, the small size of Great River enables the teachers to adapt their curriculum to the students needs. Last year, I was in a class of four students. Whenever we had a question on the matter we were learning, the teacher would make sure understood before we continued. That doesn't just happen like that in a class of 40 students. At Great River, no child is left behind. The teachers, and the student's fellow peers, make sure that doesn't happen. It is not uncommon at Great River to see adolescents teaching one another. This is Great River.

One of the most defining characteristics at Great River is the trips that we take. As an eleventh grade student, I have already been to Washington D.C., Itasca state park, Colorado, and have seen 100 miles of southern Minnesota by way of bicycle. We camp, cook, and travel together. I can't think of a better way to build community. For Great River, the trips work. The bonds that are formed on those trips last forever. If you were to visit Great River, you would see how close we are to one another.

One of the things that I take for granted at Great River, are the tables. I forget that at any other school, I would be sitting in a standard 3-foot by 2-foot desk. At Great River, every classroom has tables that the students sit at. This way, we are able to learn together. We can look at each other's smiling faces everyday. This boosts not only our self-esteem, but also our learning. We are also free to sit next to whoever we choose. The freedom enhances our ability to manage responsibilities. Freedom, along with friendship and community, is one of the things that make this Great River.

From large-scale trips to small-scale friendships, Great River is one of a kind. At Great River, our community is like a family. We care about each other like we're all brothers and sisters. When something is amiss, it hurts the whole community. We stick together, and through thick and through thin, we are Great River.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Taylor Norton

Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists

Against The Grain

When I tell people that I go to a public charter school I get one of two reactions. I either get a puzzled, “What’s that?” expression, or I get a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. I, personally, think neither of these reactions are appropriate. My name is Taylor Norton and I am a 16-year-old sophomore at the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists. My school is a unique blend of a conservatory program with a regular charter high school. I think that in our society, charter schools are treated differently than regular public high schools because with their very existence, they defy conformity.

I believe that charter high schools are highly beneficial to young adults because they can promote a sense of independence, cater to a student’s unique needs, and allow students to have input on the way their school is run. If I had a chance to speak to the future president about this matter, I’d like him to take a close look at the charter school system and understand that it is an essential establishment and awareness should be raised to promote charter schools and the wonderful opportunities they provide for young people.

I live in the suburbs of Saint Paul. I went to an elementary school called Parkview Center School which had students aged kindergarten through eighth grade. Despite its large age range, Parkview is a very small school with no more than 700 students enrolled at a time. After eighth grade, 98% of the students who attend that school, end up at the Roseville Area High School (RAHS) which has roughly 2,000 students enrolled. Having grown up in a smaller school, I decided that I didn’t want to go to RAHS. I wanted

something smaller and more personal. I looked around and stumbled upon the website for the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists. After attending an information session for SPCPA, I decided to attend. However, all my friends from Parkview went to RAHS. In this way, I was truly on my own. I consider myself a very independent person and therefore was not scared to start at a new school. I wanted to attend a smaller school where teachers would remember my name. I also wanted to major in theatre. Without charter schools, this independence wouldn't have been possible. If I had gone to RAHS, I would have become just another student; just another girl wandering the halls looking for her next class. I would have become a small fish in a big pond. If I had gone to RAHS, I would have been immediately forgotten after my graduation. That wasn't something I was interested in at all. I wanted, and still want, to be a big fish in a small pond.

My brother also attends a public charter school. His school is called Great River Montessori School. When my brother asks my mom why he was pushed to go to Great River instead of RAHS like everyone else from our elementary school, she says that it's because she didn't want him to fall through the cracks. My brother has a high-functioning form of Autism known as Asperger's Syndrome. My mother wanted to put my brother in a place where he could learn at his own pace, and because of charter schools that is possible. I am sure my brother is not the only person who benefited from this alternate option. Everyone who goes to a charter school has their own reason – their own story. Whether they choose to go to a charter school out of necessity like my brother, or out of curiosity like me, it's a wonderful thing that young people today are able to make that choice.

One of the things I love most about my school is how involved the administration is with the students. The school is so small that the teachers are able to ask for input from the students in order to improve the school. My school is only in its third year of existence and has a lot of growing to do. Like all other charter schools, SPCPA relies on the opinions and needs of its students to help shape the school. By contributing to the process by which our schools are formed, we can create schools that are personalized by everyone involved and thus improve the experience of the students.

Charter schools are built to cater to the needs of the student and I believe that's a crucial part of education. If a student is unhappy at their school, they won't learn as much. If a student feels as if they don't matter then they won't try. Students matter in charter schools. In charter schools, students are happy. People are

unique and beautiful and should be allowed to choose the kind of education they prefer. Students who actively choose to attend charter schools are ambitious. They have already proven their ambition and commitment simply by choosing to step out of the line and demand satisfaction. I want the next president to understand that charter schools promote a sense of freedom, indulge a student's unique needs, and help students create their ideal school. Without charter schools, kids like my brother and I would fall through the cracks. Don't let us fall through the cracks.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Jolene Bruska

Spectrum High School

Mr. /Ms. President:

There is something immensely important that I would like you to know. We live in a world where money is an essential asset to possess. Money is paid to the school system. The school system educates the students. Students and their families pay money to colleges in order to obtain a post-secondary education. Then students are thrust into the world with their knowledge and consequently forced to work a job to make money. The money is used for food, shelter, clothing, utilities, car and house payments and eventually, paying off their student loans. I quickly learned from my former high school, that without money, I will not live successfully or comfortably in the world. And then I began attending Spectrum High School, a new public charter school in Elk River.

Spectrum has broadened my outlook on the public school system and taught me that it is not only money that makes the education system go 'round. Charter schools, such as mine, receive about 22 percent less in per-pupil public funding, or \$1,800, than the other district schools. For a charter school of 250 students, that amounts to about \$450,000 per year. So despite this lack of funding from the state, Spectrum has done remarkably well with thanks to the support for the Volunteers of America organization.

Besides the issue of money and how it affects a charter school, there are other important comparisons to make between a public school and a public *charter* school. Such as the value and

importance of students at school. When I attended the schools in the Monticello school district, I did poorly in school. I am not blaming the school itself for my low cumulative GPA, because I did slack off during my freshman year. I take full responsibility. However, not a single school counselor took time to ask me why I was doing poorly. I was just a number with a dollar sign attached. They never wanted to know who I was hanging out with or what my interests were. Other than attending my classes, I was not involved in a single activity in 9th grade. Unfortunately, my transcript reflects my dissatisfactory choices from my freshman year. What's more disappointing than my careless work ethic is their own. Nobody paid me to not do my homework. However, my parents paid taxes to support the school that didn't care at all if I never succeeded after high school.

Spectrum High School was, to me, surprisingly different, because I had always attended an ordinary public school. The faculty cares about its students and knows each by his or her name. There is only one school counselor at my school, who also happens to be the school director. She is a busy person, who never has enough time to do what she does. But she cares. Anyone and everyone can meet with her in her office and talk about grades, activities, etc. My school is like a family. We look out for one another. We support each other. I am involved in many school activities that interest me, and because of my school director, I am looking forward to acquiring a post-secondary education.

So you see, Mr./Ms. President, the vital importance of charter schools is clear. If our state funds were higher, perhaps we could not prove to you that our curriculum is superior to other schools and our populace so tightly knit. As stated before, we are more than a school, we are a family. I am just one voice, and I cannot alone convince you that our school is as great as I have previously stated. So I will show you. And so will my friend, and my teacher. We, together, have made a community that improves the way that a student learns and achieves his or her goals. I want you to know this and be assured that you are not alone in making the United States of America a better place to live. We are all reaching for the best, together, as one.

High School Division (15 years and older)

Third Place Winner

Holly Metty

BlueSky Online Charter School

My charter school has totally saved my life. I've been in and out of rehab since I've been in 10th grade. I left public school in Cannon Falls, because I thought I would have the potential to graduate early. I had all my credits up to that point and was doing well. Sadly, I was mistaken. I enrolled into an alternative school that was attached to a college. Located in Rosemount, DCALS was my biggest mistake through out my whole education.

I was exposed to so many different drugs. It was difficult to not start using. I grew addicted to CCC's a form of cough medicine. It controlled my life. I was skipping left and right. Finally, my boyfriend Brock had enough and reported my use to the school. I was called in, my Mom arrived, and before I knew it, I was in rehab. Last year, I attempted to return to Cannon Falls High School. It was so difficult. The work load, everything. I was use to being at an alternative school where I got breaks in between classes. I also had only three classes that lasted an hour and forty-five minutes, so the majority of work I received I was able to finish in school. Traditional school was a complete over load. I felt like a complete loser, not being able to work and concentrate in school like every other student. Cannon Falls High School was aware that I had been in rehab. They thought my activity during school was poor due to me using. I went to school everyday sober. That's when I snapped. I left Cannon Falls High School forever.

I returned back to DCALS this year in hopes that I could get my life back on track, but sadly drugs came into play again. I was skipping to hang out with users, and skipping to use. At one point, I got kicked out of my house and attempted to go to school through my boyfriend's house where I was living. It didn't work very well. I fell into a deep depression and had difficulty even waking up in the morning. I slept all day, everyday. At one point, I came crawling back to my Mother. Of course, she loved me and allowed me to move back in under the circumstances that I would change. I was no longer able to get a ride to Rosemount to attend DCALS. My friends turned their back on me due to the actions I made when I was using. I wasn't a very nice person at all. A few of my friends got themselves deeper into drugs, to a scary point and I refuse to talk to them. I don't have my license, and I was left with nothing. I refused to return to Cannon Falls. My Mother suggested I attempt an Internet School. I had heard of BlueSky from a few friends who attempted it, yet really couldn't get into the work. I decided that it was my last resort and attempted. I thought much about getting my GED. I even called my local testing center. Yet, I couldn't see myself going into a job interview with just my GED. I want to succeed and have a comfortable life. I don't think I could achieve my dream with just my GED. This is where BlueSky Charter School came into play. It saved me. I now have something to wake up to every morning. I feel like I'm doing better and accomplishing something. Usually, when I tell others that I'm in Internet school, they look at me like I'm a complete idiot. But I just smile, because I know I am receiving a higher education.

If you enroll into Internet school, you have to be very self disciplined. This is hard for me sometimes, because I don't always complete the work, especially for classes I dislike. I have A's in the majority of my classes, but in others that I don't excel at my grades are lower. Over all I am doing very well. I feel proud for a change. I am also very hopeful for the future. I want to go to college and if I complete the assignments and get my grades, I might have a chance. I am very happy with what I'm doing by attending BlueSky Charter School.