

# **EXPANDING THE CIRCLE: CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE NEWS MEDIA**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

<b>Introduction:</b>	<b>Charter Schools and the News Media</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
	<b>Ten Principles for Communicating with the News Media</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>Section One:</b>	<b>Identify the Key Charter School Messages</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Section Two:</b>	<b>Select Your Charter School Spokesperson</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>Section Three:</b>	<b>Learn the Different Types of News Sources</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>Section Four:</b>	<b>Getting Started</b>	<b>Page 9</b>
<b>Section Five:</b>	<b>Drafting a Press Release</b>	<b>Page 11</b>
<b>Section Six:</b>	<b>Writing Opinion Articles</b>	<b>Page 14</b>
<b>Section Seven:</b>	<b>Working with Editorial Boards</b>	<b>Page 19</b>
<b>Section Eight:</b>	<b>Third Party Validation</b>	<b>Page 21</b>
<b>Section Nine:</b>	<b>Dealing With Negative News</b>	<b>Page 21</b>
<b>Section Ten:</b>	<b>Now What? Get Your Message Out!</b>	<b>Page 22</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>		<b>Page 23</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>		<b>Page 24</b>

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **INTRODUCTION: CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE NEWS MEDIA**

The success or failure of any organization or movement depends in part on how well the public understands its mission, activities and results. Charter school advocates, from educators in individual charter schools to leaders in state associations, can't expect the public to naturally assume that charter schools are good for public education. A thorough, well-planned strategy for communicating with the broader public is a vital part of gaining public support and building a successful charter school movement. This handbook is designed to help charter school advocates improve their communication with the public via the news media.

Charter schools introduce a major paradigm shift into public education. Many educators, journalists and community members do not yet fully understand the value of the charter school movement. The broader public does not fully comprehend that charter schools *are* public schools. In order for the charter school movement to succeed, the broader public must have a favorable opinion of charter schools. Positive stories in the news media, which reach thousands, if not millions, of people, help influence public opinion. Public opinion influences legislators, school boards and community groups, all of which can help or harm the charter school movement.

Working effectively with journalists can benefit individual charter schools. Sending information to journalists for use in their stories can help attract students to a newly established school. Sending additional information to generate positive press after the school opens can help attract even more students. Positive stories can enhance charter schools' credibility. In one case, a newspaper story about a charter school attracted the attention of a major national musician, who donated more than \$100,000 to the featured school. In another case, a television story about a successful charter program helped to convince a foundation to support the creation of many now successful charter schools. Both stories also helped build public knowledge and support for the charter movement as a whole.

Charter school advocates should not wait for reporters to call them; they should actively promote their cause. This handbook is designed to offer several "best practices" in dealing with the news media. We want to help charter advocates:

- Learn to work more effectively with journalists -- not only reporters, but also editorial page writers, freelance authors and more;
- Develop strong working relationships with the news media;
- Increase the possibility that the media will cover many of the successes, and even some of the challenges that the charter school movement experiences; and
- Expand knowledge of different forms of news media with which charter advocates should work.

This handbook has several sections that will help you:

- Identify key messages that you need to share with the broader public;
- Select a spokesperson;
- Work with reporters -- sending them information, and responding to their inquiries;
- Work with editorial boards;
- Write opinion pieces -- also known as letters to the editor or “Op-Ed” (opinion editorial) columns; and
- Recognize and work with diverse forms of news media that communicate with the public.

Since charter schools are so new, it is important to start from square one. Journalists and their readers, listeners or viewers may know nothing about charter schools or very little about the charter school movement. They need the best available information, articulated clearly and concisely. Therefore, it is important to determine the key messages about charter schools and carefully identify those who will most effectively deliver these messages to members of the news media.

## **TEN PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA**

First, it is important to understand journalists’ responsibilities, as well as their worldview. Journalists report news. Their stories can provoke, criticize, challenge, question or praise. Journalists try to get readers, listeners and viewers interested in what they write or report. A journalist’s job is not to give your school, or the charter movement, good publicity. Journalists at times may even frustrate your organization. But if you are successful at communicating with them, you will be delighted with what they can produce.

Here are ten general principles to consider when working with the news media. The rest of this workbook will give details and explanations of these key points.

- 1) Understand the pressures and needs of members of the media. On a daily basis, they are inundated with breaking news, press releases, deadlines from editors and demands to finish stories. You will be far more successful if you recognize the demands placed on them and if you put their needs first, rather than yours.
- 2) Be responsive. Newspaper and television reporters usually have less than a day to complete an entire story. This includes deciding on story ideas, conducting interviews, and writing and editing their stories. Contacting and responding to them promptly increases the likelihood that your position and positive message will be more accurately reflected.
- 3) Be proactive. Don’t wait for someone in the media to contact you. Your school or organization should reach out in a variety of ways. Prepare information. Inform journalists of special developments, accomplishments or awards. Write guest

- columns. Offer to meet with journalists at their offices. Invite them to visit your school or organization.
- 4) Be concise and to the point. Respect a journalist's time. Members of the media are especially busy people.
  - 5) Consider the journalist's audience. Some focus on a particular ethnic community. Some see their audience as a rural community. Some target the business community. Others focus on a broader statewide or national audience. A message that resonates with one journalist may not interest another.
  - 6) Do your homework. Prepare one-page summaries of important information. Provide phone numbers of key contacts. Have copies of important documents available. Be prepared to do research for members of the media. Journalists remember those who help them.
  - 7) Always be honest. Never say something to a reporter that is untrue. Also, recognize that anything you say to a reporter may be used.
  - 8) Members of the media hear from many sources. This includes those who see charter schools as a threat. This makes getting your message across critically important. Negative news stories on charter schools may originate from an individual or organization with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.
  - 9) Patience and persistence are important. If you continue sending information to a journalist regularly without being a pest, sooner or later you will get coverage.
  - 10) Be grateful. After a positive news story appears, let the reporter or writer know that you appreciate their effort. Reporters hear complaints all the time; gratitude is rare and is generally appreciated.

## **SECTION ONE: IDENTIFY THE KEY CHARTER SCHOOL MESSAGES**

Simple messages, consistently and frequently conveyed, will establish a base level of awareness and understanding of the value of charter schools. Below are examples of five simple, basic points that leaders of the California Charter Schools Association have determined are vital. These concepts have been successfully poll-tested with the voting public in Minnesota and California – the first two states in the nation to pass charter school laws. These messages are introduced regularly into discussions with the news media and the broader public.

Tailor these key messages to fit the needs of your school or organization. The critical point is that you need to think carefully and thoughtfully about your messages.

Sample key messages:

### **1) CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Charter schools are open to all. As with all public schools, they are free and non-sectarian. They do not have admissions tests. They are well within the American tradition of public education. (It sounds simple enough, but don't neglect to mention this

key message in every public setting. Some polls show that many people are not certain whether charter schools are public or private schools.)

## **2) CHARTER SCHOOLS INTRODUCE FLEXIBILITY AND LOCAL CONTROL**

For far too long, public education has been stifled by too many regulations and bureaucratic red tape. Charter schools allow educators freedom from many of these regulations so they can design programs that cater to the individual needs of students and the local community.

## **3) CHARTER SCHOOLS GIVE FAMILIES CHOICES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Charter schools expand choice within the public school system. If a regular public school is not working for a child, parents can choose to enroll them in a charter school. In fact, most charter schools have higher levels of parental satisfaction than traditional public schools, and nearly all of them have waiting lists.

## **4) CHARTER SCHOOLS PROVIDE HEALTHY COMPETITION**

Charter schools introduce a healthy pressure on the system to provide equal or better services to the students they serve. When public schools compete for students, every child wins and our entire public school system improves.

## **5) CHARTER SCHOOLS INTRODUCE REAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability into public education. If a charter school cannot attract students or improve student achievement, it can be closed. In contrast, when traditional public schools are failing, many continue to operate, and they are often rewarded with additional funding.

Other possible key messages:

- Charter schools receive less taxpayer money than other public schools but, in many cases, they produce better results. When charter schools are compared to other schools with similar demographics, student achievement is often higher.
- Charter schools help close the achievement gap by often serving a greater number of low-income youth than traditional public schools. They often improve student achievement at a faster rate than district public schools.
- Charter schools are reinvigorating families on the issue of public education. Before charter schools, many families had to sacrifice to send their children to private schools. Today, many families are re-enrolling their children in public education because high quality charter schools are now in place to meet their needs.

These messages are guidelines for you to consider. Each charter school and organization should thoughtfully determine the effectiveness of each of these points as they interact with members of the news media and the broader public.

## **SECTION TWO: SELECT YOUR CHARTER SCHOOL SPOKESPERSON**

Each school and advocacy organization should appoint one key spokesperson who will be responsible for dealing with and speaking to the news media. This person should be articulate and within the inner circle of decision-making at the organization. For a charter school, this person may be the director, or even the board chairperson. For a charter association, the spokesperson may also be an individual specially trained to work with the news media. This person should work with the leadership of the school or organization to ensure that everyone is intimately familiar with the key messages of charter schools. The spokesperson should have these key messages committed to memory. The messages should be able to roll off her or his tongue as naturally as in a conversation with a friend.

The spokesperson should be disciplined and discerning, recognizing when it important to say just enough, but not too much. Sometimes it is important that this person recognizes what not to say.

A good spokesperson should be easily accessible. Reporters are often working on tight deadlines and need to get information or comments in a very short time. Ideally, the spokesperson should be someone who can respond within an hour to a media inquiry. Reporters deeply appreciate people who promptly call them back. This sounds obvious, but many organizations have lost the opportunity to have their views represented in an article or story because they took a day or two to respond to a reporter's inquiry.

The spokesperson should also be very knowledgeable. Well-informed people are invaluable for journalists, who constantly seek reliable (and reachable) individuals for quotes, comments, charter school facts and responses.

## **SECTION THREE: LEARN THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF NEWS SOURCES**

### **Newspapers**

Newspapers typically fall into three categories: dailies, community/neighborhood papers and targets papers. Dailies tend to publish seven days a week and serve a large geographic area. They tend to print international, national, state and local news. Most dailies have a specific education "beat" with one or more reporters. Community papers tend to print once a week, or in some cases, once a month. However, some community papers publish several times a week. Targeted papers often appeal to a particular ethnic group, like a newspaper focusing on Asian, African American, or Latino communities.

Community papers will typically find your local story more interesting. A story that might receive just two-paragraphs published in the back of a daily could be the “top story” of a community paper. Targeted papers will be much more likely to print a story about someone representing the audience they want to reach (a newspaper focusing on women’s issues will be more receptive to a story about a terrific female principal. A Latino newspaper will be much more interested in a charter school that works successfully with Latino students).

When dealing with newspapers, please remember:

- Newspapers print news, not history. Therefore, timeliness is critical. Find out deadlines for a reporter and a columnist, and whenever possible, submit a story idea at least one week in advance. Don’t wait until the day before an event to invite members of the media.
- There are important differences between reporters and columnists. A columnist often expresses vigorous, even controversial opinions. A journalist reports various sides of a story. You want to work with both kinds of journalists -- but recognize that they have different jobs and different needs. Read your local papers to see the types of stories written by a particular columnist; they may be open to your cause.
- For larger papers, reporters from beats other than education may be interested in your story. Do you have a new, unusual collaboration with a business? Business reporters may write about school and business partnerships. Is a high-profile celebrity or sports athlete a school supporter? Arts and entertainment or sports sections may consider writing about this connection. Look at various parts of your local and regional papers, and think about which reporters might be interested in your school or organization.
- A reporter will not use your story prior to a specified release date. However, at the discretion of the editor, they may use it anytime afterward. Always put **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** at the top of the first page of your press release, along with the date. (See samples at the end of this section.)
- Send your press releases to the right place. Larger newspapers tend to have local bureaus. Contact the local bureau directly. If you are unable to find the name of a specific reporter, mark it to the attention of the **EDUCATION EDITOR**.
- Daily newspapers tend to have fewer staff on weekends. If you have a report that can wait a few days, you slightly increase the likelihood of it being used if you give it to the reporter Thursday or Friday, with a media embargo (a media embargo prohibits the press from using your press release prior to a specified publication date) until 12:01 a.m. for Monday morning.

## **Television and Radio**

Due to limited airtime and the up-to-the-minute news cycles, radio and television markets are much more difficult media to access. Your message will only be newsworthy if it appeals to a larger audience. Here are a few tips about working with television reporters:

- Think ahead of time about what you want to say. In most cases, only 10-15 seconds of what you say will be used. Have a sentence or two in mind that clearly summarizes your views.
- Remember that anything you say can be used. Think before you speak.
- If the reporter asks you an antagonistic question, do not get defensive and don't argue on camera with the reporter. Relax, smile, and say what you want listeners or viewers to hear. Always go back to your key charter school messages.
- Remember that radio and television stations sometimes target certain groups. Some Spanish language radio stations, for example, are eager to have news of special interest to their audience.

Make sure you dress appropriately, and remember, there are ways to look more “camera-friendly;”

- Avoid white shirts or blouses at all costs!
- Be wary of color combinations -- red and dark blue “vibrate” on camera.
- Avoid “busy” prints. This includes detailed ties. They look fuzzy on camera.
- It is best to wear soft colors; light blue is a good example. Take note by observing the dress of your local newscasters.

Radio news stories will likely include a brief sound bite from the spokesperson. These interviews are most frequently done over the phone, and are spliced around the radio anchor's commentary. Be cautious and always remember that you might be getting recorded! If you are not prepared when you are called and asked for information, it is perfectly appropriate to ask the reporter if you could call them back after they ask you their question. This gives you time to organize and compose your thoughts so you will not be led into a sound bite you'll regret.

- Remember that you will most effectively make your point when you can get your “catch phrase” boiled down to 10 seconds or less.

## **Talk Radio**

Talk radio is quickly becoming the strongest medium within the alternative news media. It is an excellent way to deliver your message. However, it is often the most difficult. Many talk shows provide a forum for two different points of view and often allow listeners the chance to call in and discuss their topic. The best way to contact such a show is through the radio show's producer.

The talk radio forum demands extensive knowledge, a strong command of the facts, an articulate presentation and a quick wit to respond to “off the cuff” questions. Little time is wasted on careful thought and reflection.



## SECTION FOUR: GETTING STARTED

Begin by gathering all the information that helps you tell your story. Look at the broader movement to assess how charter schools are impacting public education. According to several reports and studies, charter schools are indeed adding value to public education.

Assess your own school or organization's strengths. Make sure that you can define your school or organization's mission in what is called an "elevator pitch." If you enter an elevator with an interested journalist, parent, potential donor or community member, can you quickly articulate your mission before you arrive at the ground floor?

Example: One well-known charter school's mission is: "It is our goal to prepare low-income students whose parents lack a college diploma to attend and graduate from a four-year university." Is yours that simple? If not, try to refine it so it is.

Utilize data. Can you use your school's test scores to tell a positive story about your school? Don't stop there; go further. Do you have a waiting list? How about the students your school serves? Is there a positive story that shows that your school meets the particular needs of students that were underserved in the traditional public school system? Dig deep into your school to find a compelling story that may resonate with the public. Then, follow these simple steps to prepare to reach out to the news media:

### 1) Create a press kit

A press kit should include general information that you will give to a reporter to highlight either your school or the features of charter schools in your community, region or state. It should be presented in your organization's folder and ready to hand to reporters. A good press kit should include:

- **A fact sheet** mentioning the important pieces of information that a reporter will need to know, easily readable through a quick scan. It should be in bullet points and highlight facts about the organization or school. This should include: the number of charter schools in the state, the number of students served, unique curriculum and past performance data (test score results, etc.). Keep your fact sheet to one page.
- **Newsworthy events.** Include the latest press release about your upcoming event or story idea.
- **Basic charter school facts** from your state. Know the statistics and demographics of your students and staff. Reporters will access these as background to the story.
- **A backgrounder** that gives a factual narrative on unique aspects of the school or organization, but is too detailed for a fact sheet or news release.
- **Basic contact information** for the school or organization, since this may be included in a sidebar to a story.
- **Prior news articles** on your school and the charter school movement, especially if they were positive. Since reporters will access prior news stories before writing their story, this is a helpful gesture and will help focus a reporter on specific areas of your school.

- **Proper translation**, especially if you are working with a reporter from a paper or radio station that serves people who don't speak English as their first language. It helps to have a press release in the relevant language. Journalists appreciate your extra effort on this. You can get help from bilingual members of your staff, or perhaps a community partner, student or parent.

## 2) **Identify members of the news media**

Become familiar with members of the local news media. Subscribe to your major daily newspaper and community publications. Follow the education stories and become familiar with the writing style of the education and political reporters.

## 3) **Contact the reporters**

Call your local paper and other media sources and ask to be connected with the education reporter, even if you do not know their name. When you reach them, always ask if they are on “deadline.” Introduce yourself; ask them how they prefer to receive information. Both of these simple practices show that you respect the journalist’s time, and their needs. These easy gestures, which journalists rarely receive, are effective ways of building relationships with the media.

## 4) **Arrange a “site visit”**

Always tie a reporter “site visit” to a newsworthy event or to something about charter schools that differentiates them from the nearby public schools. These face-to-face interactions are the best way to build rapport with members of the news media. Do not worry if a story is not written by the reporter immediately after a visit. The reporter may contact you several months down the road, or will respond to your next inquiry. Remember, your goal is to establish long-term relationships with members of the news media.

## 5) **Always cater to differences in the news media**

Keep in mind that there are differences between newspapers, radio and television. While newspapers may devote 800 words to a story, television and radio may only give 15-60 seconds. Newspapers include pictures and text in a static format, television focuses on visual action and radio allows people to listen and to create a picture in their heads. If you know what you want to communicate, you can more easily find the proper medium for your message.

## SECTION FIVE: DRAFTING A PRESS RELEASE

The best and most traditional way of getting your story out to the news media is through a press release (also known as a news release). A press release can be used for most types of news media, with subtle changes for radio and television. For charter schools, the easiest type of press release is one that announces a site visit by a VIP. This will most likely be an elected official.

News releases are not the time to get creative with language. They should be very straightforward. Focus on the facts: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY and of course HOW. You want to reach the reporter and impress them with the event, story or “hook,” the news angle that is going to get the reporter interested in attending an event or writing about charter schools.

It is best to write a news release as factually and as concisely as possible. Keep in mind that reporters and editors come across dozens, if not hundreds, of press releases a day. Here are a few key points to consider:

- Put the important factual information in the first paragraph.
- Put your release on your organization or school letterhead.
- Include a contact person and a daytime phone number at the top of the page.
- Include a quote from a charter school leader. If your news is an event featuring a visit from a distinguished guest (i.e. an elected official); be sure to include a quote from that person as well.
- Spell out all numbers from one to nine. Use numbers for 10 and up.
- Page number your news releases if they go beyond one page. It is important to remember that most news releases should be a single page in length.
- Always put the date at the top of your press release.
- Send your press release to the media early in the morning on the day of the release. It is best if the reporter receives the release just before arriving to work. Follow up the release with a phone call to the reporter you are targeting.
- Signal the end of your news release at the bottom with this symbol: ###
- MOST IMPORTANT! Have more than one person proofread your document. Check it thoroughly for typos or mistakes.

What if it's not your news? Sometimes external news hits the airwaves that may positively relate to the charter school movement. It may be a positive report on student achievement by a university or think tank. It could also be a report issued by your state's policymakers. Here is an actual release that followed a recent positive announcement in California:

## **LEGISLATIVE ANALYST CALLS FOR ELIMINATING CHARTER SCHOOL CAP, STREAMLINING CHARTER FUNDING, EXPANDING CHARTER AUTHORIZERS**

*New Report Suggests Ways to Grow and Improve Charter School Movement,  
Address Inefficiencies in Law*

**Sacramento, CA** – A major report released Tuesday by the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) recommends that the California Legislature remove the current cap on the number of charter schools, streamline charter school funding and allow for multiple authorizers.

The LAO report, entitled, “Assessing California's Charter Schools”, follows the two state-sponsored evaluations of charter schools since charter law was enacted in 1992, including last year's landmark report by the RAND Corporation (2003). The LAO concluded that “charter schools are a viable reform strategy—expanding families' choices, encouraging parental involvement, increasing teacher satisfaction, enhancing principals' control over school-site decision making, and broadening the curriculum without sacrificing time spent on core subjects.”

“Despite significantly less funding and political hurdles, California's charter schools perform every bit as well as traditional public schools – especially on behalf of disadvantaged students,” said Caprice Young, CEO of the California Charter Schools Association. “By implementing the Legislative Analyst's recommendations, our Legislature can take a bold step which will allow more charter schools the ability to improve public education and close the achievement gap.”

The LAO's specific recommendations to the Legislature include:

- **Removing the cap on the annual growth of charter schools** – The 1992 California Charter Schools Act capped the number of charter schools that could operate at 100. This was modified through legislation in 1998 to allow 250, and allowing 100 new schools each year thereafter. The cap currently stands at 750 for the 2003-04 year. The LAO report pointed to the fact that 18 states have charter school laws that do not limit the number of charter schools that can operate.
- **Reforming the Charter School Categorical Block Grant** – According to the report, “The trend most incompatible with the original intent of charter schools is the increasing number of categorical programs for which charter schools must apply separately.” The LAO recommended consolidating 14 categorical programs back into the General Block Grant and an additional ten categorical programs back into the “Disadvantaged-Student” Component of the Block Grant.
- **Allowing for Multiple Authorizers** – The report recommended the Legislature consider multiple types of authorizers to oversee charter schools, including the

“SBE, (State Board of Education) school districts, COEs (County Offices of Education), accredited colleges and universities, and nonprofit organizations that can meet certain criteria...” According to the report, “If California were to establish a multiple-authorizer system, it would join the ranks of several other states that already have established these types of systems.”

Since charter school law was enacted in 1992, the LAO has commissioned two comprehensive evaluations examining the effectiveness of the charter school process at the request of the state Legislature. According to the LAO, last year's RAND study found “charter schools cost-effective – finding that charter schools achieve academic results similar to those of traditional schools even though they obtain significantly less state and federal categorical funding.”

RAND found that on average, “start-up” charter schools outperform conventional non-charter public schools. The report also confirmed that charter schools serve a greater percentage of low-income students, and more students with academic problems than conventional public schools.

RAND's report follows recent studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of California's charter school process. This includes recent studies by the Hoover Institution at Stanford (2003) and the School of Education at Cal State Los Angeles (2002), both which showed that student achievement at California's charter schools is improving at a greater rate than in non-charter public schools. If current student achievement rates-of-improvement trends continue, California may soon expect to see its charter schools outperforming its traditional public schools.

The full text of the Legislative Analyst's Report can be downloaded at:  
[http://www.lao.ca.gov/2004/charter\\_schools/012004\\_charter\\_schools.pdf](http://www.lao.ca.gov/2004/charter_schools/012004_charter_schools.pdf)

### **About the Legislative Analyst's Office**

The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) is a non-partisan office which provides fiscal and policy information and advice to the legislature.

### **About the California Charter Schools Association**

The California Charter Schools Association is California's premier charter school membership organization and is the public voice for California's 471 charter schools that currently serve 170,000 students. The association supports California's diverse community of charter schools by providing members with the resources, leadership and support they need to work effectively with the entire public school system to ensure that all students get a fair chance to succeed.

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## **SECTION SIX: WRITING OPINION ARTICLES**

Newspapers encourage opinion articles and commentary. They are often widely read, and education is a popular focus of opinion articles. The two most common types of opinion articles are letters to the editor and editorials. Letters to the editor are usually a brief reply to a news article, piece of legislation or a current event. A guest editorial, also known as an “Op-Ed,” is a longer opinion piece that focuses on larger issues.

### **Letters to the Editor**

#### **Basic Tips**

Most newspapers publish less than one third of the letters they receive. The following tips can improve the odds of having your letter published:

- **Keep it brief**  
The best letters are short and limited to a single point. The average length of a published letter is around 150 words and is typically limited to no more than 200 words. In any case, letters are likely to be condensed in the editing process. Follow the old adage: “Brevity is the soul of wit.”
- **Keep it timely**  
Tie your letter to a newsworthy educational event. Generally, your letter should arrive within one week following the event. It is not always required, but it helps if you can reference a particular story that has already appeared.
- **Keep it electronic**  
Since letters received electronically don't require re-typing, there is less delay between when the letter is sent and when it appears. E-mail is more effective than the fax.

Sometimes newspapers will publish letters to the editor or guest columns offering a viewpoint different than the one given by a reporter or editorial page writer. In a number of cases around the country, charter advocates have been able to present their views in one or both of these ways. While this does not eliminate the misinformation or questionable assertions that sometimes appear in articles or editorials, this is a way of more accurately getting your message out.

The following letter to the editor appeared in the national publication USA TODAY after a negative editorial was published by the newspaper:

### **Charters Represent ‘Finest’ Education**

May 10, 2004

Regarding your recent editorial, “Charters Lack Accountability”, let’s put things into perspective. One faulty program within our nation’s 3,000 charter schools is not enough evidence to indict an entire movement. Using the same logic, our

nation's public school system should be abandoned given the egregious mismanagement in a handful of school districts.

In California, we *can* quantify the number of troubled charter schools – four percent of California's 500 charter schools have been closed down for underperformance. In fact, your editorial should have been entitled, "Charters Promote REAL Accountability" given the work that those of us who are leaders in the charter school movement are doing to ensure that all charters meet high quality standards.

California's 471 charter schools, serving 170,000 students, are transforming public education. Independent studies by such organizations as the Rand Corporation confirm that the achievement of low-income charter school students in CA is improving at a faster rate than in non-charter public schools, despite the fact that charters receive less funding on a per pupil basis.

Charter schools open a window of fresh air into the public school system. With that fresh air comes a few flies. Remember that a "charter" is a contract, and responsible charter authorizers and charter leaders agree that charters must be held accountable in exchange for the opportunity to develop innovative best practices. The fact that the reported actions of the Pensacola school were identified and addressed underscores that the system is working just as it should.

Peter Thorp  
President of the Board of Directors, California Charter Schools Association  
Executive Director, Gateway High School, San Francisco, California

## **Guest Editorials -- Also Known as "Op-Ed" Columns**

### **Basic Tips**

It's rare that a major newspaper will use a piece longer than 700 words. Check the requirements prior to submitting an article. In one instance, a column of 800 words was rejected, because the newspaper had a limit of 700 words. It was resubmitted at 700 words, and printed. However, you may not get a second chance to re-submit (and you also want to make the best possible use of your time). Check ahead of time on length. Keep it tight.

- If you send your letter by e-mail, paste it into the body of the e-mail and attach it to the e-mail, to make sure it arrives even if there are technical problems the attached document.
- Most papers accept simultaneous submissions, so feel free to send your letter to publications other than just your daily newspaper.
- Grab people's attention. State your position in the first sentence. The more interesting you can make the first sentence, the more likely people will keep reading. Just because you are fascinated by charter schools does not mean

potential readers will be interested. Don't ask readers to read several paragraphs or the whole thing to find out what you think. They won't.

Examples of first sentences that will interest readers:

- “Main Street Charter School has produced an amazing change in <<student name’s>> behavior and skills.”
- “Despite critic’s predictions, Minnesota charter schools have proven extremely attractive to minority and low income students.”
- “Charter school founder <<educator’s name>> has shown just how much can be done to improve public education with new ideas, creativity and hard work.”
- “Why are people coming from all over the nation to see Main Street Charter School?”

Be specific.

Here is an example of a statement that is too vague:

- “Our community seems to like Main Street Charter School.”

And an example of a statement that is specific:

- “Main Street Charter School enrolls 180 students and has more than 200 people on the waiting list. Why? Families say they like the way art and music are used to help teach reading and math. They like the fact that our students make presentations every six weeks about what they are learning. Families are very enthusiastic about the individual family/student/teacher conferences we hold in August for every student.”

Use anecdotes. Let people know that real children are being impacted because of the presence of charter schools. It's completely acceptable to admit that the other side has some valid points. Use that to your advantage.

Example:

- “Charter school critics point out that charters have not done enough to help out all of those who are being left behind. They’re somewhat right. Only by expanding the number of charters that can be granted this year will we be able to reach all children who deserve a quality education.”

Your conclusion should restate your opinion, and what action should be taken.

Example:

- “Main Street Charter School is helping our community’s most at-risk children. This is an experiment that’s working. The school board should renew their charter.”
- Don't try to cover the waterfront. Focus on one or two major issues.
- Keep it simple yet varied. Don't use big words if more common words will do the job. Use a mix of short and long sentences.
- Don't repeat yourself. Repetition turns off readers.
- Avoid telling readers the obvious. Don't waste their time by arguing that public education is a good thing. Tell them how to achieve better education through the advancement of charter schools.
- Look for clichés in your writing. Eliminate them.



- Ask someone to read what you've written and tell if you if your points and examples are clear. You probably understand yourself, but the point is to get other people to understand you.
- When you think you've finished, read your article out loud. Listen for clunky wording and long sentences. If it doesn't sound right, it won't read well.
- One cannot say enough about the importance of your first paragraph. If you spend an hour writing your letter, use the majority of that time to craft the first paragraph. It should set the tone for the rest of the piece.

### **Who should submit the editorial?**

There is nothing more convincing than to read directly from a charter school leader. If possible, have the head of the state association or a director or principal of the charter school help write the editorial. Their name needs to be signed on the editorial. It is also appropriate to work with a teacher at a charter school or an involved parent whose child attends the school. If you have been able to build a relationship with a local legislator, it may be effective to see if they will collaborate on an editorial with you. Many legislators are waiting for the opportunity to speak out on this important educational issue.

### **An Example of an “Op-Ed” Column**

#### **CHARTER SCHOOLS BRING GOOD RESULTS**

By Joe Nathan, the Center for School Change

Wisconsin State Journal, Madison, WI, April 8, 2004

More Wisconsin universities could have a chance to join people like civil rights legend Rosa Parks, the late Minnesota US Senator Paul Wellstone, former President Bill Clinton and President George Bush, a truly unusual group. How? By helping support the charter public school movement.

A survey we completed of universities in Minnesota and Indiana found that becoming sponsors of charter schools helped universities fulfill their mission, enhance education for their own students and provide valuable new opportunities for faculty.

This would be possible for Wisconsin universities if your Governor signs a bill adopted by the legislature, authorizing up to five new charter schools sponsored by universities.

Civil rights legend Rosa Parks has been trying to start a charter school in Detroit. As he addressed a joint session of the Minnesota legislature, the late U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone referred to charter schools as “that marvelous innovation that is spreading throughout the country.” Wellstone was right. Since 1991 the number of charters has grown from one to more than 3000, and forty states have adopted some form of charter legislation.

According to the most recent national statistics, charter public schools enroll a higher percentage of low-income students, and a higher percentage of students of color (racial minorities) than do district public schools. Charters are a growing option for families with whom traditional schools all too often have not been successful.

The charter idea builds on three of the most fundamental ideas in America:

- People should have a chance to carry out their best ideas
- This is a country of responsibilities, as well as rights
- We offer freedom within some limits

Studies, such as one published by the University of California, found that the charter movement helped stimulate improvements in the district system. Former Washington State Superintendent of the Year Kent Matheson declared himself a “convert to the charter movement” because it helped produce improvements in the Flagstaff district, where he served as superintendent.

In ways similar to what happened in the civil rights movement, some district or union officials have tried to intimidate educators, parents, and even University officials who helped create charter public schools. Threats usually have not worked. And give credit to some district educators -- including some in Wisconsin -- who have been very open to the charter idea.

Our survey of more than 20 universities sponsoring charter schools reported encouraging results. University officials said that sponsoring charters gave new opportunities to business, architecture and sociology faculty, as well as the education department, to work with the schools. Universities reported that their own students gained from studying, and in some cases, contributing to the birth of a new school. And universities reported that some charter educators were more open to innovations than other educators.

Charters have pioneered new approaches, such as the teacher led cooperative developed by the Minnesota New Country School, a school that is working with Wisconsin educators. New Visions Charter has developed new approaches to helping students with disabilities. District schools that New Visions trained have shown clear, measurable progress.

Not every charter is a great school. Some rightly were closed for being ineffective. But expanding the charter sector has helped students, and helps improve existing schools. That’s good news for youngsters, their families, and the broader community.

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## **SECTION SEVEN: WORKING WITH EDITORIAL BOARDS**

Every major newspaper has what is known as an “editorial board”. Editorial boards do not print news. They usually respond to news with an opinion piece that serves as the official position of the newspaper -- an “editorial”. Editorial boards endorse political candidates and legislation, and they often weigh in on pertinent news issues of the day. To charter schools, an editorial board of a newspaper can be a critical ally. Get to know the education writers for your local and state newspaper editorial boards. You can often find their contact information on the newspaper’s web site.

Note that quality newspapers have a “firewall” between their news reporters and their editorial boards. Newspapers rarely mix their news and editorial sections. You often will find that the education reporters and the editorial writers do not communicate. Therefore, you will need to start at square one when dealing with the editorial writers as well.

### **Basic tips**

Editorial boards usually take a position on larger public policy issues, and will rarely delve into a local charter school issue unless it has broader implications.

- Build relationships with members of your local editorial board.
- If you get a positive story in your newspaper, send it to the editorial writer.
- If there is an upcoming event or major news story, it is appropriate to initiate contact with the editorial board to request a meeting.
- The best time to request a meeting with an editorial board is when you want them to take a position on your issue. This could be to support a particular piece of legislation, or to validate an important study on the effectiveness of charter schools.
- Always bring someone who can speak to the broader charter school movement with you to such meetings. This will likely be someone from your state charter schools association.
- Do not bring more than three people with you to an editorial board meeting. Too many voices will dilute your message.
- Rehearse what you are going to say and know your facts. This will ensure that everyone is “on message.”
- Bring written material, but keep it brief. A “fact sheet” on the topic you are there to discuss is critical.

Enclosed is an example of an editorial written following an interaction between charter school advocates and a powerful newspaper editorial board:

## **Rewarding Progress**

### **State should bolster successful charter schools**

The Dallas Morning News  
Monday, April 12, 2004

If you are looking for examples to put in the outside-the-box category, then by all means put charter schools in there. The leaders of these public schools get paid to innovate.

Or at least they should. Not all do. And that's part of the problem. Texas has some creative charter schools. And it has some that are failing their students.

The gap between the good and the bad explains why some charter school advocates want the 2005 Legislature to differentiate among the breed. They particularly want legislators to reward those charters that improve the way children learn.

Mike Feinberg of Houston's KIPP Academy offers one idea: exempt charters that do well on Texas' accountability system from some regulatory requirements. He and others like Rosemary Perlmeter of the North Hills School in Irving claim they lack the compliance staff that school districts have. As a result, they have to answer many state requests themselves. That's time they aren't improving how children learn.

Another reform would be to help successful charters improve their facilities. Mr. Feinberg and Ms. Perlmeter advocate that charters that rise above the acceptable standard on the state's ranking system for two out of three years should receive \$1,000 per student per year to help with facilities.

That last reform is crucial. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools don't receive state assistance for building campuses. Many have serious capital needs.

Texas has 73,000 children enrolled in charters, which the Legislature authorized in the mid-1990s as a way to find new ways to improve student learning. KIPP does it by immersing students in school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. And it conducts classes for four hours on Saturday and for an extra month in summer.

That formula may not work for all charter schools. But it has worked so far. And it is the kind of leadership the Legislature wanted from charter schools when it established them. Now, legislators need to respond with enough flexibility and rewards for successful charters. Austin ought to find ways to propel those schools, not hinder them.

## **SECTION EIGHT: THIRD PARTY VALIDATION**

When meeting with journalists, don't rely on just an articulate message to get your point across. Gather everyone who can testify to your school's success – your “third party” validation. There is nothing more powerful than a parent whose child's education has been transformed due to the success they've had at your school. Learn kids' stories, and be prepared to articulate those from at least three of your students.

Teachers play an important role in delivering the charter school message. Since teachers groups are often among those that vehemently oppose charter schools, it is important to allow your teachers the ability to tell their stories that can compel the public. It is helpful to be able to turn to one or more of your teachers who can share how they are more empowered by teaching at your charter school. Help them get their message out to the community – it may turn into one of your most powerful media opportunities.

Perhaps most importantly, charter schools need to find supportive individuals who have a high profile in the community. This person could be a legislator, a school board member, a mayor, or any “newsmaker” that can validate your school's success. Never underestimate the value of such allies. They can come in handy at a community or school event, or when you need a quote for a press release or a reporter interview. If you can't identify such a person, cultivate one. You'll find it will help you get your message out successfully.

## **SECTION NINE: DEALING WITH NEGATIVE NEWS**

When dealing with negative news, remember that the best defense is a good offense. If you have a relationship with members of the media, and you have been able to convey the value of charter schools to them beforehand, you are likely to get more favorable treatment in the event of a crisis. The most important things to remember in the event of a crisis are: to always tell the truth, to be open to communicating with the press and to get all the information that is most favorable to your position out and into the hands of the press.

It is valuable to carefully check a news article or report that is presented as negative. Sometimes it may contain positive information that needs emphasizing; sometimes it may be leaving out important information. For example, one report from a school district said that their district school test score average was higher than the charter test score average of the charters they sponsored. After the message was checked, this turned out to be true, but it was also true that a majority of the charters the district sponsored had greater improvement gains in student achievement. When this information was brought to a local reporter working on the story, a follow-up story appeared with a very positive headline, reporting that another analysis showed the clear majority of charters producing greater gains than district schools.

Line up your third party validation prior to a crisis. Contacting your supporters to articulate your positions to them can be as important as contacting the press. If your crisis situation includes a legal component, make sure you discuss what you are going to say to the press with a legal expert or attorney. If you do these simple things prior to a negative story, you will find that your position will be represented much more accurately.

## **SECTION TEN: NOW WHAT? GET YOUR MESSAGE OUT!**

So you developed your plan of action, convinced a reporter to visit a charter school, and your work led to a positive article on the front page of your paper. Congratulations! Please don't stop there. Don't assume that everyone will see the article. Be strategic with your news article and make it your school's new marketing piece. Carefully cut out and format the original version, with the newspaper's logo, on an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of paper. Frame it for all visitors to see. Send a copy to families, relevant elected officials, and others interested in your school.. Include a note with the article thanking them for their support. Your charter school or organization will get a lot of value out of this type of communication.

## CONCLUSION

Many people want to hear hopeful stories. If your school is functioning well, you have a great story to tell. The best news is about progress, accomplishment and success. There is plenty of gloom and doom to go around. You are helping journalists, and the broader community.

Don't wait for reporters and news writers to come to you. You can actually help reporters do their jobs.

Be concise. Whether writing a press release, an opinion column or simply talking with a reporter, don't waste words. Include strong opinions based on the key charter school messages, placed high in the piece, if not in the first paragraph. Your communication should be bolstered by facts, quotes, observations and specific examples. Any figure you use must be accurate, and you should include a note to the newspaper telling where the figure came from and how it was calculated (if this is not clear from the piece). Be cohesive; if you wander off your main point, you are likely to lose the attention of members of the news media.

Finally, remember that working with journalists takes a lot of work, but this effort can produce many benefits. Dealing with reporters takes plenty of planning, clarity, responsiveness, and perhaps most important, plenty of internal communication within your organization. Working with the news media should be a high priority for every charter school and for every advocacy group. It doesn't take a masterful communicator to accomplish this, just an understanding of the news media and a commitment to deliver.

## FROM "THE LOW ROAD:" A POEM BY MARGE PIERCY

...It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say *We*  
and you know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Gary Larson** is the Vice President of Communications for the California Charter Schools Association, the state's premier charter school member association. Larson also served for two years as Director of Communications the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC). Larson develops and implements the public messaging strategy for the state's charter school movement and trains the state's charter school community in effectively engaging the press.

Prior to joining the charter school movement, Larson was a Senior Associate with a global public relations firm. Larson has spent approximately nine years engaging in various political, corporate, non-profit and government-level public relations assignments. This includes working on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. Also a writing specialist, Larson has authored several editorials on a variety of political, policy and public relations topics, which have appeared in newspapers around the state of California. Larson received his Master's Degree in Public Administration from the University of Southern California.

**Joe Nathan** directs the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. Parent, student and educator groups have given him awards for his work as a public school teacher and administrator. Nathan helped write the nation's first charter law. Twenty-two state legislatures and six Congressional Committees have invited him to testify about school reform issues, including the charter idea.

For more than 14 years, Nathan wrote a regular column for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Minnesota's second largest daily newspaper. *USA Today*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Boston Globe*, *Detroit News*, and (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune* and other papers have published guest columns he wrote. Nathan has appeared on more than 300 television and radio programs, including "The Today Show," "Good Morning America," "ABC Nightly News," "McNeil Lehrer News Hour" and "NPR Morning Edition."