



Reform Isn't Enough: New School Growth Requires Public Support

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Introduction

After working with a number of clients on a variety of projects involving education reform, SE2 began discussing the growing need for a cohesive, aggressive communications effort around the issue of school reform in Colorado.

Several recent developments helped form this opinion:

- The imminent 2009 Denver School Board election.
- The approval of 10 new schools by Denver Public Schools (DPS) in the spring of 2009, after approving five different new schools in 2008.
- New charter schools (based on successful school models in other communities) that have struggled to fill all available seats.
- Expanded efforts by current charter school operators to increase the number of new high-quality schools in the Front Range beyond Denver.
- A growing number of shared school campuses, where traditional neighborhood schools are co-located with competing charter schools in the same building.
- Vocal opposition to opening new charter schools from parents and residents, including organized efforts such as the Denver Education Advocacy Network (DEAN), school board candidates who are openly critical of new schools, and the emergence in some areas of a divisive charters-vs.-neighborhood schools sentiment.

We also held conversations with local leaders in the field, including:

- Potential school board candidates;
- Foundation executives and program officers;
- Charter school leaders and;
- Nonprofits working on education reform.

These conversations led us to consider emerging challenges that could derail the expansion and growth of successful new schools. We also believe there are a number of opportunities to better organize outreach to strengthen public support for reforms and increase demand for high-quality schools.

Issue One: Broad public education on school reform

Discussion

High-performing new schools are one of the most efficient and effective strategies to increase student performance. These schools open their doors with strong leadership, effective teachers and staff and a culture of high expectations. Over time, they raise the performance of students and increase their academic growth. More of their students come to school, remain at or exceed grade level, successfully transition through the school system, and graduate and enroll in college.

New schools do not have to expend energy in staff re-training or leadership changes. Perhaps more importantly, they do not have to reverse a culture of failure and disengagement.

Existing school options are failing to adequately meet the needs of many students. A recent analysis from the Denver Post found that, across Colorado, more than 115,000 students are unlikely to meet state reading proficiency levels and more than 134,000 students are unlikely to meet state math proficiency levels anytime over the next three years.

Several years ago, SE2 proposed the creation of an informational tool designed to provide families with access to data about local school performance, as well as guidance on how to make school selections. At that time, the Independence Institute's Pam Benigno already was at work on SchoolChoiceForKids.org, which offers such an online tool. The Piton Foundation also undertook development of such a tool, which has been just launched as ColoradoSchoolChoice.org in collaboration with 9News.

The creation of such online tools is an important step towards the goal of informing parents. However, they shouldn't be the last step. Also needed are:

- Aggressive, culturally competent marketing and outreach efforts to inform families about the tools;
- Strategies to make the information accessible offline and;
- Efforts to make sure families fully appreciate why this information is relevant to their choices about schools.

Outreach to voters and families about the qualities that indicate high performance, the schools that reflect those qualities, what those qualities mean to a child's success, and how to access that information will increase the number of families benefiting from well-chosen schools and create further demand for additional high-quality options.

It's important to stress that it's not enough to simply provide the information. Families must understand why performance indicators are relevant to their experience and the long-term success of their children. Data may not be – and shouldn't necessarily be – the only consideration of families but it's important that they put it into the mix of their decision making.

This sort of robust market for schools also creates a system of accountability, which will provide strong incentives for schools to improve. Sustained focus by parents on quality indicators means

that parents are continually evaluating their children's schools, not solely for the purpose of making a school choice, thus creating continuous pressure for improvement and reform.

Objectives

- Raise awareness of the range of school performance;
- Increase support for validity of school performance assessments;
- Educate families about why and how to make effective school choices for their children;
- Increase political support for education reforms that focus on improving school quality;
- Encourage an ongoing focus on school performance, not just when families are choosing a school;
- Value existing and traditional schools, but raise expectations for school quality.

Audiences

- Families with school-age children, especially with children transitioning across levels (e.g. ECE, kindergarten, fifth grade and eighth grade);
- Residents actively engaged in school decision making (e.g. Parent Teacher Organizations, community organizations, community-based after-school providers, etc.);
- Likely voters.

Activities

- Partner with organizations developing or providing school choice decision-making tools (e.g. Piton Foundation, Independence Institute) to promote existing information on school performance, explain how to access and use that information, and stress why it's important;
- Launch a grassroots effort targeting the people and organizations in neighborhoods who are most likely to influence the decision making of parents selecting schools for their children.

Issue Two: Charter school support and new school growth

Discussion

Many charter schools in the Denver area are highly successful and have produced the statistics to back this up: high CSAP and growth scores, high student retention, completion and graduation rates, and impressive college acceptance records.

At the same time, many people, including families with school-age children, continue to be largely unaware of what charter schools are, how they operate, their relationship with authorizing districts, and the fact that they are tuition-free.

The communications efforts by charter schools or charter management organizations (CMOs), are largely independent (or occur at the CMO level) and consequently are relatively competitive.

Charter schools that expend resources promoting their own programs or academic success do so not necessarily at the expense of other schools, but also not to their benefit. And often due to limited budgets, external or public communications are haphazard and episodic.

But as charter schools expand and supply begins to increase, demand will need to grow simultaneously in order for those schools to be successful. Many of the most successful charters in the metro area have a mission of educating traditionally underserved populations, making the need for culturally appropriate, consumer-driven communication even more critical.

As charter schools expand beyond Denver and a few other urban districts, the need to increase familiarity with and demand for charters from diverse families across the region, as well as to develop strong support from those communities' leaders, will be critical to increasing the number of schools and ensuring a supply of students.

Charter schools – especially those targeting high-risk communities – have largely been a Denver phenomenon up to this point. But issues like poverty and low-performing schools are significant in surrounding suburbs as well. It is not enough for Denver to embrace these reforms but leave other communities behind. The same momentum and political will for school reform needs to extend across the Front Range.

A coordinated communications strategy across highly successful metro area charters could accomplish many goals simultaneously. General public awareness, understanding and support of successful charters could increase at the same time as demand for these schools. Charter schools would be able to solve common communications challenges more efficiently and cooperatively. As high-quality and new charters are promoted, public awareness of school quality measures will benefit, further supporting increased expectations of high quality schools serving all communities.

Objectives

- Coordinate and pursue effective charter school communications in an efficient, cooperative manner;
- Increase demand for charter schools to keep pace with growing supply;
- Improve public understanding of charter schools' purpose, structure and track record;
- Expand support and momentum for high-performing new schools beyond the city of Denver;
- Build higher expectations for school quality.

Audience

- Families who have children in or have expressed interest in charter schools;
- Families with school-age children;
- Families in traditionally underserved populations;
- Likely voters.

Activities

- Host charter school communication meetings, provide strategic direction and offer communications support (e.g. message development, communications training, media strategies and support).
- Conduct focus groups of decision makers with school-age children and highly active voters without school-age children.
- Use a combination of media relations, social marketing, online social networking and grassroots outreach to provide information about charter schools' purpose, school performance and accessibility.

Conclusion

Our hope is that this memo encourages further discussion about how to better spread the success story of new schools and how to capitalize on momentum in the school reform movement. While a great deal of work has already been accomplished, there are thousands of students in Colorado who deserve seats in great schools.

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