

## **THE SCHOOL CHOICE MOVEMENT: FRAMING THE ISSUE FOR POLICY CHANGE**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCHOOL CHOICE MOVEMENT

This case study focuses on the origins, strategies and supporting infrastructure of the school choice movement, as an example of successful field-building for policy change. The school choice movement can be broadly described as advocating for greater variety in educational options for children and parents, generally outside the setting of traditional public schools. The policy options most frequently proffered include vouchers for private schools, tax credits to offset the costs of private school tuition, public charter schools, and support for home schooling. An examination of the origins of this movement suggests that it was framed and catalyzed by a small group of conservative organizations that promote the privatization of the American K-12 education system. These groups believe that free-market competition will both improve the quality of education and increase parental control over their children's education. In this ideological sense, and institutionally, the origins of "school choice" are part of a larger national conservative movement that shares vital infrastructure in the form of funders, think tanks, and other support organizations. While the current school choice movement is arguably more complex than this conservative framing – most notably it includes many charter school advocates who would oppose the privatization of education – the framing, messaging and communication strategies and infrastructure for "school choice" derive from its origins. Our investigation seeks to describe the mechanisms by which a narrowly focused conservative base successfully framed the initial issue and built a much broader foundation of political support for the concept of school choice that continues to resonate across the political landscape today.

The movement takes as its ideological foundation economist Milton Friedman's 1955 article, "The Role of Government in Education," wherein he articulates a vision in which:

Government, preferably local governmental units, would give each child, through his parents, a specified sum to be used solely in paying for his general education; the parents would be free to spend this sum at a school of their own choice, provided it met certain minimum standards laid down by the appropriate governmental unit. Such schools would be conducted under a variety of auspices: by private enterprises operated for profit, non profit institutions established by private endowment, religious bodies, and some even by governmental units.<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone who considers themselves part of the school choice movement subscribes to Friedman's view. But there are many members of the movement who share his vision, including: 1) conservative and libertarian organizations who share an ideological belief in the inherent value of private sector competition, including thought leaders housed at conservative foundations and think tanks; 2) parents and advocates of disadvantaged children who are disillusioned by the public schools they currently attend, and who see access to higher quality schools—including private schools—as a better educational opportunity for their children; 3) Christians and others who believe that public schools do not provide sufficient moral education; and 4) education entrepreneurs and parochial educators who stand to benefit from public funds being directed toward private religious and for-profit educational institutions.

The growth and development of private sector K-12 providers in the past decade suggests that the school choice movement, if successful, will create a growing industry of private sector entrepreneurs. School choice advocates view this as a positive step toward increasing educational supply and competitive forces, but such growth also has significant potential policy implications. Education entrepreneurs are envisioned as a growing community of stakeholders who can financially support lobbying for policy change in support of their business model.

Today, the primary financial force unifying members of the school choice movement is a group of ideologically conservative, often libertarian, foundations and wealthy individuals that coordinate and bankroll research and advocacy organizations at the national, state, and local levels. Their multifaceted strategy has involved partnering with the groups of school choice supporters described above, generally to great effect. The funding and coordination—the real muscle—behind “school choice” as a brand, comes from a group of conservative foundations linked through common membership in the Philanthropy Roundtable. The Roundtable was officially established in 1991 on *“the principle that voluntary private action offers the best means of addressing many of society’s needs, and that a vibrant private sector is critical to generating the wealth that makes philanthropy possible.”*<sup>2</sup> The Roundtable allows donors to coordinate their actions, leverage funds by pooling donations, and share best practices for achieving policy change. The Roundtable works in concert with the State Policy Network, which works to promote *“strategic partnerships among market-oriented organizations,”* and is outlined in more detail further below.

## **POLICY GOALS AND SUCCESSES**

The main policy goal of the founders of the school choice movement – which include the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, members of the Philanthropy Roundtable, and a select group of conservative strategists – is the abolition of the public school system as it exists today, primarily through the provision of public funds (either through vouchers or tax credits) that allow parents to secure education for their children in the private sector – through private schools, home schooling, or other educational choices. Although much of the coordination and leadership of the movement occurs at the national level (as we’ll outline below), education policy in the United States is primarily a state and local prerogative. As such, the movement’s efforts focus on the state and local levels, and its policy successes have likewise occurred at these levels.

The first real school choice policy success came with the initiation, in 1990, of a pilot voucher program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Six years later, after the Milwaukee program had been sanctioned by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Cleveland, Ohio would initiate the second voucher program. According to Robert Enlow, executive director of the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation:

In 1996, when the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation was founded, the school choice movement had a very fractured message. There was a lot of conservative rhetoric, a focus on how markets work, and a lot of groups speaking with a lot of different voices--nothing really cohesive...We also really didn't have

many good messengers at that stage. Who could deliver this message of school choice and freedom in a credible way to members of the public? It was right-wing white folks who were delivering the message, and that doesn't sell in many ways. That's where we were in '96, and when the Friedman Foundation started, we said, "We need to change the message on school choice. We need to get groups speaking with one voice."<sup>3</sup>

The Friedman Foundation commissioned a national study tasked with creating the most publicly appealing common message for the movement. The results of the commission study provided a clear problem and solution statement, starting with the idea that the public school system is failing children, "link[ing] school choice with performance," and highlighting and promoting research that school choice improves educational outcomes and parental satisfaction. Once developed and tested, the foundation worked with select funders, think tanks, and school choice advocacy organizations to coordinate activities and promote a unified message. The specific institutions and strategies that facilitated this unified message are outlined in more detail in the next section of this case study. Additionally, according to Enlow, the movement recognized the value of *justice* as a message, and made sure to appeal directly to poor parents.

Between 1999 and 2005, Florida, Utah, and the District of Columbia (whose program was enacted by Congress and is the first federally sponsored voucher program), established voucher programs, and Illinois started a tuition tax credit program. More minor policy wins since 1997 include third-party tax credit policies in Arizona, Florida, and Pennsylvania, in which individuals and/or corporations receive tax credits for making donations to private scholarship funds. Despite considerable legislative success, the school choice movement has not been without challengers. Between 1994 and 2004, voucher or tuition tax credit proposals were put before voters in state ballot initiatives on seven different occasions, and were defeated every time. As a result of these failures, the movement has reduced its focus on ballot initiatives to focus more on legislative initiatives and legal challenges.

In 2005, according to Alliance for School Choice president Clint Bolick, school choice bills were introduced in 35 states, twelve of which are in "serious play" due to significant support from state legislators and/or governors.

Beyond its push for broad political victories, which to date are somewhat thin, the school choice movement has achieved legal and electoral victories, as well as impressive success in changing public opinion about school choice. Many school choice policies have been upheld in state courts, often with the support of conservative public interest law firms such as the Landmark Legal Foundation and the Institute for Justice. The most significant legal victory for the movement was the 2002 Supreme Court decision to uphold Cleveland's voucher program.

On the political front, school choice advocates are bankrolling pro-voucher candidates for state legislatures and local school boards and have achieved notable successes. After Colorado ballot initiatives proposing a voucher program failed in both 1992 and 1998, Steve Schuck, a Colorado Springs businessman and board member of a national school choice advocacy organization

called Children First America, decided to shift focus to the local school board in 2003.<sup>4</sup> As he describes it, “For \$150,000 we helped elect a majority of reformers to a school board, allowing for prompt, meaningful reform.”<sup>5</sup> All Children Matter, a Michigan-based school choice PAC, has been involved in political campaigns in Utah, South Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Virginia over the past few years. According to All Children Matter’s executive director Greg Brock:

In the 2003 elections, we engaged in campaign activity which helped expand the school-choice majority in the Virginia General Assembly, and we added to the ranks of choice supporters in the Louisiana legislature...[In addition,] politicians in Virginia and Louisiana discovered in 2003 that opposing school choice will now have political consequences, a factor that inevitably makes some politicians reconsider their positions.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of successfully changing public opinion, the Friedman Foundation’s Robert Enlow has noted two that have been particularly effective: 1) putting a social justice face on the movement, and 2) careful selection and use of performance data. These two strategies alone have allowed school choice advocates to persuade many legislators, foundations, and education policy experts to view choice as not only a legitimate option, but perhaps even the best one. Because the movement’s top-level framing is broad enough to encompass private sector, non-profit and government solutions – including charter schools – it has been able to attract widespread support. A 2003 report published by the Brookings Institution and sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation states that, “The discussion about ‘choice’ today is as much about ‘how’ and ‘how much’ as it is about ‘whether.’”<sup>7</sup>

Victories with funders and policy advocates, in the legal arena, and increasingly refined tactics in the policy fight (such as moving toward lobbying state legislatures and backing sympathetic candidates rather than looking for broad public support in the form of ballot initiatives) have placed school choice advocates in a strong position to effect policy change going forward.

## **STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR POLICY CHANGE**

The school choice movement, anchored financially by conservative foundations and a handful of ideologically driven wealthy individuals, and with the help of key intellectuals and lawyers, has pursued multiple strategies to increase their efforts’ efficacy. The following section explains many of these strategies in some detail.

### **Build Infrastructure & Plan for the Long Term**

In concert with the larger conservative movement, the school choice movement has invested heavily in infrastructure to help them change public opinion as well as policy over the long run. The two key components of this infrastructure are research institutions and advocacy organizations, the latter of which includes both political and legal advocacy. Many of the state and national level think tanks and advocacy organizations are linked together through the State Policy Network, which works to promote “strategic partnerships among market-oriented organizations.”

### *Think Tanks and Research Centers*

Certain foundations, such as the John M. Olin, Walton Family, Lynde and Harry Bradley, Jaquelin Hume, and Sarah Scaife Foundations, provide critical support to national- and state-level think tanks and university-based research centers. These think tanks and research centers support scholars interested in exploring the impact of school choice, and help produce research supporting the movement's claims about the benefits of school choice. The results of this work are then selectively mined to devise appealing and persuasive frames and messaging tactics (as described by Robert Enlow above).

The Philanthropy Roundtable's publication *Strategic Investment in Ideas: How Two Foundations Reshaped America* describes a key early example of this strategy. In 1986 the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation made a grant of \$75,000 to John Chubb (a founding partner of the for-profit Edison Schools) and Terry Moe (a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution) to fund the book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, which received significant attention from education policy professionals and the media. Chubb and Moe's book argues that the design of America's public schools is fundamentally flawed, and that only a choice-based system of market competition can save our children. In addition to the research grant to Chubb and Moe, the Bradley Foundation in the mid-1980s was a founding donor to a state-level think tank called the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute published a series of papers denouncing the quality of public education in Milwaukee and around the state, and these papers provided support for local school choice advocates.<sup>8</sup>

According to Gisèle Huff, executive director of the Jaquelin Hume Foundation, "We believe state think tanks play a critical role in producing the intellectual ammunition state legislators need to push for school choice....[State think tanks] have the contacts on the ground and know their environments; so they can be in the forefront."<sup>9</sup>

Effective research from one state level think tank, such as the Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy's 1998 study of school district collective bargaining agreements, is often used as a template for other states. The Mackinac study presented the view that:

Parents, teachers, and administrators share widespread dissatisfaction with public school education. Many place the blame for poor education on a lack of parental involvement, insufficient funds, poor teacher preparation, and so on. Few have focused on a major contributing factor to this failure: unionized teachers and collective bargaining.

This work has been replicated by choice-friendly researchers in Ohio, Minnesota, and New Jersey, and used as ammunition by local school choice advocates in those states.

### *Advocacy Organizations*

The foundations also support national- and state-level school choice advocacy organizations. These groups organize grassroots support from groups such as parents

of disadvantaged children and Christian parents who want their children to have an explicitly religious education. These advocacy groups also lobby state and local lawmakers. For example, the national school choice advocacy group Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), created in 2000, received over two million dollars in grants from the Olin, Bradley, Walton, and Hume Foundations between 2001 and 2003.<sup>10</sup> According to a report by People for the American Way:

In March 2001, BAEO began its organizing efforts with its first annual meeting in Milwaukee – bringing over 600 African-American voucher backers from 35 states together for the express purpose of starting local chapters... By the summer of 2002, BAEO had tapped into the network of existing local African-American voucher supporters and formed 33 local chapters.<sup>11</sup>

Legal advocacy organizations, such as the Landmark Legal Foundation and the Institute for Justice (whose co-founder Clint Bolick is now president of the leading national advocacy group Alliance for School Choice), also receive funding from this core group of foundations and have played an important role in advancing the movement's goals by defending school choice policies in court.

Joseph Bast, president of school choice advocacy and messaging organization the Heartland Institute, recommends that sub-national advocacy organizations focus exclusively on school choice, acquiesce to coordination by national leaders, and avoid democratic institutional structures. In *Successful Strategies and Tactics for School Choice Advocates*, Bast advises:

Avoid adopting an organizational model that involved elections membership, annual meetings, etc. Enormous amounts of time get consumed with meetings, voting, and resolutions, and coalition members often have other agendas that will intrude if given the opportunity.<sup>12</sup>

### *Media-savvy spokespeople*

The school choice movement has developed a contingent of media-savvy spokespeople, both policy wonks and stakeholder activists, as an element of field infrastructure in both the research and advocacy settings. The Heartland Institute offers the following advice to advocacy organizations:

Every participant in your campaign must be prepared to make a brief and effective case for educational choice. This requires preparation, rehearsal, and even memorization of key phrases and arguments. A convincing presentation will define the concept, establish the need, demonstrate workability, and document the benefits of the educational choice plan.<sup>13</sup>

The Philanthropy Roundtable's *A Donor's Guide to School Choice* reports:

Robert Aguirre, a wealthy San Antonio businessman and consultant, has recently created the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), a national group with local affiliates, to carry out his educational mission. HCREO will inform the Hispanic community on school-choice issues and build up Hispanic support for reform—in part by finding and training a new cadre of parent leaders, as Aguirre has already been doing in San Antonio... In Aguirre's view (echoed by many other choice proponents), the way to bring about change is to work closely with choice parents, so that they fully understand the issue, and then to help train them to make the argument publicly. "We can teach parents how to tell their own stories to the media, convey their own expectations of the education of their children, educate them in the issues surrounding school choice so that they can make their case effectively to the public," says Aguirre. A summer leadership institute he has set up in San Antonio is doing just this, graduating more than 100 newly media-savvy, pro-school choice minority parents last year.

### **Create Alliances with Diverse Constituencies**

The conservative ideological segment of the school choice movement learned early on, through its struggles in Milwaukee, the value of support from politically appealing constituencies, such as minority parents, and the help that could be enlisted from parochial educators. Many movement publications emphasize the importance of spokespeople that can represent broad and diverse community support in order to counter charges of rich, white, or even out-of-state conservatives foisting an educational agenda on urban minority kids. For instance, the Philanthropy Roundtable's publication *Strategic Investment in Ideas: How Two Foundations Reshaped America*, refers to Polly Williams, "a former welfare mother who represented a poor section of Milwaukee in the state legislature as a Democrat," as an "essential supporter" of the original school choice pilot program in Milwaukee. A leading school choice activist (who asked not to be identified) emphasized the value of Washington DC's voucher program for bringing "urban liberals" into the school choice movement. Many choice advocates remark on the irony of this partnership, between wealthy white conservatives – whose institutions fight affirmative action and spending on social welfare programs – and poor minority parents. Irony aside, however, all recognize that unity of message has been vital to the movement's policy successes.

Specific strategies to broaden the school choice coalition have included:

- **Creating parent stakeholders** through private scholarships and charter schools. Providing privately funded scholarships to minority kids creates a small but vocal group of parents and business people with a stake and interest in private school vouchers. These kids also provide a demonstration of the potential benefits of school choice. Several movement participants have noted that statistics about student achievement in

charter schools and voucher programs are particularly effective in bringing community activists and parents of disadvantaged kids into the school choice coalition.

Kevin Teasley, founder and president of the Greater Educational Opportunities (GEO) Foundation, a school choice advocacy organization, started a charter school in Indianapolis that is also a parental choice advocacy center. As he describes it, “We’re using the school as a platform to talk with parents, the community, and politicians about school choice – we’re three blocks from the state house.”<sup>14</sup>

- *Appealing to, organizing, training and supporting minority parents* as activists through BAEO and HCREO.
- *Partnering with the Christian right*, many of whom want public subsidies for religious educational institutions and/or support for home schooling and moral education.
- *Attracting the support of parochial educators* by explaining the financial benefits of school choice to them. The Heartland Institute’s Bast writes, “A successful strategy must involve close cooperation with the Catholic Archdiocese and proponents of charter schools, since both have huge stakes in the survival of their schools, have significant constituencies, and have a detailed knowledge of the working of the public schools, city hall, and the state capitol.”<sup>15</sup>
- *Providing support to the charter school movement*. The school choice and charter school movements, while separate, leverage each other to achieve shared goals. The school choice movement supports charter schools not only as a baby step toward a competitive education market, but also as a means of softening the stridency of their call for privatization. The charter school movement, for its part, has at times called upon more conservative political supporters of school choice as powerful allies who can help catalyze policy change including charter schools as part of an education reform agenda.
- *Coordinating financing of state and local candidates* for public office with local education entrepreneurs.

## Unify the Movement

The school choice movement is known for its high levels of coordination in advocacy and messaging, which is achieved through both the existence of networks of organizations and through the concerted activities of its funders. A report from the Commonwealth Institute notes that, “Much of [these organizations’ efforts are] well-coordinated and they reinforce each other through the consistent use of common language and a shared ideology. Many of these organizations focus heavily on marketing their ideas to the broad public and to political office holders.... They repeat messages through multiple channels until these concepts become ‘conventional wisdom’.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the Friedman Foundation's Enlow, "Since 1996, the school choice movement has adopted a more unified message. The Friedman Foundation, Alliance for School Choice, Cato Institute, and many others are working to advance school choice, using different methods and aiming at different audiences, but working together so that we speak with one voice." These groups have multiple strategies for creating and maintaining cohesion across multiple organizations. These strategies include:

- ***Cross-pollinating boards*** of directors, and overlapping staff between foundations and non-profits. For example, the Philanthropy Roundtable was a project funded by the Institute for Education Affairs, founded in 1978 by William Simon and Irving Kristol. Simon was the president of the John M. Olin Foundation. The longtime president (1986-2000) of the Bradley Foundation, Michael Joyce served until 2003 as chair of the Roundtable's board of directors, and Michael Grebe, current president of the Bradley Foundation is one of the five directors of the Roundtable. The Olin Foundation and the Bradley Foundation have been leading funders for the Philanthropy Roundtable. Board and staff members from the Roundtable and the State Policy Network, in turn, have been tapped for leadership positions with state funding and policy organizations.
- ***Holding working groups*** to iron out differences and agree on common goals, principles, and strategies. The Alliance for School Choice, which is quickly emerging as a leader in the movement since its inception in May 2004, has convened individuals from different organizations to take part in task forces charged with creating strategic plans in proactive litigation strategies, scholarship tax credit bill design, and accountability.
- ***Coordinating funding, messaging, and best practices*** using the Philanthropy Roundtable and State Policy Network. For example, the Philanthropy Roundtable's publication *A Donor's Guide to School Choice* provides a road map with best practices for philanthropists who want to get involved with promoting school choice.
- ***Creating model legislation*** with variants for organizations and states with different priorities. For example, the Alliance for School Choice and the Friedman Foundation have formed a partnership to create model legislation for six different kinds of school choice policies. The models were vetted by movement leaders and have since been distributed to thousands of legislators across the country.
- ***Unifying pressure from funders*** for all organizations to support each other and the movement as a whole. The Walton Family Foundation, one of the single largest funders of the school choice movement, was particularly active in using its financial resources as both a carrot and a stick to encourage unity and mutual support between different organizations during the fractious early days of the movement.<sup>17</sup>

## Messaging & Framing

The school choice movement has been extremely successful at developing emotionally powerful concepts and phrases in support of school choice, and then deploying them repeatedly by way of many different players in the movement. This coordinated message and framing strategy has resulted in many of these messages becoming received wisdom. According to a report by the Commonweal Institute, “The same words and phrases magically appear in multiple media at exactly the same time. Staying on message is a skill well-honed by the proponents of school privatization.”<sup>18</sup> The Friedman Foundation’s Enlow gives one example of a time when the movement deliberately created and coordinated the use of certain messages:

The first thing we did [when the Foundation was created in 1996] was commission a national study to come up with a common message, and we shared the results with everyone. We wanted to create an environment where school choice became a widely accepted policy alternative everywhere in the nation--and frankly, right now, school choice is on the menu of policy options in almost every state. It was not in 1996.

The study produced a "mind map," a map showing how widely different values and different messages are embraced. The most powerful message for school choice is that children learn more and gain knowledge from school choice, and that leads to a more prosperous future. The story that America wanted to hear was all about giving children a greater opportunity to achieve goals and succeed in the future. We had to claim that ground in order to win the next level of the school choice message. And that's what we have been doing.

The most effective messages are oriented toward child advancement or parental pride in doing the right thing for their children. Those were the two messages we wanted to get out, and we did. Many groups started to use those. Other messages come out of this new focus, messages that are very simple: School choice is widespread unless you're poor. School choice works. Opponents of school choice lie when confronted by the facts. Those were our messages. And we hammered those in many different ways.<sup>19</sup>

BAEO’s use of the Friedman Foundation’s core talking points is a clear illustration of how the movement’s messages have been deployed effectively by affiliate groups. Shortly after its formation in 2000, BAEO began running print ads in national and community newspapers featuring African American parents and students and the tag line, “Parental school choice is widespread – unless you’re poor.”<sup>20</sup> This message was created in the 1996 study commissioned by the Friedman Foundation and remains a prominent tag-line on many school choice advocacy websites today.

Perhaps the most central theme of the school choice movement is that “Public schools are failing,” along with its related message, “Children are trapped in failing schools.” The Commonweal Institute report traces the use of this phrase back to a 1994 document produced by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Since then, the “failing schools/trapped children”

message has been repeated many times by pro-school choice think tanks, researchers, politicians, activists, and editorialists. As the BAEO example indicates, the messages are nurtured in think tanks and then disseminated for use by others in the movement.

### *Layered Messaging*

The concept that public schools are “failing,” a waste of taxpayer money, unfixable, and fundamentally flawed, is at the heart of the movement’s message to the general public. However, the movement uses targeted messages for specific groups. Among secular conservative intellectuals, funders, and libertarians, the message is that public schools are a monopoly. Monopolies lead to poor quality services and bad outcomes and the only solution is market-based competition. When communicating with conservative Christians, an important message is that public schools promote multiculturalism, homosexuality, moral relativism, and negative attitudes toward America. For parents of poor and minority children, parental choice is presented as a civil rights issue.

### *Social Justice Frame*

Perhaps of equal importance with the concept that public schools are failing and flawed by design is the school choice movement’s systematic development and use of a “social justice frame.” This development was necessary both for political expediency, and to mobilize true grassroots advocacy. Public schools in poor areas are the ones most likely to be failing local children, so spokespeople from those areas are the most persuasive face for this argument. Groups like BAEO and HCREO lend real credibility to this message and work to organize parents as community activists and spokespeople in support of school choice.

In addition to highlighting the poor academic performance of poor and minority students in public schools, another way the movement frames school choice as a social justice issue is by pointing out that many community leaders, legislators, and teachers send their children to private schools, i.e. if the rich and powerful can send their kids to private schools, low-income and middle-class parents should have that choice as well.

### *Use of Data*

Data plays a varied role in the school choice movement. Perhaps most notable is the long “shelf-life” of data that is consistently used at multiple levels in support of the movement. Advocates often quote a 1983 study commissioned by the Department of Education titled *A Nation at Risk*. The study includes this passage: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”<sup>21</sup> Beyond this quote, use of hard data is mixed. Some advocates assert that public schools are failing generally and provide statistics on minority achievement from specific urban school districts. Where the movement’s use of data is weakest is in providing causal evidence that school choice will fix the problems. Many arguments rest on the concept that school choice “works” and is better for students. As an example, the Heartland Institute’s publication *Ten*

*Principles of School Choice* cites the above quote from *A Nation at Risk*, statistics on eighth grade reading proficiency in Chicago, Cleveland, and the District of Columbia, data on Black and Latino high school dropout rates, and references a study that found smaller achievement gains during the K-12 years in American students relative to students in other wealthy countries. Evidence for the success of school choice often rest on selected examples taken from the voucher programs in Milwaukee or Cleveland.

Many school choice websites provide a large number of articles and studies – from both conservative foundation-funded researchers and presumably more ideologically neutral academics – that support the idea that educational achievement in America is too low, particularly among minorities, and that school choice (both charter schools and school voucher programs) leads to greater educational success. The Alliance for School Choice website has a large research database, and other advocacy organizations point to many of the same academic studies that they feel support their claims about the effectiveness of school choice. Many of the quoted studies are quite controversial in academia, where publications are subjected to rigorous peer-review processes to ensure their scientific integrity. There is no current consensus in academia that school choice is the “solution” for poor school performance. Despite this fact, even controversial studies supporting school choice can be used to considerable effect. Performance data appear to be particularly useful for convincing parents of disadvantaged kids and policy makers to support new school choice policies. It does not appear, however, that detailed local data are necessary to make the case. Many campaigns are mounted by using data and anecdotes drawn selectively from other locales, as highlighted above.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has produced a research summary that it claims refutes the idea that vouchers improve student achievement. Interestingly, it cites some of the same studies that school choice supporters do. This is possible because many of the studies that are quoted find very small effects, which school choice proponents call “effects” and the AFT calls “very small.” These arguments do not seem to have harmed the school choice movement, or stemmed its rapid growth.

### **Focus Policy Change Efforts at State and Local Level**

Because American education policy is primarily controlled by states and localities, school choice is an agenda that must be pushed at the state and local level. A leading school choice activist explained that the vast majority of policy change effort is concentrated at the state level for this reason. National and state level advocacy organizations are now working together to fund and coordinate state and local elections all over the country, providing money, sophisticated messaging, and best practices in order to elect sympathetic legislators. They are also working to identify pre-existing sympathetic legislators, and to organize and educate business and civic leaders to lobby at the state level.

### *Choosing a Battleground*

The movement has created a presence in cities and states considered to be key voucher battlegrounds. In the early years, the location of wealthy proponents seems to have dictated the geographic focus of efforts. Milwaukee's seminal voucher program owes much to the local presence of the Bradley Foundation. In Ohio, the major financial backer of the State Representative who introduced the voucher bill was David Brennan, an entrepreneur with a private, for-profit company that now manages the voucher schools.<sup>22</sup> California's unsuccessful 2000 voucher ballot initiative was led by Tim Draper, a local venture capitalist with education-related business interests.<sup>23</sup>

In recent years, however, the movement has targeted cities and states primarily on the basis of perceived receptivity of state and local officials to school choice. States deemed most receptive to the choice message are those with both a governor who would sign a school choice bill and state legislative committee heads who are sympathetic to school choice.<sup>24</sup> Other considerations include the quality of schools in the state (the worse the perception of public schools, the more openness to school choice) and the presence of strong statewide advocacy organizations. However, one national leader (speaking not-for-attribution) feels that state advocacy groups can be adequately created by national organizations and therefore are not a prerequisite.

Whether or not a state's constitution has a "Blaine Amendment" is an additional consideration. Blaine Amendments prohibit state funds from going to religious institutions, and they may be a consideration in terms of designing the legislation (e.g. proposing tax credits rather than vouchers). However, according to one longtime school choice litigator, the amendment is not considered a complete barrier to school choice policy in any state other than Massachusetts and Michigan, which have particularly "impervious" constitutions.

### *Use of Demonstration Projects*

One strategy that has been quite successful in creating goodwill toward school choice at the state and local level has been to share successful voucher experiences with other communities in a personal way. According to *A Donor's Guide for School Choice*:

One highly effective way to build a grassroots coalition for school reform without spending much money is to sponsor trips that let community leaders see choice in action. Kevin Teasley, president of the GEO Foundation, arranged for a series of visits by Denver leaders to Milwaukee and says the trips were an essential part of Colorado's move to school choice: "They earned us key converts and long-lasting relationships." Teasley was brought in to build grassroots support for school choice by four individual donors and a large foundation after a school tax-credit bill failed. He took groups of 20 to 30 people for two-day trips to Milwaukee every month or so during the school year for two

years. The cost was roughly \$15,000 to \$20,000 per trip, and the end result was a great broadening of support among local leaders for school choice efforts. The state eventually passed a voucher bill (now tied up in court) that was largely shaped by the trips' alumni: "They helped craft the bill, bought into it, fought for it, and are still fighting for it today," says Teasley. In fact, the bill's sponsor was a state representative who'd opposed vouchers for years before she went to Milwaukee. Teasley has arranged similar trips for New Jerseyans, including the head of the Newark branch of the NAACP, who has since joined the board of a local school choice group.

One movement leader reiterated in an interview the value of demonstration projects in providing a personal and first-hand way for influential people to gain a positive impression of school choice. He mentioned Teasley's bus trips to Milwaukee in particular, explaining that the business and civic leaders who go on these trips then feel more informed and comfortable advocating for school choice to policymakers.

In another example of this kind of personal testimony based on a demonstration program, BAEO ran television ads in Washington DC in 2001 featuring Milwaukee mayor John Norquist. In the ad Norquist says, "Our vouchers give low-income children a chance to escape failing schools. And just as important, public school officials say vouchers give our schools an incentive to improve." BAEO's executive director Kaleem Caire said the ads were not aimed at influencing any particular piece of legislation at that time, but more broadly at influencing opinion about school choice.<sup>25</sup> However, BAEO was highly involved with organizing DC parent activists during the run-up to the 2004 Congressional vote on the voucher program, and may have been laying the groundwork since 2001.

### *Different Tactics for Different States*

As an influential movement leader explains, different states are at different places in the school choice "issue cycle." These range from having no support for school choice, to actively demanding it, to needing help implementing it. Therefore, the appropriate tactics to use range from basic education, grassroots organizing and training parents to talk to the media, to drafting legislation and direct political action to get it passed. However, the latter actions do not make any sense without laying the groundwork through the former.

## CONCLUSION

The school choice movement has been remarkably successful in creating local and state momentum in support of policy change. Although they have not yet achieved large victories at the state or national level, some observers believe that the tenor of current debate has created an environment where the question is “how” and “how much,” rather than “whether.” Their success in transforming the terms of the debate has been achieved in less than 10 years.

How have they done it? Our research suggests the following:

- The movement *invested in communications and public opinion research* to determine the most salient messages and the most persuasive messengers. Their work is based on tapping existing values and prejudices, rather than trying to change hearts and minds.
- They *recognized the need to expand their base of supporters and potential “messengers.”* They defined their priorities and agenda broadly and in a way that did not immediately alienate individuals and organizations that were outside of the movement who they were actively recruiting (e.g. minority parents).
- The movement *invested in strategies to bring in these needed constituencies*, and helped them develop the skills needed to serve as effective advocates.
- They have *reached out to powerful constituencies who were judged as likely allies*, like evangelical Christians and the Catholic Church, but they have kept divisive language out of the movement’s public face and framing language. Specific language for these constituencies is often confined to interpersonal communications, speeches, etc.
- The movement has *mostly used a “low-tech” approach that relies on an interlocking web of relationships and funding*, combined with persistent messaging from a small pool of data and phrases. There appears to be some degree of coordination (sharing) of messages and information on the internet.
- The movement has *used data selectively to support their cause*. Data or stories that support the movement are used, whereas data that undermines the movement is marginalized or ignored. Studies from 1983 are just as good as those from 2005 if they provide a compelling message or quote. Consistency of messaging is valued much more highly than “accuracy.” Their funders support this approach.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Milton Friedman. "The Role of Government in Education," in *Economics and the Public Interest*, Robert A. Solo (ed.), (New Brunswick, NJ: Trustees of Rutgers College, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/about.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Enlow. "School Choice: Past, Present, and Future." *School Reform News*. 07/01/2005.

<sup>4</sup> Terje Langeland. "Command Performance: How the National Voucher Movement Hijacked School District 11." *The Colorado Springs Independent*. February 19-25, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Brian C. Anderson. *A Donor's Guide to School Choice*. The Philanthropy Roundtable. 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education. *School Choice: Doing it the Right Way Makes a Difference*. The Brookings Institution, Brown Center on Education Policy. November 2003.

<sup>8</sup> John J. Miller. *Strategic Investment in Ideas: How Two Foundations Reshaped America*. The Philanthropy Roundtable. 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson (2004)

<sup>10</sup> Media Transparency database

<sup>11</sup> People for the American Way Foundation. *Community Voice or Captive of the Right? A Closer Look at the Black Alliance for Educational Options*. July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph L. Bast. *Successful Strategies and Tactics for School Choice Advocates*. The Heartland Institute. October 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The Heartland Institute. "A Marketing Plan for Educational Choice."

<sup>14</sup> Anderson (2004)

<sup>15</sup> Bast (2004)

<sup>16</sup> David C. Johnson and Leonard M Salle. *Responding to the Attack on Public Education and Teacher Unions*. Commonweal Institute. November 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Clint Bolick, October 4, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Enlow (2005)

<sup>20</sup> People for the American Way Foundation (2003)

<sup>21</sup> The National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. April 1983

<sup>22</sup> People for the American Way Foundation. *Privatization of Public Education: A Joint Venture of Charity and Power*. April 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> This usually means Education Committee heads, but sometimes a school choice bill can be introduced in another committee if its leaders are more sympathetic to the cause.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Gilbert. "Norquist On Air in D.C. Touting School Choice." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. May 3, 2001.