



The Five Most Common Charter School Vulnerabilities and How You Can Refute Them

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The Five Most Common Charter School Vulnerabilities

About the Presenter

Gary Larson founded Larson Communications in 2007 after spending six years leading the California charter school movement's efforts to raise public awareness and support with the California Charter Schools Association. For over a decade, Gary has helped the charter school community tell its story through the news media and educate the public about the benefits of charter schools. During his tenure with CCSA, support for charter schools increased dramatically and enrollment doubled.

Gary has spearheaded numerous media campaigns covered by every major news outlet in California as well as national outlets including The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Economist, Good Morning America and USA Today.

Gary now helps charter schools and support organizations across the nation in messaging, positioning and telling their positive charter school stories to the public.



The Public Relations Basics

“A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has the chance to get its pants on.”

-Winston Churchill

Follow these public relations basics so that you define yourself before you are defined:

1. **Audiences:** Identify who you want to communicate your messages to.
2. **Messages:** Develop a simple, credible and relevant series of messages and deliver them over and over again.
3. **Spokespeople:** Select a spokesperson that is best capable of delivering your messages.
4. **Channels:** Deliver your messages creatively and credibly to a wide range of media channels.
5. **Vulnerabilities:** Know the misconceptions about charter schools and how to respond to them.



The Public Relations Basics

Tell Your Story on Your Own Terms

Communicating through the **news media**, through **stakeholder engagement** and through **social media** helps inform the public. The more knowledgeable the public, the better for your school or organization. The public most often gets their information from the news media. Telling your story to the public influences public opinion.

How to do this: Create a Plan of Action

1. Seize the initiative
2. Tell your story first; be proactive and responsive
3. Tell your story your way
4. Always tell the truth; focus on the long term
5. Be responsive; get all the facts out about your program's successes

“A government can be no better than the public opinion that sustains it.”

- President Franklin D. Roosevelt



Being Responsive – Lessons from Flight 1549

- 3:29 pm (+0:00): Flight 1549 goes down in the Hudson River.
- 3:30 pm (+0:01): Flight 1549's landing first appears on Twitter.
- 3:31 pm (+0:02): Fox News, MSNBC, CNN break from programming to cover landing.
- 3:35 pm (+0:06): Initial AP coverage crosses the wire.
- 3:38 pm (+0:09): First blog coverage begins. ABC News and CNN.com run visuals.
- 3:46 pm (+0:17): CNBC reports, "The company, according to Reuters, says that they were unaware of any incident involving any of their aircrafts and are investigating."
- 3:51 pm (+0:22): MSNBC begins streaming live video. "News Alert" pushed from *The Wall Street Journal*, with other outlets following.
- 4:15 pm (+0:46): The headline "Twitter Spreads News of US Airways Crash in an Instant" runs.
- 4:30 pm (+1:01): US Airways Website times out due to overwhelming web traffic. NTSB and Homeland Security announce no indication of terrorist activity.
- 4:35 pm (+1:06): US Airways' Website reactivated, including draft statement riddled with typos.
- 5:02 pm (+1:33): US Airways releases first official statement.
- 6:15 pm (+2:46): First passenger from Flight 1549 appears in studio on CNN.



Today, it's a different world. Every organization needs a sophisticated plan of action. An effective response must be multi-dimensional (including website, message from head of organization, media relations, social media and government relations).



PR Clichés



Know Your Positive Messages

Key Charter School Messages:

1. Charter schools are public schools.
2. Charter schools allow teachers to innovate.
3. Charter schools give parents choices.
4. Charter schools introduce accountability.
5. Charter schools are closing the achievement gap.



Know How Critics Operate

Critics = Zero-Sum Argument

Solution = Positive-Sum Argument



The Five Most Common Criticisms

Know the five most common charter school criticisms

1. Draining money

- Privatization
- Perceived as outsiders
- Loss of students

2. Mixed student achievement

- Poor performance
- Charters are on par/behind

3. Unprepared teachers

- Poor working conditions/protection
- Unlicensed teachers
- High turnover/low retention
- Inexperienced

4. Creaming

- Cherry picking the best students
- Not serving special education kids
- Racial isolation in charters
- ‘Weeding out’ poor performers

5. No Accountability

- Little oversight
- Governance/conflict of interest
- Misspending of taxpayer money
- Can’t pass the ‘smell test’



The Five Most Common Criticisms

Each Criticism Requires a Tactical Responses and a Strategic, Pre-buttal Message

Tactical – You must respond with a tight, compelling answer when hit with a criticism (i.e. your clichés)

Strategic – Develop a plan to refute these criticisms before you're hit with them, your 'pre-buttal' strategy



The Five Most Common Criticisms

Let's Review

1. Draining money
2. Mixed student achievement
3. Unprepared teachers
4. Creaming
5. No accountability

"The battle over the future of charter schools will be won by whoever makes the more effective case: Either the status quo will convince the public that charters are bad for public education because they drain resources, or charters will convince the public that school districts are reforming because of them."



Criticism # 1 – Draining Money

“If we keep starting charter schools, pretty soon we’re not going to have a public school system any more.”

Former San Jose Unified School Board Member

“I think charter schools are a mistake. I think they are a retreat for the state on the part of its duties academically and a retreat on the part of parents from their civic duties, and I’m not afraid of them.”

Pasadena Unified School District Board Member

As the charter school movement grows, the public is naturally concerned about the kids left in the traditional public school system. Combat that with a message that is:

- Positive sum
- Teacher and student focused
- Outcomes oriented



Criticism # 1 – Draining Money

Tactical Responses:

1. Charter Schools are Public Schools

“Charter schools are public schools and they keep public money within the public school system. If a traditional public school is not working for a child, then parents should be able to choose another public school option, including a charter school.”

2. Choices Inspire Improvement

“Charter schools give parents the ability to choose the best public school for their child. As more parents are empowered to choose, this creates a competitive dynamic that inspires all public schools to improve and helps transform our public school system.”

3. Parents Need to be Empowered

“There are close to one million wait list applications to attend a charter school in the United States. Empowering parents with another public school option is an important way of improving the broader public school system.”



Criticism # 1 – Draining Money

Strategic Messages: Document What's Worth Sharing

1. Sharing best practices so that everyone benefits

“Charter schools give teachers the flexibility to design new and innovative ways of improving student achievement. Charters can then share what works with the broader public school system so that all students benefit.”

2. Serving at-risk kids, increasing college-readiness, reducing dropout rate

3. Providing something that the school district can't

4. In some cases, charters are bringing kids back into the public school system:

“Some worry that this growth weakens traditional schools and could lead to a shrunken system that could not operate a viable system of neighborhood schools. Never mind that the competition from the charter schools helped spur traditional schools to undertake needed reforms or that recent years have seen a stabilization of enrollment in the public-school system and even a slight increase this school year.”

“D.C.’s Odd Resistance to Charter Schools,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 2013



Criticism # 1 – Draining Money

The Words that You Use Matter

Avoid

‘Outsider’

‘Privately-managed’

‘Draining’

‘Taking away’

‘School district’

Replace

‘Community-based’

‘Independent public school’

‘Inspiring’

‘Parents choosing’

‘School system’



Criticism # 1 – Draining Money

The Words that You Use Matter

Adopt a Simple Definition of a Charter School:

“Charter schools are independent public schools that are allowed to be more innovative and are held accountable for improved student achievement.”

Within this simple 21-word definition, you:

- Work in three of your key charter school messages.
- Link the importance of innovation and accountability.
- Focus on the key outcome: improved learning.



Criticism # 2 – Mixed Student Achievement

“From a national standpoint, the 20-year-old charter school movement has been a disappointment. More than a third of these independently run, publicly funded schools are actually worse than the traditional public schools they were meant to replace.”

*“Better Charter Schools in New York City,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2013*

“On the contentious issue of charter schools, I think it's fair to say some do pretty well and some don't.”

*“Bloomberg's Meddling in L.A. Unified Races,” Steve Lopez, *The Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2013*



Criticism # 2 – Mixed Student Achievement

Tactical Response: Data is Your Best Ally

“Studies continue to show charter school students make greater academic progress than students in traditional public schools.”

National Charter Schools Overall

The average charter school student now gains an additional 8 days of learning each year in reading, compared to the loss of 7 days each year reported in 2009. In math, charter students in 2009 posted 22 fewer days of learning; now that gap is closed so their learning each year is on par with their peers in traditional public schools.

Under-Served Students in Charter Schools

Students in poverty, black students, and those who are English language learners (ELL) gain significantly more days of learning each year in both reading and math compared to their traditional public school peers. Performance differences between charter school students and their traditional public school peers were especially strong among black and Hispanic students in poverty and Hispanic students who are ELL in both reading and math.

Source: Credo At Stanford University: www.credo.stanford.edu



Criticism # 2 – Mixed Student Achievement

Tactical Response: The Bigger Picture Today

“Of the 14 studies published since 2010, three national studies and 10 regional studies from across the country found positive academic performance results for students in charter schools compared to their traditional school peers. One regional study found mixed to negative results.”

“The national studies looking at charter management organizations, single-site models and the KIPP model found that public charter schools have a positive impact on student achievement compared to traditional public schools. In Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York City, Washington, D.C. and Wisconsin, the regional studies also found that public charter schools have a positive impact on student achievement. One regional study found mixed and negative results looking at public charter schools in Utah.”

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools: <http://www.publiccharters.org/publication/?id=1022>



Criticism # 2 – Mixed Student Achievement

An Effective Response to Mixed Student Achievement

Re: Better Charter Schools in New York City

While rightfully acknowledging charter schools' success in New York, the Times missed the mark in calling the national charter movement a “disappointment.” Interestingly, the Times praised [New Orleans](#) in 2011, where 75% of all schools are now charters and the number of students attending a failing school is down three-fold since Hurricane Katrina.

Whether they are 5% of public schools like in New York or 75% like in New Orleans, charters schools are providing hope. In the last five years, the movement has added 1,700 schools and a million students. Another 610,000 are on waitlists.

The movement took the 2009 CREDO report seriously. Since then, nearly 500 charters have closed. CREDO's more [recent research](#) has found that charter students from low-income families are outperforming their traditional public school peers.

When the Times reviews the evidence, it will find what millions of parents already know: the charter movement is a resounding national success.

Nina Rees
President and CEO
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools



Criticism # 2 – Mixed Student Achievement

Strategic Messages:

Get beyond the data to highlight examples of where school districts are reforming due to charter schools.

Example: Oakland Unified School District

“Whether it is individual attention, changing the culture of a school or finding an inspirational leader to hold the reins, Oakland's traditional public schools are ready to adopt some of the charters' tricks. Recently, Fremont High School was broken up into five smaller schools and Castlemont High will follow suit this fall, initially creating three small school campuses with a fourth.”

Source: The San Francisco Chronicle

Disseminate Additional, Important Metrics

- College Acceptance Rates
- College Graduation Rates
- Reduced Dropout Rates



Criticism # 3 – Teachers' Conditions

Charter schools are open to the criticism of less experienced teachers who have little to no rights:

“Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)”... “issued a scathing report Monday concluding that charter schools nationwide rely heavily on uncredentialed teachers.”

Source: The San Francisco Chronicle

Tactical Responses:

- “Teachers that teach in charter schools benefit because they no longer have to go to a distant, impersonal school district to ask for permission.”
- “Charter schools give teachers the flexibility to unleash their talents and abilities to design programs that work better for the students they serve. This is why many talented teachers oftentimes will only teach in a charter school.”
- “Today, most teachers leave the teaching profession within the first five years of teaching. The number one cited reason they leave is a lack of a voice in the decision-making process.”



Criticism # 3 – Teachers' Conditions

Strategic Messages:

Teacher Demand:

“The Oakland School for the Arts has already succeeded on a level that many other Oakland schools have not: Students and teachers are clamoring to get in. About 400 teachers applied for nine positions.”

Source: *The Oakland Tribune*

Student Achievement Matters Most:

“One charter school principal said her school's performance jumped by nearly 200 points in three years. ‘Decisions are made at the school level. It's made by all the stakeholders -- parents, teachers and other staff,’ she said. ‘We know our children. We know what fits their needs...’”

Source: *The Los Angeles Times*



Criticism # 3 – Teachers' Conditions

Charter Schools and Teachers Unions – Do's and Don'ts

Do: Know the facts.

Some charter schools participate in district bargaining agreements; others don't. This is a decision that the teachers and individual school get to make together.

Do: Focus on outcomes first.

“What matters most is the impact that a school has on improving learning. If a unionized environment does that, we're all for it.”

Do: Incorporate teachers into your story.

Make the case through statistics and your own teachers' stories that teachers are embracing you and want to teach in charter schools.

Do: Focus on a happy faculty.

“High-quality charter schools have teachers and faculty that are integrally involved in the leadership of the school site. Therefore, as decision-makers, they're generally pretty happy.”



Criticism # 3 – Teachers' Conditions

Charter Schools and Teachers Unions – Do's and Don'ts

Don't: Use strident messages that hit hard at unions.

Years of using negative messages towards teachers unions have not undermined their public standing.

Don't: Feel like you need to run from this criticism.

“By and large, many teachers unions have been very slow to embrace charter schools. That's not a good thing.

“Being more open to charter schools would help them in their efforts to organize, and the additional upside is that having a greater presence in charter schools could help them become a bit more reform-minded.”

Keep In Mind:

There is perhaps no one who can serve as a better spokesperson for charter schools than a long-time teacher from a traditional public school who is now thriving in a charter school.



Criticism # 4 – ‘Creaming’ the Best Kids

“As we embark on our journey toward charter schools, we need to examine likely outcome of dual school systems. The assumption is that both systems will be equally open to all. This is unlikely. Children with less involved parents, and thus at higher risk of academic failure, are less likely to find charters welcoming them.”

“Charter Schools Prevent Reform,” *The Clarion Ledger*, February 14, 2013

“Reuters has found that across the United States, charters aggressively screen student applicants, assessing their academic records, parental support, disciplinary history, motivation, special needs and even their citizenship, sometimes in violation of state and federal law.”

“How Charter Schools Get Students They Want,” *Reuters News*, February 15, 2013

“Charter schools, a small but fast-growing segment of K-12 education, enroll fewer children with disabilities than traditional public schools, according to a new federal study. About 8 percent of students at charter schools are disabled and require special services, compared with 11 percent of students in public schools, the GAO found.”

“Charters Enroll Fewer Disabled Children, GAO Report Says,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 2012



Criticism # 4 – ‘Creaming’ Response

Tactical Response: Data Again is Your Best Ally

“Public charter schools are opening where they are most needed -- in underserved neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income students of color and low-performing district schools—to help close the nation’s persistent academic achievement gaps.”

Public charter schools across the nation enroll:

- A greater percentage than traditional public schools of low-income students (46 percent versus 41 percent).

NAPCS Data Dashboard: www.publiccharters.org

- A greater percentage of Black and Latino students (27 percent versus 15 percent, and 26 percent versus 22 percent, respectively).

NAPCS Data Dashboard: www.publiccharters.org

- A greater percentage of students who perform lower on standardized tests before transferring to public charter schools.

“Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition,” RAND Corporation, 2009.



Criticism # 4 – ‘Creaming’ Response

“We know it's the eager-beaver parents who are working the school-choice market more So the higher growth rates can still be explained by family characteristics, parents who help with homework, for example, or restrict TV, or push their kids to work harder in school.”

UC Berkeley Professor, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Strategic Messages:

Showcase Your Students' Changed Lives

“That's what Berenice Gonzales wanted. She had been diagnosed with a learning disability and put into a special education program in middle school. There she was miserable and determined to prove her labelers wrong. She enrolled in DCP. She now takes advanced placement courses, has a 3.5 GPA -- and a college acceptance.”

The San Jose Mercury News

Turn This Argument on its Head with a Question

“If you were doing well in a traditional public school, why would you move?”



Criticism # 4 – Special Education

Special Education: Three Suggested Responses

Charter Schools Give Parents, including Parents of Special Needs Students, More Choices

Charter schools introduce choices into public education, including for families of students with special needs. Charter schools empower parents with the ability to choose the public school that best meets their child's needs – including those with disabilities. The vast majority of charters welcome and effectively serve special needs students.

Charter Schools Often Mainstream Misclassified Students

Public schools too often over-identify students as special education students. Charter schools have the flexibility to design new programs to meet students' increasingly diverse needs, resulting in fewer students being misclassified. Through unique approaches such as individualized instruction in the classroom, greater one-on-one attention and better early intervention programs, charters prevent students from being unfairly given a lifetime label.

Many Charter Schools Cater to Students with Special Needs

Many public charter schools specifically serve students with special needs. By adopting methods of full inclusion, many charter schools have developed a reputation for effectively ensuring that the needs of moderate to severe special needs students are met. Where other schools might relegate students with special needs into separate classes, many charters are having great success fully including special education students in classrooms where they benefit from the same core curriculum that traditional students receive.



Criticism # 5 – Charters Lack Accountability

“Abysmal charter schools remain open for years, even though the original deal was that they would be shut down when they failed to perform.”

“Better Charter Schools in New York City,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2013

“Chicago school officials tell us they have never closed a charter solely for dismal academic performance. It's about time. Schools that don't measure up — charter or otherwise — shouldn't be allowed to keep failing students, year after year.”

“CPS Applies Charter Heat,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 2013



Criticism # 5 – Charters Lack Accountability

Tactical Response: Take this Criticism Head On

Introducing Accountability

“Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability in our system of public education. If a charter school is not improving student achievement at a greater rate than their nearby regular public schools, it can be closed down. This stands in stark contrast to many regular public schools that have been mired in academic underperformance for decades.”

Nimbleness

“If things aren’t working, charter schools can turn on a dime and make quick, effective changes such as modifying curriculum or replacing ineffective staff to get back on track.”

Charters Are Demonstrating Accountability

“Over the past five years, more than 500 under-performing charter schools have been closed down nationally, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.”



Criticism # 5 – Charters Lack Accountability

Strategic Message: Focus on Kids and Broader Accountability

Overall Accountability

“Charter schools are leading the way in ensuring that failing public schools are held accountable.”

Concern for the Families who Made the Choice

“We need to not only do everything in our power to close failing public schools, but we need to respect the families who chose those schools by ensuring that there are quality public schools – charter or district schools – available for them to choose from.”

When it comes to school closures and parents and the public, they all will express concern for where the kids end up. The movement needs to have a good answer for this important dilemma.



Your Story = Your Differentiators

Develop Story Ideas and Build Reporter Relationships

Reporters are interested in:

1. What are you first at?
2. What are you best at?
3. What are you unique at?
4. What are you 'most' at?
5. Credibility, face, stats, the organization and the pitch.

Point is: What about your story defies conventional thinking? (i.e. “man bites dog!”)



The Six Buckets of Telling Your Story

1. **News** – What are you doing that is new and compelling?
2. **Results** – Does what you're doing actually work?
3. **Success** – Is what you're doing being positively recognized?
4. **Momentum** – Can you document what you're doing? Is what you're doing increasing, systemic or helping positively change the world?
5. **Validation** – Are important people and organizations showing that they value what you do?
6. **Human Interest** – How do you bring what you're doing to life and put a human face on it?



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