

Flooding The Zone:

How an intense, focused “school choice” campaign in Harlem increased support for reform

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Democrats for Education Reform aims to return the Democratic Party to its rightful place as a champion of children in America's public education systems.

The views expressed in this briefing memo are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Democrats for Education Reform

Flooding The Zone

An unprecedented three-month “school choice” campaign in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood in 2008 resulted in enhanced political support for public charter schools from local politicians and increased awareness and support from the public. This paper takes a brief look at the thinking behind the Harlem school choice campaign, the implementation of the campaign, and the short-term results which were measured through polling and increased political support for reforms, specifically including public charter schools in Harlem.

Despite messaging that highlighted the widespread and longstanding failure of traditional public schools in the neighborhood, the increase in support for public charter schools did not reduce the percentage of respondents who believed that public education had improved in recent years.

In New York, strong support for charter schools from Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein have reinforced the notion that the introduction of popular high-performing charter schools like Harlem Success, KIPP, Harlem Village Academy, Harlem Day, Sisulu Walker, Harlem Link, Democracy Prep, the Harlem Children’s Zone and many, many others are part of a comprehensive strategy to save public education in the city and provide parents with meaningful choices for their children’s education.

Cover photo: *More than 5,000 parents attended the 2008 student lottery for the Harlem Success Academy charter schools in April. Photo courtesy of the Success Charter Network*

The idea was to ‘flood the zone’ in Harlem with a school choice message in the period leading up to the neighborhood’s charter school lotteries

- The Challenge:

Harlem has long served as a prominent center for black culture – both for New York and for America as a whole. Yet for many years, opportunities for neighborhood children to receive a quality education have been lacking, to put it mildly. Waves of reform dating back to the late 1960’s did virtually nothing to improve the educational options available to Harlem families. Public school failure has been the norm, and expectations among parents that anything will ever improve have been continually dampened. The onset of public charter schools in the neighborhood offered a chance to break through this wall. There will be more than 20 public charter schools enrolling students in Harlem this coming fall - representing the start of what could be an educational renaissance in this politically symbolic community.

Two obstacles have stood in the way of this important shift in the schooling marketplace: (1) A lack of clear understanding among parents that an increasing number of quality school options exists; and (2) Longstanding political allegiance to a failing public education status quo.

A decision was made by leaders of the Success Charter Network, Democrats for Education Reform and a group of parent activists called Harlem Parents United to go “on offense” to provide political cover for attempts to increase the number of charter school offerings in Harlem, to educate parents about their choices, and to help create a climate more hospitable for charter schools seeking to share space in public school buildings.

- The Players:

Success Charter Network is a charter management organization based in New York City. Its chief executive officer is Eva Moskowitz, a former NYC City Councilmember and college History professor, and its flagship charter school, Harlem Success Academy, opened in 2006. Democrats for Education Reform is a NYC-based political action committee run by Joe Williams, a former education journalist with the New York Daily News and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Harlem Parents United was formed in late 2007 by parents of students at Harlem Success to become the “parental voice for school choice.”

- The Campaign:

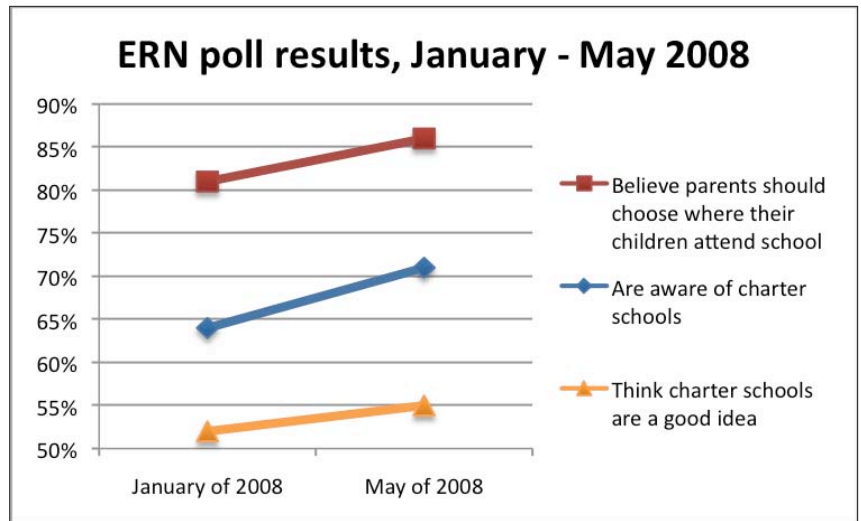
The idea was to “flood the zone” in Harlem with a pro-school choice message in the two-month period leading up to the student lotteries for the neighborhood’s more than 20 public

This campaign intended to position charter schools as a positive force in the neighborhood

charter schools. This was accomplished through a series of high-quality mailings to school-age parents, a flurry of op-ed pieces in major New York City newspapers, radio spots (targeting Spanish-speaking families), ads on bus shelters, and rigorous leafleting of public housing projects.

A 2007 change in New York’s charter school law requires schools to make “best efforts” to attract special education and bi-lingual students, and many charters have gone to great lengths to recruit students whose demographics closely resemble the neighborhoods they serve. Additionally, at a time when Harlem was dealing with political tension regarding gentrification and the pushing-out of longstanding “mom and pop” businesses, this campaign intended to position charter schools as a positive force in the neighborhood.

Fig. 1



Source: School Choice Selected Issues. A Survey of Attitudes and Opinions: 500 Likely General Election Voters, New York 15th Congressional District. Margin of Error, +/-4.9

Six mailings were sent to a universe of 15,000 - 35,000 families and 200,000 leaflets were placed under doors at every one of Harlem’s public housing complexes. The literature featured several different school choice messages to Harlem parents. Some mailings simply informed parents that they had a choice in where to send their children to school, and urging them to make the most of it. Other mailings specifically advertised the four Harlem schools operated by SCN, but kept to the same school choice themes and messaging. (Meanwhile, other charter schools in New York City also found novel ways to market their schools to families for the 2008 student lotteries. At the Bronx Community Charter School, for example, organizers got a local Mexican restaurant to attach bright orange fliers announcing the school, in English and in Spanish).

Question: Too many of our kids in Harlem can't read at grade level. What's the problem?

Answer: Our schools

One ad in the Harlem portion of the charter outreach read, “Don’t settle. You have the right to choose your child’s school.” Another featured a Harlem mom declaring, “Where my child goes to school is my choice.” This parent-to-parent messaging drove home the idea that it was a parent’s responsibility to find a great school for their son or daughter, and that they shouldn’t settle for a failing school. “20 years ago we had no choice. It was our zoned school or nothing,” another ad read.

By design, some of the mailings were hard-hitting. The outside of one piece read, “Too many of our kids in Harlem can’t read at grade level. What’s the problem?” On the inside, the answer: “The problem is our schools.”

There were 24 bus stop ads produced and placed in highly visible venues. More than 1,500 posters were displayed inside local businesses and approximately 10,000 postcards were produced so that parents could mail them to the local city council member to express support for school choice and charter schools. Every public housing complex in Harlem was hit multiple times with flyers and school choice literature, in a field campaign conducted by experienced field organizers and an army of field workers, mainly high school students who were hired to blanket the neighborhood with materials.

Three other events in that condensed time period served as platforms to push the school choice message to the public as well: A “Harlem Education Fair” featuring more than 25 schools (mostly charter schools and private schools as most traditional public schools were invited but opted not to attend); a “Harlem Charter School Night” political rally; and the actual lottery for the four SCN charter schools.

The Success Charter Network coordinated the information campaign, Harlem Parents United coordinated the Harlem Education Fair (with some sponsorship support from a group called the Council of Urban Professionals and local businesses) and DFER coordinated the political rally, but all of these groups worked together – and with other Harlem charter schools, other advocacy groups such as the New York Charter Schools Association and the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence – on each portion of the campaign.

To monitor the effectiveness of the campaign, the non-profit group Education Reform Now (with ties to DFER) conducted a pre-campaign and post-campaign poll of 400 Harlem residents. Respondents were asked a variety of questions about the state of New York’s public schools in Harlem, their awareness

More than 1,400 people turned out for DFER's "Harlem Charter School Night" rally

and support for public charter schools, and support (or lack thereof) for policies allowing parents to choose schools for their children.

The unofficial "end" of the campaign was the mid-April student lottery for the Success Charter Network, an event that was planned to be open to the public. By the time student names were drawn for seats in these schools, Harlemites had witnessed unprecedented levels of support and enthusiasm for school choice offerings in the neighborhood – specifically public charter schools. More than 5,000 people showed up for the SCN lottery, where some 3,000 students applied for some 600 seats. More than 1,400 charter school families and supporters turned out for DFER's "Harlem Charter Night" rally with politicians, and more than 600 people attended the Harlem Education Fair, including local businesses which were encouraged to sign on as sponsors for the event.

- The Results:

The campaign achieved significant results, both in terms of the impact on public opinion and awareness, and in the reaction of elected officials – both supporters and opponents of school choice offerings. City Comptroller William Thompson, a candidate for mayor of New York with a weak record of support for charter schools, nonetheless pointed to the significant parent demand that was displayed in Harlem in public remarks he made about education.

"I'm also a strong supporter of expanding our city's many extraordinary charter schools and opening equally innovative new schools...Many of these schools -- like those run by the Harlem Success Academy -- are producing exceptional results, and our parents know it," Thompson said at a public appearance weeks after the student lottery.

Similarly, when public hearings were held regarding decisions by the city Department of Education to locate public charter schools inside underutilized public school buildings, politicians who in the past had been hostile to charter schools this time issued statements declaring they were not opposed to charters per se but had concerns about "the process" for placing these schools. (Charter school supporters who are used to clearing political hurdles just to get their schools open regarded such shifts as relatively monumental because it indicated the political equation had shifted somewhat for local elected officials over the issue.)

Harlem State Sen. Bill Perkins, a Democrat who in previ-

The campaign saw its most dramatic impact with the parent consumers it targeted

ous years had opposed allowing public charter schools to use public school space, near the end of the campaign explained: “Frankly, folks are fleeing the public school system. And in fleeing they’re looking for any alternative. Sometimes they wind up going to charter schools, because they figure, it can’t be any worse. Sometimes they go to parochial schools not because they’re Catholic or because they want a faith-based teaching, but because their public school experience has been for them dismal.”

Several other elected Assemblymen from the northern part of Manhattan, who had previously been lukewarm – at best - to the idea of charter schools, during the campaign expressed their support for allowing these schools to share space in underutilized public school buildings.

Even local politicians who had been longtime supporters of charter schools were given enhanced “cover” by the growing consensus in Harlem that charter schools were helping to improve public education offerings rather than harm the public education system. In April, for example, Gov. David Paterson became the first seated Governor in history to attend a charter school lottery.

The Education Reform Now poll showed that the regular drum beat in Harlem for school choice even had a measurable impact on the general public, despite the very short timeframe and the fact that the campaign specifically targeted parents of school-age children for effectiveness. More than a third of those who participated in the Harlem poll said they saw an ad or an editorial about charter schools in the preceding weeks. (See Fig. 2) Of those who saw an ad, 61% said they were either “much more likely” or “more likely” to support public charter schools as a result. (See Fig. 3)

The percentage of poll respondents who said they believed parents should choose the schools their children attend jumped five points between late January and early May, from 81% to 86%. Awareness of public charter schools increased from 64% to 71%, while the percentage who thought they were a good idea increased from 52% to 55%. (See Fig. 1, located on page 3)

The campaign saw its most dramatic impact with the parent consumers it targeted. Of the roughly 3,666 Harlem students eligible for Kindergarten enrollment, 1,521 students submitted an application for the Harlem Success lottery - a stunning 41% of eligible students.

Despite messaging that highlighted the widespread failure of traditional public schools, the increase in support for public

Democrats for Education Reform
Statement of Principles

A first-rate system of public education is the cornerstone of a prosperous, free and just society, yet millions of American children today – particularly low-income and children of color - are trapped in persistently failing schools that are part of deeply dysfunctional school systems. These systems, once viewed romantically as avenues of opportunity for all, have become captive to powerful, entrenched interests that too often put the demands of adults before the educational needs of children. This perverse hierarchy of priorities is political, and thus requires a political response.

Both political parties have failed to address the tragic decline of our system of public education, but it is the Democratic Party – our party – which must question how we allowed ourselves to drift so far from our mission. Fighting on behalf of our nation’s most vulnerable individuals is what our party is supposed to stand for.

Democrats for Education Reform aims to return the Democratic Party to its rightful place as a champion of children, first and foremost, in America’s public education systems.

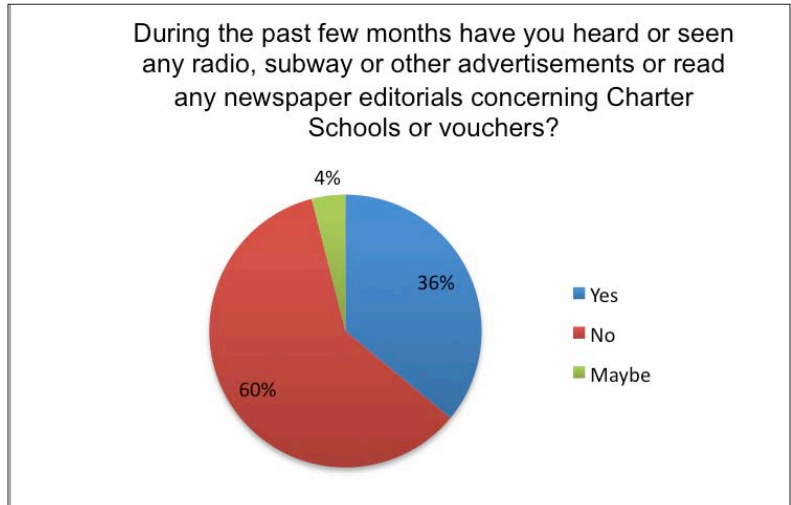
We support leaders in our party who have the courage to challenge a failing status quo and who believe that the severity of our nation’s educational crisis demands that we tackle this problem using every possible tool at our disposal.

We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. This requires opening up the traditional top-down monopoly of most school systems and empowering all parents to access great schools for their children.

We know that decisive action today will benefit our children, our party and ultimately our nation.

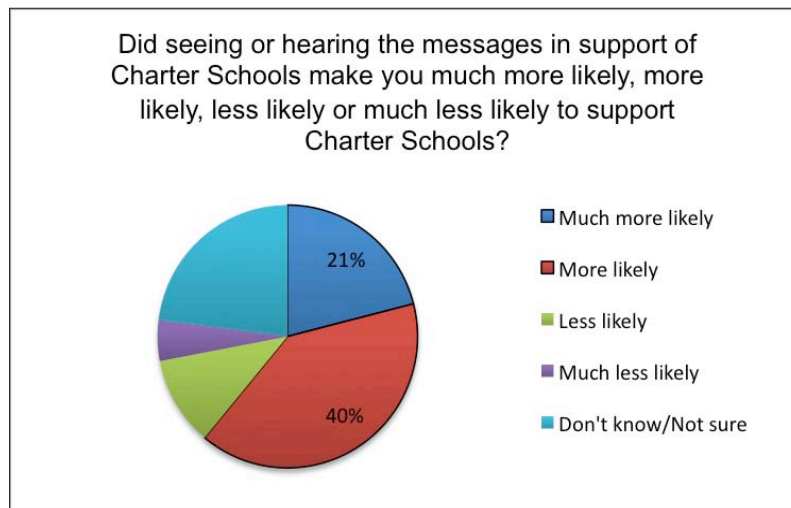
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Fig. 2



Source: School Choice Selected Issues. A Survey of Attitudes and Opinions: 500 Likely General Election Voters, New York 15th Congressional District. Margin of Error,+/-4.9

Fig. 3



Source: School Choice Selected Issues. A Survey of Attitudes and Opinions: 500 Likely General Election Voters, New York 15th Congressional District. Margin of Error,+/-4.9

charter schools did not reduce the percentage of responses indicating that public education had improved in recent years, with 44% taking this position pre-campaign and post-campaign alike. In New York, strong support for charter schools from Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein (who attended and spoke at both the Harlem Charter Night and the SCN student lottery) have reinforced the notion that the introduction of popular high-performing charter schools like Harlem Success, KIPP, Harlem Village Academy, Harlem Day, Sisulu Walker, Harlem Link, Democracy Prep, the Harlem Children’s Zone and many others are part of a comprehensive strategy to save public education in the city and provide parents with meaningful choices for their children’s education.

*- Joe Williams
Democrats for Education Reform*