



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This White Paper on engaging parent advocates is the third in a series of papers published by the Missouri Charter Public School Association (MCPSA) to promote a better understanding of charter public schools and the important role they play in providing quality school options to Missouri public school students.

MCPSA would like to thank Adam Soliman, a fellow with the Coro Foundation for his research and authorship of this White Paper.

While we are grateful for these and others' contributions to this work, MCPSA alone is responsible for any errors of interpretation this document may contain.

For questions and comments related to this White Paper, please contact Edie Barnard, Director of Communications and Development at [ebarnard@mocharterschools.org](mailto:ebarnard@mocharterschools.org). You can learn more about the Missouri Charter Public School Association at [www.mocharterschools.org](http://www.mocharterschools.org).

---

## **Charter Public School Parent Engagement in Missouri**

Missouri Charter Public Schools Association (MCPSA)

### **Executive Summary**

The Missouri Charter Public Schools Association (MCPSA) is a membership-based organization of charter schools from across Missouri that strives to improve student achievement by increasing access to high-quality charter public education options for families throughout the state. Since advocacy is a critical facet of the Association's mission, MCPSA completed a research study that considers the best methods and messages to engage parents for charter public schools. The findings in this report are derived from interviews with charter school organizations, parent advocacy groups, and education advocates from Missouri and throughout the country.

This research finds that engaging parents indirectly through their school leadership is the most promising strategy to broaden parent advocacy efforts in Missouri. Future research will focus on listening to the perspectives of both charter school leaders and parents as they relate to advocacy.

## **Expanding Charter School Parent Advocacy in Missouri**

In June 2022, Missouri Governor Mike Parson signed a funding equity bill for charter public schools into law that will provide over \$60 million to charter public schools in the state.<sup>1</sup> For nearly a decade, this was a significant priority of the Missouri Charter Public Schools Association (MCPSA), and the Association considers the bill an essential policy step forward to ensuring that public charters are treated as equitably as their traditional public school counterparts. Now that its immediate state legislative goals have been achieved following the enactment of this law, the MCPSA wants to maintain the momentum generated from this legislative victory by keeping parents engaged in broader charter school advocacy. In particular, the Association desires to foster long-term relations with and train a group of engaged charter parents throughout Missouri so that the MCPSA can quickly mobilize them as needed to fight for its future legislative objectives.

MCPSA conducted a research study that collates the best practices for charter public school parent engagement across the country. Throughout the inquiry, the Association learned about different advocacy methods by interviewing various state charter school organizations (CSOs), parent advocacy groups, and education advocates. The tactics mentioned included directly educating parents on how to advocate and developing messages and stories that center children as the main priority of charter school policies. The Association found that engaging charter parents indirectly through their member school leadership and coordinating with a designated staff member is a promising practice for MCPSA to broaden charter advocacy efforts in Missouri.

---

<sup>1</sup> Missouri Charter Public Schools Association. “Governor Parson Signs Bill Making Missouri Charter Public Schools Equitably Funded [Press Release],” 2022. June 29. [https://www.mocharterschools.org/apps/news/show\\_news.jsp?REC\\_ID=795079&id=0](https://www.mocharterschools.org/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=795079&id=0).

## **Methodology**

MCPSA is interested in learning about strategies and messages other charter school associations, and parent organizations have used to sustain long-term, consistent parental involvement in public charter school advocacy. In line with MCPSA's reasons for wanting to revamp its parent advocacy program, the Association defined best practices for charter school advocacy as any methods that foster parental engagement so that organizations can quickly mobilize them to advocate on policy matters facing charter schools. For this study, MCPSA interviewed education advocates as well as advocacy and community outreach personnel at CSOs and parent advocacy organizations from across the country.<sup>2</sup> The Association reached out to 25 individuals and was able to arrange oral or written interviews with 15 of them. To ensure consistency in gathering data, every organization or individual interviewed was asked a comparable set of questions.<sup>3</sup> The questions considered effective outreach strategies and messages to parents and any challenges the interviewees and/or their organizations faced mobilizing parents and tactics they found to be ineffective. Answers to these questions were entered into a spreadsheet to help identify and analyze the common practices mentioned by the interviewees.

The main limitation of the research methodology concerns the perspectives that the Association could not consider in this report. Given this project's time and resource constraints and insufficient responses to interview requests, MCPSA did not speak with charter school parents, even though interviewing parents was originally part of the research plan, and the MCPSA attempted to contact over 30 parents in Missouri alone. This speaks to the challenge of getting parents to respond to requests, whether to mobilize, train, or survey. Ideally, the Association would have interviewed parents who work with MCPSA and the other organizations

---

<sup>2</sup> The list of organizations and individuals whose insights were considered for this report can be found in the Acknowledgments section.

<sup>3</sup> A list of these questions can be found in Appendix A.

interviewed for this report to consider parents' points of view for this report. Therefore, the opinions from which the conclusions in this report are derived mainly come from leaders in the charter school space, especially those who regularly engage parents in advocacy efforts.

However, many of the advocacy and community outreach professionals who contributed to this report have worked closely with parents across the country. This is an important strength of the methodology as these professionals hold a good understanding of how parents respond to advocacy efforts, and, therefore, their insights remain a valuable source of analysis when assessing best practices for parent advocacy for public charter schools.

### **Indirect Parent Engagement**

One effective tactic frequently mentioned for engendering parent advocacy for charter schools was cultivating relationships with charter school leaders and staff and asking those individuals to engage their parent communities. As Ricardo Soto, the Chief Advocacy Office and General Counsel of the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA), explained, school leaders can be more effective messengers to their parents in mobilizing them to act on charter schools rather than staff from a state CSO. Further, he mentioned that the parent engagement staff that many charter schools in California hire often hold a lot of trust with their parents and know how to communicate information with their communities effectively.

It is also helpful to work with charter school leadership on parent engagement because the schools can sometimes hinder efforts to get charter parent contact information necessary for any direct engagement by a CSO. At least seven state CSOs—the CCSA, the Colorado League of Charter Schools (CLCS), the New York Charter School Association (NYCSA), the Tennessee Charter School Center (TCSC), the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MACPSA), the Washington State Charter School Association (WSCSA), and the MCPSA—reported having had at least some level of difficulty with persuading charter schools to give them access to their parent

communities for advocacy engagement.<sup>4</sup> MCPSA has also experienced a reluctance from school leaders to provide direct access to parental contact information. In California, the CCSA found it so challenging to receive access to parents in charter schools that this CSO decided to move away from its direct parent engagement program, “Charter Champion,” in favor of indirectly engaging parents via charter school staff. The CCSA can provide information on advocacy to school parent engagement staff to do this work. Still, the California Association relies heavily on its member schools to relay that to their parents and mobilize them when charter school issues arise in that state.

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) takes a similar approach, not necessarily due to issues with getting parent contact information from their member schools but because this CSO finds indirect engagement much more practical and effective. While Jodi Cantrell, its Director of External Affairs, mentioned that schools often lack policy, advocacy, and community engagement infrastructure, school staff usually have stronger community relationships with parents and other charter school stakeholders than the INCS. These relationships are critical for persuading people to act for public charter schools, but they can be more challenging for a statewide organizations like the INCS to cultivate. The INCS, thus, usually supports charter schools’ development of parent advocates indirectly. It provides school staff with various resources, such as best practices for community organizing and talking to parents, as well as information on how their charter parents can contact state legislators and school board members. Given that some state charter school organizations like the MCPSA are statewide but have a small staff, focusing on building relationships with charter school leaders and relying on them to do parent outreach and advocacy training might be a better way for the MCPSA to maximize its parental engagement capacity.

---

<sup>4</sup> The abbreviation of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association is typically “MCPSA,” but to avoid confusion with the Missouri Association, I abbreviate the Massachusetts Association as “MACPSA.”

Indirect parent engagement is effective in negotiating the challenges of low staffing at some CSOs and the reluctance of charter school leaders to give them access to parents. If done well, it can enable quick mobilization of parents and other stakeholders when charter schools face legislative challenges. In 2019, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer line-item vetoed a provision passed by the state legislature that would have given a \$240 per-pupil increase to public charter school students in the state.<sup>5</sup> The state CSO in Michigan—the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA)—quickly mustered public opposition to the veto. For two decades before the veto, MAPSA had developed relationships with member charter school staff and relied on them to communicate directly and regularly with their parents. The organization essentially employed the “train the trainer” model whereby they consistently provided classes to member school staff on matters such as how people can find and talk to their state lawmakers. These individuals would then teach this information to parents and other charter school community members. Thus, when the governor vetoed the increase to public charter funding, MAPSA had an engaged base of nearly 10,000 advocates they could rapidly activate. The organization also provided additional materials related to the veto to their school membership, such as prewritten messages that staff could send to their parents to inform them of what happened and phone scripts that advocates could use when calling state legislators to oppose the governor’s decision.<sup>6</sup> MAPSA even organized press conferences and trips to the state capital that featured charter school community members prominently. Their efforts played a role in Governor Whitmer later signing a new bill that restored funding to public charter schools in

---

<sup>5</sup> Urbain, Alicia. “Whitmer Slashes Funding Increase for Charter Schools with Veto [Press Release].” *Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA)*, 2019. October 1. <https://www.charterschools.org/blog/whitmer-slashes-funding-increase-for-charter-school-with-veto>.

<sup>6</sup> “Case Study - 2019 Michigan Charter School Funding Veto: An Analysis of Strategy Led by MAPSA.” *Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA)* n.d.

Michigan.<sup>7</sup> The example of effective charter school organizing in Michigan indicates the potential for an indirect engagement model to allow the MCPSA to mobilize parents and other advocates quickly should the need arise – a significant concern that the Missouri Association has for parent advocacy in the coming years.

Even when doing indirect outreach to parents, maintaining reliable and consistent communications with leaders in charter schools is crucial for an advocacy strategy to be successful. As Dr. Howard Fuller mentioned in an interview, an organization cannot have an advocacy strategy without a communications strategy. Some CSOs have recognized this lesson and have implemented changes in their operations accordingly. For example, in Massachusetts, the MACPSA stated that they view communications in general as how they advance the advocacy priorities for their member schools. While they do not have a specific parent engagement program, the MACPSA merged its advocacy and communications departments into a single Public Affairs Department about two years ago. The MACPSA now runs joint training courses with charter schools' communications and advocacy personnel rather than having separate classes for those professionals, which had been the association's previous practice.

Charter Service Organizations (CSO's), and other advocacy organizations, must establish connections to their schools and their parents before needing to quickly activate advocates. In response to the Michigan Governor's veto, MAPSA rapidly contacted its network using phone calls, text messages, and emails using lines of communication they had prepared in advance of the veto. They also made extensive use of social media, invested in their website using a builder called HubSpot, issued accessible graphics using Canva, and used subscription services such as

---

<sup>7</sup> Levin, Koby. "Charter Schools Get a \$35M Boost, as Whitmer OKs Sweeping Budget Deal." *Chalkbeat Detroit*, 2019. December 11. <https://detroit.chalkbeat.org/2019/12/11/21055521/charter-schools-get-a-35m-boost-as-whitmer-oks-sweeping-budget-deal>.



Constant Contact to send emails and Voter Voice for phone calls.<sup>8</sup> If the MCPSA considers changes to its parent advocacy program, pairing it with a compatible communications strategy could be crucial regardless of whether the Association undertakes a direct or indirect engagement model with charter parents in Missouri.

Indirectly engaging parents through charter schools has its limitations, especially since public charter schools do not always have parent coordinators or other dedicated staff that work directly with families. In Missouri, charter school members in the Association, such as the Academy for Integrated Arts in Kansas City and the La Salle Middle School in St. Louis, do not employ parent engagement or communications staff. MCPSA has found it challenging to engage member schools in parent advocacy when schools lack dedicated staff. Likewise, CSOs serving schools without “communication” or “parent coordinator” staff often report difficulties persuading these schools to engage parents on the associations’ behalf. Indeed, it can even be hard to convince charter school leaders and parents themselves of the need to partake in charter school advocacy. Danielle Pape, MACPSA’s Senior Director of Communications & Advocacy, stated that it is sometimes challenging to get charter school leaders in Massachusetts to realize the importance of advocacy work and that some school leaders told her organization that “we don’t do advocacy.” Indeed, MCPSA has been told by some school operators that they don’t engage in “politics.” Even organizations like the NYCSA, which do quite a bit of direct parent engagement, reported that persuading charter parents of the importance of advocacy for their schools can be difficult. Natasha Cherry-Perez, a Community Engagement Coordinator with the NYCSA in New York City, said that parents are often unfamiliar with aspects of charter school operations, such as how charters in states like New York need to undergo periodic renewals, they may not understand the urgency for advocacy. Developing mutual, sincere relationships with

---

<sup>8</sup> “Case Study - 2019 Michigan Charter School Funding Veto: An Analysis of Strategy Led by MAPSA .” *Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA)* n.d.

school leaders and their parents may help mitigate these challenges and, in particular, persuade charter school leaders to put CSOs and other charter advocacy organizations in contact with their charter parent communities. But as Jodie Cantrell at INCS stated, a lack of ongoing relationships with schools and parents rooted in trust can hinder a CSO's ability to engage them productively in advocacy efforts. Building these relationships demands a lot of time and effort and must be considered when developing an indirect parent engagement and advocacy model.

Despite the potential limitations of indirect charter parent engagement, this advocacy model remains a promising practice for state CSOs like MCPSA to foster charter parent advocacy throughout their states. Indirect charter parent engagement can derive important benefits if done appropriately, as seen in cases like Michigan, and potentially help some understaffed and under-resourced CSOs engage more parents throughout their states.

### **Future Research on Parent Advocacy for Charter Schools in Missouri**

Ultimately, the type of parent advocacy strategy that an organization elects to pursue depends on its mission and overall objectives. This was an important point stressed by Dr. Fuller, who stated the importance of having clear objectives and understanding how parents relate to meeting those goals before attempting to develop and implement an advocacy program. For a statewide organization like MCPSA, which may have insufficient staffing to do an effective direct parent advocacy program across Missouri, an indirect approach to parent engagement that involves charter school staff may be the most effective and practical approach for the organization. However, adopting this model assumes MCPSA can meet its objectives by working with charter schools rather than directly with the parents themselves. Suppose MCPSA believes it is essential to connect with parents on a deeper level to empower them to fight for their children's education. In that case, a direct parent advocacy approach might be needed.

However, implementing an effective direct advocacy program would require additional changes for the Association, such as hiring more staff and developing a more substantial community presence in Kansas City and St. Louis – where almost all of the Association’s charter school members are located. MCPSA maintains a close relationship with school leaders, which supports using an indirect approach to parent engagement.

As MCPSA continues to bolster its parent advocacy work, it must ensure that member school leaders and parents are involved in developing a long-term strategy. As the Director of Policy and Advocacy at TCSC warned in an interview, if an organization does not include parents in developing an advocacy strategy and instead tries to bring them in on the back end, parents may be less likely to engage.

This report is just one piece of a broader conversation about charter parent advocacy that some CSOs have as they consider ways to engage parent communities in their states. As MCPSA considers revamping its parent advocacy efforts, it is, therefore, crucial that it listens to the perspectives of charter parents before embarking on any change in its strategy. In particular, future research should involve reaching out to parents with the consent and collaboration of charter school leaders.

Ideally, MCPSA will not only ask about the advocacy strategies that parents consider to be effective but also seek to learn about the parents’ communities and experiences of their children in their charter school.<sup>9</sup> The Association may consider querying parents’ opinions on their school’s culture, the availability of school resources for their children and family, the quality of school facilities, teacher attentiveness, and transportation options. Asking parents questions about advocacy allows MCPSA to learn more about the schools they serve and helps

---

<sup>9</sup> A list of potential questions to ask charter parents developed with MCPSA Director of Advocacy Imani Harris can be found in Appendix B. The Association would have asked these questions to our parent advocate network and included their responses in this report if it received enough consents for interviews.

build trust with parents and school leaders, and shows the Association's genuine concern about their school communities. Taking the time to listen to charter school communities fosters the trust necessary for cultivating effective relationships for advocacy.

### **Acknowledgements**

The following individuals provided valuable input for this report: Dr. Howard Fuller, Lauren Freemire—Director of Regional Advocacy and Special Projects at the Colorado League of Charter Schools, Ricardo Soto—Chief Advocacy Officer and General Counsel at the California Charter Schools Association, Natasha Cherry-Perez—Community Engagement Manager in New York City at the New York Charter Schools Association, Jodie Cantrell—Director of External Affairs at the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, Carra Harris—Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Tennessee Charter School Center, Becky Carlton—Strategy and Partnerships Director at the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, Rebecca Gieskes—Managing Director of Advocacy at the Texas Charter Public Schools Association, Danielle Pape—Senior Director of Communications & Advocacy at the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, Darcelina Soloria—Regional Advocacy and Organizing Manager at the Washington State Charter Schools Association, Cici Tompkins—Community Outreach Manager at the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri, Nina Ward—Director of Programs and Events at Show Me KC Schools, Tiara Jordan—CEO and Founder of Activate STL, Keri Hunter—Vice President of Training and Outreach at EdChoice, Maribel Sainez—Director of Family Engagement Community Advocacy at Aspire Public Schools (a charter public school operator in California), Kristin Costa—Senior Account Executive at Larson Communications (works with Aspire Public Schools), and Ashara Baker – New York State Director at the National Parents Union and a former member of the New York Charter Parent Council member.

*I am grateful for the support from Edie Barnard, MCPSA Director of Development and Communications, Imani Harris, MCPSA Director of Advocacy, and Chrissy Beck, MCPSA Director of Operations. They provided invaluable feedback and knowledge throughout the study, and this report could not have been completed without their assistance.*

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Is there any way to determine if a given advocacy strategy is effective?
2. What measurements are considered when evaluating a strategy/practice?
3. Does communications relate to advocacy?
4. What steps, if any, do you take to complement your communications and advocacy efforts?
5. What have been the three most effective tactics to mobilize parent advocates on charter schools?
6. What advocacy tactics and messages, if any, have you found ineffective?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Proposed Charter Parent Interview Questions**

#### *Opening Question*

1. Please provide the name(s) of the charter school(s) in which you have children.

#### *Advocacy Work*

1. How many charter school advocacy events have you attended, including training, trips to the state capital, and board meetings within the past year?
2. What challenges, if any, have you faced as a charter school advocate in your community?
3. What three things could MCPSA do to better support your advocacy efforts?

#### *School Culture*

1. How would you rate your school's culture? Satisfactory, Dissatisfactory, or Neither Satisfactory nor Dissatisfactory?
2. What, if anything, could your school do to improve its culture for your child?

#### *School Support Resources*

1. Do you know what support resources, if any, that are available at your charter school(s)?  
These may include but are not limited to school nurses and child behavioral health counseling.
  - If you know the resources, please state them.
  - What additional supportive resources, if any, do you think your school should provide?
2. If your school provides supportive services, do you know how to access them? Do you feel comfortable accessing them?
  - a. If you do not feel comfortable accessing support services, what, if anything, could your school do to make them more accessible?

3. How would you rate the attentiveness of your school's support staff (if it has any)?

Satisfactory, Dissatisfactory, or Neither Satisfactory nor Dissatisfactory?

#### *School Facilities*

1. How would you rate the quality of the facilities at your school? Satisfactory,

Dissatisfactory, or Neither Satisfactory nor Dissatisfactory?

2. What, if anything, could your school do to improve the quality of its facilities?

#### *Teacher Attentiveness*

1. How would you rate the attentiveness of your child's teacher to their needs? Satisfactory,

Dissatisfactory, or Neither Satisfactory nor Dissatisfactory?

2. What, if anything, could your child's teacher do to better engage with your child?

#### *Transportation*

1. How would you rate the quality of transportation access for your child to and from school?

Satisfactory, Dissatisfactory, or Neither Satisfactory nor Dissatisfactory?

2. What, if anything, do you want to see change with your school transportation options?