

Interview of Jon Schroeder: “Herding Cats, the New Breed of Education Entrepreneur”

September 16, 2020 | Interviewed by Ember Reichgott Junge

Ember Reichgott Junge: [00:01](#)

Hello, and welcome to this oral history for the National Charter Schools Founders Library. I'm Ember Reichgott Junge and I'm the lead for the library. And one of my favorite things I love to do is to interview pioneers like Jon Schroeder, who we have today, because they've been there at the very beginning. We had an earlier history where he and Senator Dave Durenberger talked about how they started the charter school CSP program together. He was the policy aide for Senator Durenberger, but well after Durenberger retired from the U.S. Senate in 1994, Jon Schroeder was not giving up on his work on chartering. And he was well involved for many, many years later and is currently a member of the National Alliance for (Public) Charter Schools Hall of Fame. So with that I want to welcome Jon Schroeder; and thank you so much for being here. So you have had a long history in chartering--talk about (that). You were with Senator Durenberger for number of years. And then what happened after that? How did you transition out of that into the world of chartering?

Jon Schroeder: [01:11](#)

Okay, well, I always try to emphasize that I'm not an educated professional educator. I came to this realm through the policy side and I really respect and defer to teachers on what goes on in schools as well as parents and students. They're very important designers of this opportunity. Even while I was still working for Senator Durenberger after he introduced the bill, and as we were trying to build support for it in the Congress, I was in touch with, started to be in touch with people around the country who were working on charter legislation in their own states after Minnesota passed its law. And there started to emerge also a group of what we called charter friends who were state level charter school resource center directors, and say, charter school association directors.

Jon Schroeder: [02:11](#)

And this was something that Ted Kolderie had been doing as well after the Minnesota law passed. And even before he'd been starting to be in touch with people around the country. And we noticed that they were starting to have some informal conversations among themselves, especially the resource center directors, and Eric Premack in California and Linda Brown in

Massachusetts were the leaders of this informal networking activity that was going on. They had a couple of weekend gatherings and certainly were on the phone and emailing back and forth all the time.

- Ember Reichgott...: [02:51](#) Why was that necessary? Why were friends networks necessary? Why were they kind of popping up from the grassroots here?
- Jon Schroeder: [03:00](#) Well, you know this was a new opportunity and there were lots of interested educators and parents and community leaders who wanted to start charter schools. But they weren't familiar with our laws and they may have had previous experience in education as teachers or even principals or whatever, but they needed some technical assistance basically in how to develop an entire proposal and get it adopted, authorized, and then open their schools, and even earlier. And so there was a need for, you know, these resource centers and affiliations of charter schools to really make this a success.
- Ember Reichgott...: [03:44](#) I love the way you titled this segment, "Herding Cats, the New Breed of Education Entrepreneurs." I love that. Talk about that.
- Jon Schroeder: [03:53](#) Well, this is something that Ted noticed too. Ted and I had been friends in college for many years. I had gone to work for him actually when he was executive director of the Citizens League, way back in 1972. And so we had, you know, been in consultation through the legislative process in Minnesota and nationally. And then as things started to evolve and he really had picked up on his charter friends concept, he also noticed that, this is now not a great revelation, but that this was really a state level activity. And that was the whole idea behind having state laws. And why we were puzzled so much about what to do at the national level. And he also noticed that these were entrepreneurial kinds of people. They were very independent, not really wanting to have affiliations, formal affiliations. They did start to form state charter school associations, but even though there were several attempts to create a national charter school association, a formal association with membership and so forth, they were not successful. And these were really independent entrepreneurs and trying to relate to them and network them was something that we referred to as herding cats.
- Ember Reichgott...: [05:32](#) So Ted Kolderie of course, was a thought master behind the whole charter legislation of course, and was also staying very involved as you were as it went through the states. And I think I recall as the original author of the first law here in Minnesota,

that there were probably about six, seven states just in the first three years. I mean, we followed with California, you mentioned Eric Premack. Massachusetts, you mentioned Linda Brown. There was Colorado, Michigan, and Wisconsin. So there were a number of those, and you were in touch with some of those; and then tell me what happens. So you were organizing it a little bit, herding those cats?

Jon Schroeder: [06:10](#) This is kind of a funny story that really is evidence of, you know, Ted's credibility. I had taken on another job after Senator Durenberger retired and was, you know, happy with the job, but he got in touch with me in the fall of 1996, two years after Senator Durenberger had retired, and I had gone to work for this national nonprofit on scholarships. And we had several conversations about my interest in getting back into the charter movement as it was really growing into at that time. And I was interested, and he shared with me his observation, which I had kind of sensed too, about the entrepreneurs and the cats that needed herding and the networking that needed to be done.

Jon Schroeder: [07:15](#) And, and of course, you know, I had family, young children, need for healthcare insurance and income. And so I was curious about how this might be organized if I were going to do this and who was going to pay for it. And so he arranged a lunch at the Mall of America, one of the restaurants at the Mall of America with the founder from Washington State and the executive director who was from Dallas. And they came together in Minneapolis at the Mall of America and we had lunch. And these were people from the Challenge Foundation, which had been starting to support some individual charter schools.

Ember Reichgott...: [08:03](#) In Texas, primarily right?

Jon Schroeder: [08:06](#) Other states too. And Ted made the pitch and expressed enough confidence in me to manage this thing that they agreed right there over lunch at the Mall of America to commit a hundred thousand dollars initially, and then with the potential for several more years. And we did get, I think, three years of grants of that same amount from the Challenge Foundation. And so that gave me enough confidence that I said, okay, sure. Now what do we do? How do I get health insurance? And so Ted arranged with Dan Loritz at Hamline University to put me on the Hamline payroll (ERJ: Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota). Yeah. And they have a very strong education program, teacher education program, both undergraduate and graduate all the way to doctorate. And so it was a good home for me, and not just for employment and the health insurance benefits, but to be in an environment with professional

educators. And so Ted had an affiliation. He was on the board of the Center for Policy Studies, a nonprofit based in St. Paul. And so it got to be a partnership between Hamline and the Center for Policy Studies to employ me through Hamline; Hamline contracted me out to the Center for Policy Studies. And we created this project called the Charter Friends National Network.

- Ember Reichgott...: [09:49](#) Why did you have a project for the Charter Friends National Network versus just creating a nonprofit organization or an association to bring people together? It sounds like you were doing this almost as a one-man shop here.
- Jon Schroeder: [10:04](#) Well, it was done that way on purpose to really be responsive to what I described earlier of these, these cats that needed some herding and some networking and...
- Ember Reichgott...: [10:16](#) But not a lot of top down.
- Jon Schroeder: [10:19](#) No, well, they wouldn't accept that, you know, and they had rejected the earlier efforts to create a formal national organization. This was a project of the nonprofit in partnership with Hamline. And I was a contract employee, a contractor not an employee of the project or of the Center for Policy Studies. I was an employee of Hamline. And we ended up hiring by the end several dozen over time consultants who are also contractors and not employed.
- Ember Reichgott...: [10:55](#) What did you all do? You've got this large cadre of consultants.
- Jon Schroeder: [10:59](#) The first thing I did was I went around the country and visited with these people and they took me to some schools and we talked about, and I learned about their laws, the differences in their laws, what the needs of their schools were, what kind of benefit these state level charter support organizations might get from a more proactive organized networking activity, and what that entity might do, what kinds of services or functions it might provide that would be supportive of the state organizations and in turn through them, the schools. So I did a lot of traveling, you know, over time, 25 States or so to really listen and learn. And then, I'm the generalist. So we contracted with Brian Hassell of Public Impact in North Carolina. And he and a number of other consultants developed resource materials, resource guides.
- Jon Schroeder: [12:03](#) We established partnerships with the United States Department of Education with a national cooperative bank on facilities financing, with a national association of state directors of

special education on special education issues. We created an accountability network of charter school people from around the country, which actually ended up seeding what became the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and one of the consultants that we had engaged to do that work ended up being the first director, Margaret Lin, the first director of the national authorizers association. Over time we worked with the Department of Education on the national conferences that they started doing each year. We did all these resource guides, probably about 25 of them. We had a big partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation on a number of these resource guides and other materials that they then made available through their website. And we did on ours as well. The Walton Family Foundation became a very strong supporter of the Friends Network, and there were other funders as well, national and Minnesota funders.

- Ember Reichgott...: [13:25](#) What was in it for the funders? What were they trying to achieve through the Charter School Friends Network?
- Jon Schroeder: [13:31](#) First of all, Ted was very well known nationally among funders, state level legislators, governors, others that had influence and were knowledgeable. And I think practically everybody had read his early writings about breaking the exclusive franchise.
- Ember Reichgott...: [13:58](#) So what outcomes were they looking for?
- Jon Schroeder: [14:01](#) They said they agreed with the need for the state level support organizations and the value of their networking that would then in turn, be a value in strengthening the quality of charter school applications and charter school operations.
- Ember Reichgott...: [14:17](#) And advocacy perhaps?
- Jon Schroeder: [14:20](#) Well, that came a little later. As we began to establish ourselves I, because of my policy experience in particular at the federal level and in Congress, we started to monitor for sure, the implementation of the federal charter school program by the Department of Education. And then in 1998, 1999, there was developed an interest in Congress, several members of Congress in facilities financing. And they were interested in adding a facilities financing program to the federal charter school program. And so we got involved in that and Jim Griffin from Colorado, the Director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools at that time, was really our in-house expert on facilities financing. And so he and I tracked this federal legislation which became a part of the first reauthorization of the federal charter

school program. And there were some things in there that were good and some things that we questioned.

Jon Schroeder: [15:35](#)

And so we had to take some positions. The members of Congress wanted to know how we felt about this. And so I remember very well, I was on my way to California and I had a layover in the Denver airport and I had a voicemail message back in my office and returned it. And it was somebody, a staff person for a member of Congress asking a very detailed, substantive, but very important question about a proposed amendment to this facilities legislation. And I thought to myself, I don't know. So I called, I said, I'll get back to you. So I called Jim right there in Denver on the phone and he and I worked it through and came up with an answer and I got back to them. And it was at that point that both Jim and I realized that this was not good enough. You know, we were flying too much by the seat of our pants and we needed something more formal. And some of the funders started to get that in their heads too, particularly Bruno Manno, who was at the Casey Foundation at that time and Checker Finn at the Fordham Foundation. And so they pushed us to do something, to establish a more legitimate and professional presence in Washington. And that led to a meeting that Howard Fuller chaired at the 2000 charter school conference.

Jon Schroeder: [17:25](#)

And we invited about 75 people from various states. It was a very tight conference room at the hotel. And it wouldn't comply with today's distancing requirements at all. There were no masks on. And the letter inviting people to this was sent out by Jim Griffin and by John Ayers, who was the director of the Charter School Resource Center in Chicago. And so it wasn't like I was pushing this.

Ember Reichgott...: [18:06](#)

It was kind of growing from the need around the country. It sounds like because...

Jon Schroeder: [18:11](#)

Both from the grassroots and from the funders. And so,

Ember Reichgott...: [18:14](#)

And from Congress, I mean, it sounds like people needed to have a resource; there wasn't really a resource available, a national resource at that point in 2000?

Jon Schroeder: [18:24](#)

And out of this meeting that we had, this was in December of 2000, we then had two regional meetings of state level charter school leaders, one in Denver and one in Philadelphia, where we had probably 30 different states represented at one or the other of those meetings. And out of that, they developed the principles around what might become a national, a formal

national organization. And in the interim, we also contracted with a lobbying firm in Washington, very highly regarded, Vic Klatt was our principal lobbyist. And he had worked on the Hill for a number of years and was the senior Republican staff person on the House Education and Labor Committee.

Ember Reichgott...: [19:22](#) So just a little bit of context, stepping back. We're talking now from 1991, the passage of the law in Minnesota, to 2000--nine years. During that time, you said nearly 30 States had adopted this legislation. That's an incredible amount of activity in nine years. We're also talking about President Clinton during that time who you might want to talk about, who was a strong supporter of chartering. So there was a reason nationally why people were really engaged in this, even after Durenberger retired. So talk about that a little bit.

Jon Schroeder: [20:02](#) Well I'm not sure if there were 30 States by 2000. I don't remember the exact count, but there were about 30 States represented at these meetings because there were still efforts underway to adopt charter school laws also. So there were fledgling organizations in some states that were advocating for laws, as well as serving schools under existing laws. Yeah, we had from the very beginning, very strong bipartisan support for chartering and the role of states and federal--an appropriate federal role through the charter school grant program. And under President Clinton's leadership there were huge increases in the annual appropriations for the charter school program. And particularly as more and more states came online and there were more and more charter schools opening that needed start-up assistance. And the president had a goal of a certain number, several thousand charter schools...

Ember Reichgott...: [21:08](#) 3,000, I remember, by the time he ended his term in 2000.

Jon Schroeder: [21:13](#) Yep. We had also under the Charter Friends Network, we had started National Charter Schools Week. That was the first of those, was in May of 2000 and President Clinton came to that. And we had an event here, a kickoff event in St. Paul at the City Academy, the very first charter school in the nation. The president was there. And so, that, and these national conferences also was creating a sense of a national movement. Right.

Ember Reichgott...: [21:52](#) I just want to say, I remember that time that President Clinton came to City Academy, it was a very joyful time because it celebrated the fact that we had been nine years into this, but that Minnesota and the Minnesota legislature had really led the way on this. And there were a lot of chartering people there,

leaders from the legislature, it was a wonderful to have President Clinton there in support, but he also spent time with the students. I remember that as well.

- Jon Schroeder: [22:19](#) So yeah, he stayed as long as there were people wanting to talk to him. And there must have been hundreds of people who he spoke to individually, including all the students from City Academy and they were taking pictures and yeah, it was quite a deal. And I remember because his speech was very, you could tell the extent of his interest and engagement in the issue because of how specific he was able to be about what makes a good state charter school law, and what makes for strong charter schools. And he said, you know, on the one hand, there are some laws that are too loose and leave these schools to run too far, too fast. And other states, they're too tight, they're under the control of districts and districts might be the only authorizers and heavily regulated. And he said, you got it about right in Minnesota. And that was a tremendous compliment to, you know, the authors of our legislation and the architects of our legislation, and also its implementation here at that time by the state department and by some of the leading school districts in this state. And the people that stepped forward to start new charter schools. So it was, yeah, that was a big day.
- Ember Reichgott...: [23:54](#) It was. And I still smile about it. The Charter Schools Week, National Charter Schools Week, of course, has continued from that year. Every May now has been a Charter Schools Week and your organization helped to make that happen, I guess.
- Jon Schroeder: [24:10](#) Yes. And the National Alliance, which we'll get to in a minute, still puts that on. Initially it was done by the U.S. Department of Education and... (check with Jon: Does he mean National Conference here?)
- Ember Reichgott...: [24:24](#) The U.S. Department did it itself. That's interesting. It's a government function. Yeah.
- Jon Schroeder: [24:28](#) Yeah. And they paid for it and did it all. And they contracted with us, with the Charter Friends Network two or three years, they outsourced to us the development of the content of the conference, particularly the workshops. So we ran the RFP that went out to charter school people around the country to propose workshops and we proposed speakers and other events that took place during the conferences.
- Ember Reichgott...: [25:02](#) So now you've had these meetings, if you will, in 2000. President (Clinton) is leaving office, we've got President George W. Bush coming into office now. What's the role of the Charter

Friends Network and the potential transition here into a more solid national organization?

Jon Schroeder: [25:20](#)

Well as I mentioned after this meeting in Washington at the national conference in December of 2000, we held these two regional meetings in Denver and Philadelphia that spring, we engaged Vic Klatt and his firm to be our lobbyist in Washington. So we were really positioning ourselves and, and really having this come from the grassroots in terms of whether to do it and how to do it, it being creating some kind of more formalized national organization, something that would be fiscally sustainable and be located in Washington and have the capacity really to do the job that was needed. And so later that summer the Walton Family Foundation, which was our biggest financial supporter underwrote a national meeting in Orlando where we had charter school people, a smaller number, maybe a dozen or so of the more experienced charter school leaders from the states.

Jon Schroeder: [26:35](#)

And at that meeting, it was decided that they themselves through a steering committee would design the new national organization. And I would provide the staffing and this would be done through the Charter Friends Network, but it wouldn't be like upgrading the Charter Friends Network. We really started from ground zero on what this should be and what it should do, and what its membership should be, how it should be paid for, where it should be officed and all those kinds of details. And so we had working groups within this steering committee that came up with recommendations on all of the above issues and through the good offices of the Washington D C Charter School Resource Center, we were able to obtain pro bono legal assistance from a very large, very well regarded international law firm that had expertise in nonprofit organizations.

Jon Schroeder: [27:44](#)

And they helped us develop bylaws and Articles of Incorporation, which we filed. And we also recruited a board, a larger board about 20 people or so I think that were a combination of state level people and national people. I think a third of the membership was national people. And it had a membership of state organizations. They were the membership base, and they were the ones that selected the other two-thirds of the board. And we had some early commitments from funders. Certainly the Walton Foundation was interested in this, but others as well. So we went ahead and Howard Fuller, from Milwaukee, was the board chair.

Ember Reichgott...: [28:46](#)

Howard Fuller, of course was at the time, or at least earlier, the superintendent of Milwaukee Schools and was with Marquette

University. But then later, or maybe at the same time, (he) formed the Black Alliance for Educational Options group as well. So just to bring the context, he's been a strong leader in chartering. Who else was in that room, or who else was on the board that people in the chartering world might recognize?

- Jon Schroeder: [29:15](#) There were state association leaders like Sue Bragato from California and Dan Quisenberry from Michigan...
- Ember Reichgott...: [29:27](#) And who is still in 2020, the lead of the Michigan Charter Schools Association.
- Jon Schroeder: [29:34](#) There was Jim Griffin from Colorado, Colorado League of Charter Schools, and Sarah Tantillo from New Jersey. She was the chair of the steering committee that put all of this together. Steve Dess from Minnesota was on that first board. Ember Reichgott Junge was with that first board, I think, as a national leader, and Checker Finn. And there were some other national level people that we recruited as well. And then we had resource center directors Eric Premack from California, Linda Brown from Massachusetts, John Ayers from Chicago. It was a really solid group.
- Ember Reichgott...: [30:20](#) It really, it's a Who's Who in the early pioneering of chartering that's for sure. Tell me about what the purpose was of this group now as you were talking about in the early two thousands.
- Jon Schroeder: [30:32](#) Yup. Well, we're now in about 2003 when the new board was launched and the new organization was launched and we hired a CEO and he in turn hired three or four other people in key positions—communications, and development, and product development. And he was quite entrepreneurial and wanted the organization to be at least partly funded by services that it would sell to the state organizations. And we had a meeting in Chicago where we formally created the organization and
- Ember Reichgott...: [31:27](#) Which was now called what?
- Jon Schroeder: [31:29](#) Well, I think it was called the Alliance at first.
- Ember Reichgott...: [31:35](#) So an early forerunner of the National Alliance.
- Jon Schroeder: [31:38](#) Yeah. And it was kind of messy for another year because it turned out that the funders got together and decided that their preference or what they felt would be a stronger representation of the charter movement nationally would be what they called a

leadership organization rather than a membership organization. So the governance and the board would be entirely highly-regarded national leaders and

- Ember Reichgott...: [32:13](#) As opposed to?
- Jon Schroeder: [32:15](#) Well, two-thirds of the original board were state associations. And also they were members and they just thought that a member organization would be overly deferential to its weakest members. You know, that was the kind of the organizational theory here that the funders had. There's an argument there about, inevitably, that any group has to protect, or is at least driven to try to protect all of its members.
- Ember Reichgott...: [32:52](#) So let's say a weakened member might be a member, a state that really didn't enforce some of the key elements of a chartering law or quality or that sort of thing. Is that what you're thinking?
- Jon Schroeder: [33:05](#) Yeah. It might be a combination of a weak law, a weak state department, or maybe even antagonistic state department, a weak charter school association, a weak resource center. Or particularly I think they were concerned about the potential for scandals or bad press, things that really might be a drag on the charter idea nationally and wanted to try to protect the national organization from being driven to defend, you know, its weakest members.
- Ember Reichgott...: [33:48](#) I see. Okay. That makes some sense. Yeah.
- Jon Schroeder: [33:50](#) And so this was communicated to Howard by these funders, Howard Fuller. And we had to make some really quick and controversial decisions about what to do. And I know that we had some options that we identified, but we really were forced to lay off our staff and we had contracts with all of them. They had provisions in them to guarantee some type of severance for situations like this, where they were unemployed, not for cause. And we then created a new subgroup, a smaller group that Howard led and I staffed again, and we got funding that time from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Bruno Manno again, the key person there, who had been very supportive all along and wanted this to happen, wanted it to be done right.
- Jon Schroeder: [35:01](#) So we went through another nine months or so of strategic planning, I guess you'd have to call it or organizational design and came up with a new model, a new set of bylaws, a new board. And some of us were carried over from the old board

and some new, stronger national people were added to the board. We got a grant from the Pisces Foundation to do an executive search and we ended up and I was on the search committee, I staffed all of this. We then interviewed, we had, a dozen or more good candidates that we interviewed in several different interview sessions. And then the board interviewed the three finalists that we recommended and selected Nelson Smith to be the first President and CEO of what is now the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

- Ember Reichgott...: [36:09](#) And what year are we talking at this point?
- Jon Schroeder: [36:11](#) We're now in October of 1994...
- Ember Reichgott...: [36:19](#) No, I think it might be 2004. Right. Okay.
- Jon Schroeder: [36:25](#) And so it had taken us three years from the initial meeting in Orlando which the Walton Foundation underwrote and the steering committee planning process that resulted in the first iteration of the Alliance, and the very strong advice that we got from the funders, the unhitching of our staff, and the development of a new plan, the hiring of a new CEO, and our recruitment of a new board. And that took another year, almost.
- Ember Reichgott...: [37:08](#) So a lot of growing pains, I mean, chartering
- Jon Schroeder: [37:13](#) These are birthing pains.
- Ember Reichgott...: [37:14](#) Yeah, exactly. Chartering is a birthing pain. And I think people need to understand that, too. I mean, the whole idea of chartering was constantly being challenged and looked at and improved in the states. Now we're trying to do that at the same place in the national level. All organizations go through this, but this just sounds like it really took some time. So now we're in 2004, we've got a number of states now that are charter states. Lots of charter schools being started and Nelson Smith is the CEO. What was the purpose now of this new organization, now I believe called the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
- Jon Schroeder: [37:58](#) Well it actually went through several different name iterations, but right, it ended up being the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. And I remained on the board. I was secretary of the board, on the executive committee, and also co-chaired the policy committee with Andy Rotherham, who had been in the Clinton White House and really had been very instrumental, I think, particularly after he went to work there. And he had

been previously at the Democratic Leadership Council, Progressive Policy Institute and heading up their education program. And Andy really got it. He really understood this. I was perceived as a Republican, I guess, coming off of Senator Durenberger's staff. He was of course a strong Democrat, so we co-chaired the policy committee. And so we developed policy positions.

Jon Schroeder: [39:07](#)

We had been earlier very involved with President Bush's No Child Left Behind proposal, which had some significant implications for charter schools, both in how they were treated as public schools and with all of the consequences of the testing and monitoring of improvement over time, and the consequences for not improving over time. And the consequences themselves focused somewhat on charter schools in that if after a period of time of low performance as defined by No Child Left Behind, a district public school did not meet the expectations, then they had to do something significant, like change principals or change their staff or shut down or convert into a charter school. It was one of the options. So we were involved in that legislation, working with the Bush administration and with Congress on that, trying to look out for the charter school interest, and that legislation, which was done through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act also reauthorized the federal Charter School Program again.

Jon Schroeder: [40:29](#)

And so we were closely monitoring that. All along we were in close touch with the Charter School Office in the U.S. Department of Education about the guidance that they sent out to states on how to implement the laws. They had a series of regional meetings around the country of state department, charter school, office directors. I attended at least three of those as the department was rolling out its new guidance and the changes in the law that were made in No Child Left Behind. And we continued to support, really organize, we had several contractors who staffed the coordination of National Charter Schools Week every year. We continued to work on the National Charter School Conference and by and by the Alliance, of course, started to take on more and more of a national role.

Jon Schroeder: [41:32](#)

And as a board member, I was a part of that, particularly in the policy area working with Andy Rotherham. And the charter movement continued to grow and flourish nationally. More and more states passed laws, more and more schools were open. Schools were closed in some cases because of bad management or fiscal insolvency, unsustainability, low enrollments, bad academic performance. Although most of them were closed for

fiscal and administrative governance reasons. And in some cases, fraud.

Ember Reichgott...: [42:17](#)

I want to interject here that under the charter law, we expected that those charter schools that didn't perform would be closed, that they would be held accountable. That was a strength of the law, and we needed to make sure that occurred. So I think we needed some of the oversight in the states and the national (team) to make that happen. So you've got now this organization that's clearly now the national resource to bring chartering together, nationally, leadership. You and I served on that board up until 2008, and then we retired together. You obviously had an important role as staffing all of these different pieces of this as you, as we went forward. So you were right in the middle from beginning to end. And my question for you is, were you able to accomplish what you wanted to, when you set out with your Friends Network, you created the resource group, the National Alliance. Did you achieve what your goal was at that time or are we still working on it?

Jon Schroeder: [43:31](#)

Well, I don't think this will ever end in terms of achieving goals. There are now thousands of charter schools and I don't even know how many charter school students there are now, in the millions, and there were long waiting lists and particularly in some major urban districts, a very high percentage of school-age children are in charter schools. In Washington DC about half of the students in public schools are in charter schools. And it's even higher than that in some other places, you know, smaller cities. And here in Minnesota, in Minneapolis and St. Paul there's a significant percentage of the school-age children who are in fact, it's a significant majority of school-age children are not in Minneapolis district schools. They're in a combination of charter schools and they're open enrolled into other districts, they're taking full or part-time post-secondary options, they're on college campuses, they're in private schools, they're homeschooled. So this is growing and growing, but there are significant issues today.

Ember Reichgott...: [45:04](#)

Well, I'm going to just rephrase my question, because my question was much more the impact of the national organization. Did that achieve the goal that you wanted for the national organization's impact on the charter movement? Okay. You were talking about the growth, maybe that had some impact on it, but has it been helpful to the growth of chartering?

Jon Schroeder: [45:27](#)

Well, we had rather modest, evolving goals at the beginning to network, connect, expand the number of, improve the capacity

of the state level charter school support organizations. When we started, or even before we started, there were half a dozen of them that were meeting together, but I think they met two or three times, had telephone calls and emails back and forth. By the time we launched the Charter Friends Network, there were maybe a dozen or so of these organizations, including the state charter school associations that started to emerge in the early charter school states. By the time we handed all this off to the National Alliance, there were over 80 (ERJ: Oh, wow!) state level and sub-state level charter school support organizations that were part of our network that were co-sponsors of National Charter Schools Week, that signed on letters that we sent to members of Congress on particular pieces of legislation, that participated in our organization of the National Charter School Conference and other activities. We had working groups in various substantive areas. And so this grew from six strong starters to over 80 such organizations in all the charter school states.

- Ember Reichgott...: [47:08](#) That's impressive. And it sounds like the national work you were doing was a catalyst for the states. They needed that resource center. They needed that nudge, that catalyst, that network, where they could see it happening in other states. Right? So that's I think a real benefit.
- Jon Schroeder: [47:30](#) We developed materials they could use that were generic enough that they could be used across states on facilities financing and special education, accountability, and all of the issues that they needed. And we represented them in Congress and we had an effective, strong lobbying effort there. We had people testify and I was still traveling around the country a lot and connecting people. I don't know anything about anything, but I know who to call.
- Ember Reichgott...: [48:07](#) You're the networker, the consummate connector. Yes, you were. Absolutely. Still are.
- Jon Schroeder: [48:10](#) If somebody called from a new charter school state, like Idaho, and wanted to start a state charter school association in Idaho, I went to Boise and I learned about the Idaho law and about the schools that were starting to emerge there. And then I connected them with probably Jim Griffin in Colorado, or Sue Bragato in California who are two of the strongest leaders and strongest state charter school associations in the country. And in some cases, they went to Boise and helped these people. So that's how it worked.

- Ember Reichgott...: [48:49](#) So that really is, it was the connector and the catalyst, it sounds like, and so important for the growth and sustainability of chartering for sure. Jon, my last question is this, what lessons did you learn from this? What could we do differently now? What could we have done differently then? But what lessons should we learn from the work that you did as we go forward and try to serve that same catalyst and connector role for charters?
- Jon Schroeder: [49:24](#) Well as things get bigger, it's harder to do. There are more cats and there are some lions and tigers out there too. You know there are snakes in the grass, all kinds. As something grows and is successful and in a competitive environment, it starts to snatch eggs or kill baby cats, kittens. There has to be a response. And it's also harder to manage. And this is not apropos to any particular situation. I'm trying to abide by it in a way in the current environment, as an old white man, the best thing we can do to make something like this successful, even nudging the cats in the right direction, is the best thing we can do is listen and learn.
- Jon Schroeder: [50:47](#) That's what I try to do always. And when a kitten was born, I would go listen and learn first, and then pass it on. And I learned a lot in doing that myself that made the whole thing work better, made the cats more herdable, made the goal that we were heading toward clearer and more consistent and achievable. And I think that any national organization, in this case the Alliance, needs to do the same thing. And it's not just people, it's not just the old white males in the charter movement that need to be listened to, the rich and powerful, the ones that have the capacity to launch a significant number of schools in a year, or raise millions and millions of dollars from private funders, from the federal government, from the federal charter school program. They certainly have a role to play, but there are lots of other smaller cats around the country who really need even more help and ought to be the focus of any national initiative. So I think that those lessons, it's a philosophy, it's an opinion of mine that I try to personally apply in other situations, other environments, I think are relevant today.
- Ember Reichgott...: [52:42](#) Listen and learn--very simple, but very powerful. And so important I think today to learn from that, as we talk within the chartering community, listen and learn (with) one another, as we talk within the public education community with district and charters, and as we talk in the larger political community. We're seeing less and less of that in 2020, unfortunately. So I think that is a great place to end. Thank you so much. Jon Schroeder,

who is in the National Charter Schools Hall of Fame and as you can see, has been integral to all of this all the way from his time when he was the policy aide in U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger's office, was part of the beginning of the CSP program all the way through the beginning of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. It's really an honor to visit with you and learn all of this, which all these years I didn't realize. So thank you so much, Jon. (Jon: Thank you!).

Ember Reichgott...: [53:42](#)

This is being taped for the National Charter Schools Founders Library. And I want to also recognize that this is a project of the National Charter Schools Institute in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, with Jim Goenner as the CEO. I am the lead for that library. And you can find this video as well as lots of supporting documentation from Jon, Senator Durenberger and others and all the other videos we've done on our website at the National Charter Schools Institute. With that, thank you so much. And we appreciate your being with us.