Transcript of Interview with Harold J. Brubaker

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SPEAKERS

Ember Reichgott Junge, Speaker Harold Brubaker

E Ember Reichgott Junge 00:19

Hello, and welcome to this recording for the National Charter Schools Founders Library. This year is the 25th anniversary of North Carolina chartering and one of the people responsible for that is with us today for an interview and we are delighted to have him for his oral history. This is former Speaker Harold Brubaker of North Carolina. My name is Ember Reichgott Junge and I am the lead for the National Charter Schools Founders Library and was the original author of the Minnesota chartering law. So I am looking forward to having a conversation with a legislative colleague, who was there in the trenches with me way back in 1996. So Harold, welcome to the National Charter Schools Founders Library.

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 01:06

Thank you, Senator, glad to be a part of it and to share the platform with one of the gurus that started this movement.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 01:16

Well, Mr. Speaker, you were Speaker during this time that chartering occurred in North

Carolina. So we'll start there in just a moment, but I'd love to hear just a little bit more about your background. How did you get into politics in North Carolina and tell me a little bit of your history?

S

Speaker Harold Brubaker 01:28

Oh, that's an interesting essay in itself. So I grew up in Pennsylvania on a farm. Matter of fact, the painting behind me is the home farm that I grew up on in Pennsylvania, a small dairy farm, chickens, poultry, and a few pigs. Went to the public school system, did my undergraduate degree at a little place called Happy Valley, Penn State University in Ag Econ, and then I wanted to teach in a community college system and the Dean of Penn State said try North Carolina. They have more community colleges than any other state in the country and you don't have to have a Master's to begin teaching. So I said, Great. I call a friend in North Carolina, who I had known over the years with my involvement in an organization known as the FFA, and he said he had two openings. And I said, I know where neither one's located, which one's closer to the university where I can work on a Master's. So I taught at the community college system for about three to four years, and completed a Master's in Econ at NC State University. While I was teaching, and you know how you can stand in front of a class, Senator, and pontificate your viewpoints. And finally, one old big boy in the back of the room raised his hand and said, Well, if you know so much, why aren't you in office? It kind of hit you right between the eyes and so that kind of led to me getting involved in the local party, and the local political scene and one thing led to the next. Back in the old days in the '70s, you had to be asked to run for office. I don't know if you encountered that, Senator, or not. You can't just wake up one morning and say, Hey, I'm going to run for the legislature. I'm going to run for county commissioner. It didn't work that way. Back in the '70s, you had to be asked by the party and if you accepted the party that basically shepherded a whole campaign. The first campaign I ever ran cost $500. So I became a member of the legislature in 1976, one of six Republicans that year, figured I'd stay about 10 years. Well, 35 and a half years later, after being Speaker and Senior Budget Chair, I decided to retire in 2012.

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Ember Reichgott Junge 03:44

That is quite a history. Thank you for your service, first of all. Well, let's go to 1996. Now, you'll recall that in '91, Minnesota passed the first charter school law that was where I was involved as a senator. But a few years later, a few states came along, North Carolina was one of them, but chartering had been around for about five years. So how did you first hear about it? What did you first know about chartering and how did you find out about it?

S

Speaker Harold Brubaker 04:37

Actually, believe it or not, I did know of your early forte, Senator, into the charter school arena and I always thought this is a very unique approach, because not only have we, those of us serving in the public bodies, heard from our school districts year after year, that we all we need more money. Well, what about the quality of the student and I believe in a public school system. And so this was a very novel issue, to still have a public school, called a charter school, that was a little different and had more leeway in how they could govern. And so that was a very interesting concept in my approach, I used to kind of like to dig back in the archives and find out what worked and what didn't work. And also I love people that think outside the box. And of course, you did that with the original charter school move back in the early '90s. So that's kind of the background of how I kind of got honed on to the issue of charter schools. And then we had members after the '94 election, '95 and '96 and '97, that were all gung ho for charter schools and that's kind of the genesis that started a movement in North Carolina.

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Ember Reichgott Junge 05:54

Now, you then were elected the Speaker of the House at that time, so you probably weren't interested in sponsoring many bills when you're in that leadership position. So other people sponsored the bill. But you were involved. But just go ahead and tell me a little bit about the history about how this happened because you had a Democratic let's see Senate and a Democratic governor, Republican House, and it was very much a mixed legislature. So how did you get through all that?

S

Speaker Harold Brubaker 06:27

Well, first, you know, after '94 elections and having the first Republican majority in 100 years, as a matter of fact, it was 1895 the last time there was a Republican Speaker in North Carolina until 1995. Now, we've had three more that served in that capacity. So one of the initial ideas we had what we called Contract North Carolina in '94 campaign, and one of them was talking about vouchers and charter schools. And all of a sudden, the debate opened up and we started doing legislation in the House on a number of other issues, going to our, you might say, our plan for North Carolina and then all of a sudden, the Governor and the Senate start looking at what these guys and gals doing in the House and we had a voucher bill introduced and a charter school bill introduced. And at that time, a friend of mine walked in one day and had a book written by Governor Weld of Massachusetts, and she said you need to read this chapter. And in that chapter, talked our Governor Weld in Massachusetts, had a voucher bill and a charter bill. And as folks got very upset with the voucher approach, they kind of jumped on the charter approach. And I thought that was a very novel idea. So we kind of turned up the flames in North Carolina,

that we got to go with vouchers and all of a sudden, all the naysayers, both House and Senate and Governor jumped on this idea of charter schools. So that was very helpful to get in the background and that's why the bill, legislation moves very quickly through the House at that time, but that's kind of our background here in North Carolina.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 08:15
So you actually created pressure by proposing vouchers in North Carolina. Is that what you're saying?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 08:24
Exactly correct and that led to everybody jumping on board saying, Oh, no, no, no, we can't have vouchers, but you know, this charter school is a novel idea and we need to support that. And as a matter of fact, later on, President Clinton visited North Carolina, in a joint session of the House and Senate, talking about charter schools after we passed the legislation.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 08:47
Well, and President Clinton had always been about the third way. He looked at this as a pragmatic way of having public school choice built into the system without vouchers. What's interesting about what you just said, Mr. Speaker, is that we had the same exact thing happening Minnesota back five years earlier. We were making the argument that this was better than vouchers and for the unions and for the Democrats, because it was a Democratic majority. That was something important to them, they thought they could prevent vouchers from occurring. And so it's interesting that same issue both federally, Minnesota and North Carolina, was the pathway to getting chartering down the middle.

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 09:36
And on top of that, Senator, we also said that an existing public school, don't know if you do this in your state or not, but in an existing public school system could switch to charter.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 09:49
We didn't have that. We did not have conversions. Did you have many actually do that?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 09:55

None, because the typical system, they are afraid to think outside the box, and we have some small school systems in the state that ought to really consider it.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 10:09

And that was something we hadn't thought of but later on in other states, they wanted to have conversions, but very few actually did that. And I think because they liked what they had, but it was also part of the Union situation. So let me ask you that. How important was the union position on this? And were they opposing it while it was going through the legislature?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 10:38

Well, yes, of course, let me back up. While we have the teacher union, the NCEA, the republicans call them union, but they're really not North Carolina, because we're right to work state so you really can't have public unions. But anyhow, they get dubbed with the same nomenclature that they're a union, but anyhow, by leading them down the path, that vouchers are going to be the way we need to go, that's what they begin to look and say, Oh, well, so we have a choice. You want the status quo? You want to go to vouchers, or do you want to go to this new novel approach charter schools? While, at first, they did not come out and endorsed the concept, they were basically silent and, of course, that gave the nod to be able to move forward among the Democratic colleagues in the Senate.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 11:27

So they didn't, the Democratic colleagues, didn't face the same opposition that we did in Minnesota, which was pretty strong, and thereby causing some real controversy here, correct? Sure. Was it a very controversial bill overall, then as it was passing through the legislature?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 11:47

There was obviously an enormous amount of discussion going on, which was good, which was good, brought out all the major points of the benefits of charters and the thing that the opponents couldn't, had a very difficult time arguing, that this is not a public school system. Oh, yes, it is public school system, we're gonna get funding basically the same way that our our other K through 12 and the public school system has. And so it was a hard

concept for a lot of them, you might say, to get over the top. But eventually they did, mainly because when we decided that we might have to bring the voucher bill to the floor that basically ended that discussion.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 12:30
That's so interesting, that back pressure. Was the vote close?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 12:36
We had about 60% of the House members supporting it at the time.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 12:40
How about in the Democratic Senate?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 12:42
Yeah. Well, we ended up the senators, they had some very unique individuals and leadership over their business folks, and I'm a business guy. And talking to them in terms of choice, and decisions parents should be able to make in the real world. And they came around in a very short period of time, but it took some it took some discussion.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 13:08
And who were the major opponents, if the union wasn't really that strong, were there other opponents then to it? School boards and that sort of thing?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 13:20
Yes, the school boards worried about the local dollars, you know, being taken away. And that was the sad thing about education all boils down to three things: money, money, money. And so the question is, how can you best serve the student and the parents in the community there? But then they realized, as the old saying goes, the legislative process, hey, the train's on the track. Now, if you don't get out of the way, this thing's gonna go and it might be detrimental to some of the other things that you might want funding for. And so that was the impetus in terms of getting things rolling. And when it came down to it, it was Senator Wib Gulley, who was in the Senate, who was basically handling the negotiations; my House member had some other issues that he was working on and so I kind of got put into the throes of doing all the final negotiations. Everything was worked

out, except how many charter schools can you have? We had no limit in the House side, our position, the Senate wanted 25, so I was on the floor of the House, conducting the session from the dais and Senator Wib Gulley would come up, come in the door and come up right to the dais. I'd motion him on up and he said we can't do 25. I said, Well, we were stuck on a minimum of 200. Oh, my gosh, he said, Well, we'll do 50, I said nope, 200. So he left went out, I guess he went back over the Senate chamber, came back in a few minutes later said we'll go 75. I said well I'll go 150 and that's all I can do. He said, we can't do that. He said, we're just gonna let it die. Okay, I'll stick in the budget or put it some other place where you'll see it again. So he goes out about 15 minutes later he comes back in, alright 100 is the max we can go to. I said you got to deal, we shook hands on. Now, about two or three years ago, the state legislature has taken the cap off charter schools. So we had the 200 cap for years and it was just recently taken off. And I know we're over the 200 limit right now.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 15:38

Legislative sausage making at its best, that is a great example. How much did the governor get involved in this and what was his position?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 15:49

Well, Governor Hunt was always very much involved in educational process. And he also saw that the president, President Clinton, at that time, was beginning to talk more and more about charter schools. So at that point in time, Senator, we did not have veto for the governor. So while he had a large soapbox, really didn't matter, just whatever the House and Senate worked out. And yet I was the culprit, I was the guy that gave together veto later on, on my way out the door. But and now so there is the governor of North Carolina does have veto over overall legislation, except local bills, constitutional amendments, and redistricting. But so Governor hunt, a very sharp individual saw this, this movement, not only in the state, but nationwide, and saw that the President was jumping on board, so he was with us jumping right on. Matter of fact, did help convince the Senate this is something we need to do.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 16:54

In your original bill, did you have alternate authorizers? Who were the authorizers for chartering?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 17:03
It all was the same, went to the State Board of Education.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 17:07
So you had one authorizer, the State Board of Education. Could the local school districts also authorize charter schools?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 17:15
Well, they had to, basically they could oppose it, and they do oppose it. When we had the charter school starting in Randolph County, basically, both school boards wanted to come out and oppose charter schools, you know, again, afraid of dollars and students taking away from their bottom line. So they're your natural adversaries.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 17:37
So the state board was the authorizer, which I've always maintained, is essential to have someone other than the local school district be the authorizer. Right?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 17:46
Because you'd never get it done.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 17:49
Well, right. In Minnesota, when our bill passed, it was severely compromised, requiring double approval, this local school district and the state. So as you might imagine, the first seven of nine applications were turned down. And the only two that got through was one school, City Academy, that that serves students who had already dropped out of school, and a special needs school called the Metro Deaf School. So those were the only two that got through. So I'm glad to hear that you had that alternate or that higher board, if you will, right away.

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 18:25
We had a luxury of kind of looking over what you did in your state, what other folks did their states, and kind of say, hey, so what's working the best?

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Ember Reichgott Junge 18:35

And you did that because you looked at Massachusetts, and there had been California and Colorado and Michigan and some others that are actually strong charter school states so you had some good lessons to be watching. Well, you talked about Randolph County, which is the county you represented in the House, or in the Assembly, I guess you call it, and you also told me that it took many years to get a charter school there. So talk about that process years later.

S

Speaker Harold Brubaker 19:03

Well it was kind of embarrassing, so that having been the Speaker of the House, and having this legislation become law in the late '90s and it almost took to about 2011-2012 before we even had an application from Randolph County, my home county I represented for 35 and a half years in the General Assembly, to even have members come forward and want to start their charter school. Now at that particular point in time, the politics behind it was very unique. So we had the State Board of Education Chairman was appointed by then Governor Beverly Perdue of North Carolina and, of course, so we had, at that point in time, a Republican House, a Republican Senate, and a Democratic Governor, and the Board of Education, the majority are appointed by the governor so therefore basically controlled by the governor's party, the Democrat Party at that point in time. So the application with the charter schools in Randolph County, got a slow start, got a thumbs down the time or two. And a good friend of mine, who was one of the original starters, Mac Whatley, who was a very close friend of mine, and was the chairman of the Democrat Party for years in Randolph County, but his father had taught in the community college with me back in the early '70s. Mac, when he got out of school at UNC, went to Harvard Law School and came back to Asheville. But he was very instrumental in working with the charter school. We also had a young lady that was very involved in the political arena in Randolph County in the Democrat Party. This is a county that's, in a normal year, a Republican will win 75 to 80% of the vote and but she had run as a Democrat for the local school board. So after seeing them get turned down a time or two, and I was either fortunately or unfortunately, the senior budget writer in the House. So my other colleagues from Randolph County, Senator Tillman, who was in the Senate at the time and Representative Pat Hurley, who's in the House, still in the House, right as of now, and I had him come to my office, and we called the chairman of the state school board over to meet with us. And so I gave the background, said listen, let's cut through all the fat. I know, this is the Republican county. I know your school board is is is dominated by the Democrat Party, I understand that and if I was going to be political, I should be on your side. He looked at me kind of weird like why? I said Mac, while he's the former Democrat Party Chairman of Randolph County, one of the other ladies that started starting the school was a Democratic candidate for the school board. These are all Democrats, and we

should all be against them but you know what, we got a problem. They're all good people and they deserve this. They're smart. They know what they're doing. They know what the community wants. And that's why you see up the three of us Republicans here that represent Randolph County House to Senate. Yes, we're supporting the Democrats to get this thing done. He looked at me kind of odd, something happened within a few short period of time, Uwharrie Charter School got approved for Randolph County.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 22:27

So very bipartisan and it sounds like there's a bipartisan trend throughout all this. Is that fair to say, that chartering has been really bipartisan in North Carolina? Talk about that.

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 22:40

It is, because education should not be political. Education should not be dominated by Democrats, by Republicans, by Independents, or anybody. It should be what is best for the students of North Carolina. And you know, when you look back at our educational system for what, 100, 200 years or however long, probably closer to 100, you look back and you say, so what was done correctly in K through 12 public school, and what can we improve on? And frankly, until until the early '90s, Senator, when you came along, nobody thought outside the box. And so it was Oh, yeah, this is a novel idea. And so that's how it became a bipartisan issue. It wasn't a Republican or Democrat issue. It was one people generally concerned about the future of education and challenges and thinking outside the box. That was that was the genesis.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 23:39

Why do you think it is so partisan today in some states? Chartering seems to have taken on its own pathway in some states. Some think it's Republican initiatives, some think it comes from the Democratic Urban Coalition. Talk about that. What is causing that divisiveness right now, in some states around chartering?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 24:08

I think in some of the states and I can look at North Carolina in particular, the NCEA is probably coming out stronger and stronger against charter schools, because they look at that as a method of siphoning students off of the other public schools out there. So I see that's more of the trend of where it's happening. The other thing is, over the years, the makeup of at least the North Carolina Legislature, like when I first became a member, it was lopsided, you know, 114 Democrats and six Republicans, you know, didn't even matter

if I showed up to work or not. But today as races become more competitive, and when you have bodies that are out of 120, you might have 66 and 56. You know, it's a lot closer than it used to be. I had one term as Speaker when I had a majority of one vote. The Senate Pro Tem, a Democrat, had the majority in the Senate by one vote when I was Speaker. So when you have this area, you might say, of margins closer then issues become more political. That's what I've seen happening over the period of time, not specifically directed in that direction, but it just becomes a very tight issue because in some states, in North Carolina, that the predominant members of the Democratic minority in the House and Senate are from the real large cities, which they probably should have more charter schools than anybody else, some of them do. Whereas the predominance of the party in control now in North Carolina, the Republican Party, and House and Senate is 90% rural. So you have different needs in different areas. And I think that all plays into the changes we're seeing in society. But it's a great idea and we should never forget that the importance of charter schools as part of the public school system throughout the country.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 26:18

And that's one of the reasons why we founded this library was to capture the origins, hear the history from leaders like you, the pioneers like you, talk about the bipartisan origins and talk about the why and the how for chartering so that we can preserve that for the future, if there is need to refresh our memories, given the divisiveness and the partisan myths that are going around. So from your perspective, what have been some of the greatest lessons we've learned in chartering, that we might want to share with educators and policymakers? What are some of the lessons we've learned both good and bad?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 27:03

I think the number one lesson that we learned that, just because you have a group of people that want to get together and start charter school, you need to make sure you've got the right mix of individuals, number one. Number two, are you going to be financially viable? And can the folks wanting to do the school? Do they have some experience in running something similar, i.e. a business? Because basically, it could be correlated with the idea of a business, running an operation. And that's where we've had some fail, because probably the due diligence was not as done as in depth. That can you run the system? Can you run the school system? And how your finances? And do you have plans for alternatives because by the time in Randolph, Uwharrie Charter School came along, you had to have access, as I recall back, this is digging back 25-30 years ago, that you had to have a backup, you had to have a bank or someone to be able to back you for $500,000 to a million dollars that first year to get started. Well, you had to have a pretty solid plan, number one. Number two, to go somebody, go to a bank that's going to do

that, you had to have solid individuals and a solid background. So the ones that I saw fail over the years were those that did not have that ingredient, the fiscal part. How are you going to sustain yourself financially? How are you going to grow? And do you know what your minimum student body requirement is to break even? And so I look back and think that is the main cause for failure - finances.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 28:48
And the people who oversee the finances are, of course, board members, and authorizer. Right? So maybe those are areas that we need to be looking at for stronger schools?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 29:01
Exactly. Exactly. Make sure the members on the board is not just like who wants to be on the charter board? Raise your hand, you know? No, it's an application process. I know, for example, Uwharrie, they now have gone through an application process if you would like to join the board. And since it's quasi-public, but yet it's not those members are not elected by the general public, but they do go through a qualification. For example, on the first board here in Randolph, the Uwharrie one started we had, for example, an attorney, a banker, and I think maybe it was more than one banker on the board, two or three at one time, but people with backgrounds like that CPAs, business people, that new fiscal soundness, and I think that's what kind of kicked off Uwharrie and why Uwharrie has grown. When they started out, it was like three grades, three upper grades, and now they're K through 12, which is what I had hoped to see. It was my dream to see that and fortunately, we had great folks in Randolph and took that dream and ran with it.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 30:10
And one of them was Rhonda Dillingham, I understand, is now the executive director of the NC Charter School Association.

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 30:19
That is correct. She was one of the one of the two original culprits to get this started Randolph County.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 30:25
And talk about that school. You've mentioned the name, Uwharrrie. It sounds like a Native American name. Talk about the school and its origins. How did it come about? Who

wanted it? Who were the parents and the families involved?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 30:42

So Rhonda was part of the original team that started it and her and her colleagues were at, we call it, a zoo school. It was part of the Asheboro City public school system, but had modular units stuck at our Zoological Park in Randolph County, which by the way, Randolph County North Carolina Zoological Park is located in Randolph County, North Carolina. Asheboro, in particular. It has over 2,000 acres of land. It is the largest, land-centered zoological park anywhere in North America. And its the largest around. And so it was a great center and so this is where the original genesis started with the two ladies that kind of headed up the zoo school. And, of course, when the word got out, and they were starting to receive all types of negative comments from the higher ups at the Board of Education, the city school system and all that, but they toughed it through, they kept going with the idea and their perseverance paid off.

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 31:57

Well, congratulations, because as you say, it's doing quite well today from what I understand...

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 32:02

It is and the term Uwharrie, Senator, I forgot to throw that in there. Uwharrie, we have a chain of mountains that goes through Randolph County, that's kind of a Native American name, so the Uwharrie Mountains goes through Randolph County, so why not have the Uwharrie Charter School?

E **Ember Reichgott Junge** 32:23

And one of the things you did have was strong board members, which we talked about, and I feel very strongly about the need for good governance for chartering. That's one of the keys for success. The others, of course, are good leaders like Rhonda. The other thing is a good authorizer. So talk about your state board as an authorizer. How does it do its work? Has it been effective? Do you need alternate authorizers in North Carolina?

S **Speaker Harold Brubaker** 32:52

Well, no, it's basically it's based on a per pupil. The interesting part is that the charter school movement has always had a tough time, while the public, while the general public

school system, that's non charter, they will get a per student allocation for capital. The charter schools do not in North Carolina. So they're almost starting out with one hand tied behind their back, that they got to go into some very unique planning in terms of how they build their school. And most of them end up doing it privately funded, there are companies out there that will come in and buy the land, if you want to purchase the land, build the buildings, and lease it back to you over so many years for them to recap the investment then it would turn over to you after so many years. So when they started out that was that was kind of a unique position and, as a matter of fact, it's one of the things the charter movement in North Carolina still continues to work on of being able to get dollars for capital. It seems every time they get one or two steps in the direction that it could happen, then somebody comes in and nixes it, whether it's a veto from the governor, or whether it's one body, House or Senate, decides they can't go that route. But that's the main stumbling block that's been to the years with charter schools in North Carolina, how do you get a piece of the action or piece of the dollars for capital?

E Ember Reichgott Junge 34:28

That's a big issue, too. I know in Minnesota, we came back a number of years later, and we developed lease aid, which was a substitute for that so that they could at least rent and have money for that. And so they got about 90% of the amounts that overall that a district public school would have but but I can't believe you still don't have facilities aid in North Carolina. That's got to be very tough for those schools.

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 34:56

And think about it this way, look how it blows your mind, so here you have a system that's starting lacking capital, but don't get the per pupil allocation that their other sisters and brothers in the public school system get and yet they're able to do everything without any more money. Somebody's sleeping at the switch.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 35:19

Imagine what they could do if they had the full amount. But let's talk about that. One of the things I'm interested in as a Democrat is how we can bring the charter sector and the district sector together, how we can learn from one another, what kind of innovations we can share, as he just said, sometimes charters can do more with less how can we share that information? And what can we learn from districts? Is any of that going on in North Carolina? Are they working together at all to try to share information?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 35:54

Sadly, no. It's more, this is my turf, and that's your turf, stay off of mine. I'm not going to get in yours. Ideally, that's what should happen, for the two systems to work together, because I think there's always good ideas. As I used to say when I was in the campaign mode running for office, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have all the good guys. They're good people on both sides of the aisle. And you got to learn to cross the aisle and work together. And what's ironic, you have school systems, where the segment of the public school system that's not charter might have a board all Democrats and the charter might have all board Democrats and you think they could get along, but they don't. Because it's your turf versus my turf. That's the million dollar question, Senator, and I haven't figured out how you overcome that. When you find out, let me know.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 36:52

I haven't found the answer either. But some states have done it. And I think again, it's all about the kids, isn't it? It's about putting the focus on the child because that's where it should be. Given all of your years of experience, as a legislator, as a charter pioneer. What is your advice to the policymakers of today in North Carolina and around the country about chartering? What should they be thinking about? How can we make it better? What can we do to sustain it for the next 25 years?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 37:31

First, always think outside the box, think about how you can do something better than what you have today. There's always room for improvement no matter what we have, or what we're doing. And so that's what I would encourage the leaders to do today, of both parties, think outside the box, how do we do we improve K through 12? We have charter and the other side of the public school system. Yes, we've had failures on both sides of the equation, on both sides of the public school system. So when we have a public school system that fails, we either have the state superintendent come in and take over that system, and bring in new people to address their deficiencies because you learn to learn from their problems, and learn from successes of other districts. So if we do that, within our systems, why don't we work across, you might say, across the table for both sides of the public school system to get along, share what they know is a success and share what is not successful. And that's how we build a better school system. It's all about the kids, the bottom line.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 38:48

So you and I probably are both closer to the middle of our parties, I think. And so that's easy for us to say. But of course we have a lot of partisan extremes now. So perhaps we have to wait for it to come back. Because you probably know that up till 2016, two thirds of America supported chartering. And I mean, what else does two thirds of Americans support, right? Now that has gone down because in the last few years, chartering got conflated with vouchers in the Trump administration. And so the support is going down. But how do we bring that back again, so that the public truly understands chartering? How do we make that message come through loud and clear?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 39:35

I think one of the things we should do more in a charter school movement is touting our successes. Whether it's an inner city school, where you've had the kids in their corollary system fail, and how they came into a charter school, and how one on one in a lot of cases, has built that young child up into a great human being. And so we've got to tout our successes. In the early phases, you've heard more successes, but then the naysayers always would throw up those that fail. And then starting out whenever you anytime you have a new experiment, just like we have with charter schools, you have growing pains and we had growing pains in North Carolina where we would have some start and fails, Oh, look at that these these guys and gals don't know what they're doing. But as we matured into charter school system, in North Carolina, we got a lot more tons of successes, versus the small, minute amount of failures. And we need to learn to build up more and promote more of the successes of the charter schools. It's something that should be in every newspaper and every TV station throughout North Carolina, and even the public TV sector should be supporting promoting more and telling the story, because it's the best kept secret, very frankly, the history as well as the success of the charter school system. So I think that's what we have to do.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 41:14

I totally, totally agree with that. I was thinking about over the time, some of the schools you said closed, and they didn't do well and they probably needed to close because they weren't academically successful or financially successful. Well, that was one of the fundamentals that we built into the chartering law, which would say that if you don't succeed, and you have time to improve that you would be closed, so that we could protect those kids. Talk about the accountability aspect of this. What I've seen over time is that actually, some of the districts are picking up on the same thing, they are now using data more to assess whether the district schools are succeeding and in some cases, closing district schools, but not many. So talk about the accountability side of this and what chartering has done to promote that.

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 42:09

So over the period of about 25 years in North Carolina, and having a great track record for charter schools, the successes of being accountable, more of an open book, if you will, for the charter schools, looking at their finances, and again, like you said, Senator, the dynamics of the charter school movement was building in, if you will, a measuring tool successfully in terms of curriculum, and also successful in terms of finance, and golly ned, if we'd have that all the way across the board, what a new day it would make throughout all public schools. And so as a result of that, as a result of looking at the successes that develop, I think we do have the other side of the public school system, the non charter, that are, some of them, are very much in tune more than, I'd say, the superintendents that don't look at an issue and say oh, the answer's no but look at and say well, how can we benefit from this? What can we take that is very beneficial that they're doing in the charter movement and use over in the non charter movement. So I think you do see some of that but the beauty of the whole movement was that there was a level of standard put in there for success financially and accept success for the students, which we don't have that in the other side of the equation with the non charter schools.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 43:49

Well, that is well said. Mr. Speaker, you've had such an experience with chartering and so appreciated. I'm wondering if you have any documents hidden away that might be helpful to add to our library? Is that somewhere hidden in an archive library somewhere in North Carolina that you might want to contribute to our library?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 44:14

Oh, I'll have to check back through and see what we have, be glad to.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 44:19

Because that's the other piece about our library is that we love having the oral histories and then if you have any documents that you have to share that or maybe a little history or timeline that might be helpful that you want to provide. We love having that. And I want to just kind of close our interview now with just a little bit about the library and maybe why it's important. We're only a couple years old now and we are gathering these histories, one by one in the states. Do you see a need? Do you see a benefit? Do you see ways we can use these resources to improve chartering in the future? What would you use this library for if you could?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 45:05

Oh, absolutely, by having a documented record, and I think to be very transparent with the movement, the fact that we that we bring out front our failures, and also our major successes that we have and so that's where the library will be extremely difficult and somebody new in a new part of the of the country that might be thinking of doing a charter school. Well, the beauty of going to the library is to say, here's what failed, we got to stay away from that. Here's where the top successes are, that's what we want to build on. That's the value of the library.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 45:41

Thank you. Thank you so much for that. And thank you for this interview. I do want to acknowledge, first of all, that the National Charter Schools Founders Library is a subunit of the National Charter Schools Institute in Michigan headed up by Jim Goenner, Dr. Jim Goenner, who is the visionary behind this. It's been a pleasure to build it. I also want to thank Rhonda Dillingham and her association for sponsoring this video to make it possible for future pioneers to be able to access. So we really appreciate your time. I'll just end by asking if you have anything else you want to add about your work in chartering or the what you see for the future of chartering in North Carolina?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 46:31

I guess my ending state would be, Senator and folks like yourself and the library, keep the momentum going. You've always got to be in the forefront. You've always got to be pushing forward the ideas. Never give up on the issues, because we know the success it can be.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 46:50

And with that, I think it's a great place to end. Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. We have so enjoyed having you. I understand now you have your own firm that you're working with lobbying and other clients. Is that right?

S Speaker Harold Brubaker 47:03

That is correct. Brubaker and Associates.

E Ember Reichgott Junge 47:08

All right, so people can contact you there if they need to. Thank you so much. We appreciate your time and all of your pioneering work in chartering. You are indeed a pioneer. Thank you!