

A Brief Timeline of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

For the Founders' Library

National Charter Schools Institute

What follows is my own recollection of how the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools was created and evolved, up till the time of my departure as its first CEO in 2010. It is informed by conversations conducted in 2011 with many of the founders and leaders of the Alliance, but any errors are my own. I hope this provides useful insight into the history of the charter school movement's principal national voice.

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August 6, 2021

Introduction: Formation of the Alliance

In the early years of the charter school movement, there were competing interests that made formation of a national organization difficult. A growing list of state-based charter support organizations, nurtured by Jon Schroeder's Charter Friends National Network (CFNN), wanted to see strong grassroots leadership.¹ They were wary of being spoken for by the constellation of think-tanks and advocacy groups that operated nationally, but were mostly headquartered in Washington, DC. National funders, however, feared that a membership-based organization might be held hostage by its weakest members, and wanted to see a national voice that would speak for high standards.

These forces finally began to converge at the national charter school conference in December 2000, when John Ayers of Chicago's Leadership for Quality Education and Jim Griffin of the Colorado League of Charter Schools invited representatives of more than 70 state and local organizations to a meeting chaired by Howard Fuller of the Institute for Transformation of Learning at Marquette University and Chester E. Finn of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

It was a planning grant from the Walton Family Foundation to CFNN in 2002 that finally set in motion the creation of a single national organization, originally called the "National Charter Schools Alliance." But that initial effort was short-lived, as its leader and board fell into dispute about whether it should be financed by a range of services, (think AARP or NEA), which might compete with those offered by state groups.

The second try was grounded in the "national" arena, with formation of the original "Charter School Leadership Council" financed by a Walton grant to the Washington-based Education Leaders Council. Jon Schroeder began commuting to DC to represent CFNN. But this time the board itself ran aground over disputes about how much control a single member might exert given the "consensus" rule it had adopted for decision-making.

In August 2003, funders delivered the message that there must be a new organization grounded in principle but encompassing the breadth of the charter movement. The driver of this grand bargain was

Howard Fuller, whose passionate but fair leadership style had earned trust on all sides. An October meeting produced agreement on the basic shape of a new “National Charter Coalition,” and Arnold & Porter attorneys provided pro-bono assistance in drafting by-laws and other corporate documents. A 21-member board would include national and state leaders. The new group would be financed initially by philanthropy – putting off the vexing question of whether California and New Hampshire should pay the same level of dues.

The board settled on a familiar name: The Charter School Leadership Council (CSLC). Andy Smarick, who had been hired by the prior CSLC, agreed to stay on as director of the new organization. (Lucky for them! He has since gone to national prominence as an education thinker, and among many other accomplishments has served as president of the Maryland State Board of Education.) Korn Ferry was hired to do a national search for the organization’s leader – and found a former DC authorizer and longtime policy wonk named Nelson Smith, who began work on December 1, 2004.

2005: Startup

CSLC’s Official launch took place in January 2005 at National Press Club. Responding to a spate of adverse publicity after the NY Times published the American Federation of Teachers’ interpretation of 2003 NAEP results, we presented a new, more comprehensive review of charter school achievement by Bryan Hassel of Public Impact.ⁱⁱ We also announced formation of a Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability that would make recommendations later in the year.

Glover Park Group, which included some Clinton administration veterans, was hired to do polling and market study.

Gregg Vanourek’s State of the Charter Movement 2005, a wide-ranging compilation of growth and progress indicators, was released during National Charter Schools week in May.ⁱⁱⁱ

In August 2005, we gathered about 120 charter movement leaders, thinkers, and funders in a summit meeting made possible by the generosity of Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan.^{iv} There, we released the Task Force report, *Renewing the Compact*.^v It was a clarion call to move away from the pure-choice argument for charter schools, and toward a new emphasis embodied in “Seven Principles of Quality Chartering,” principal among them these two:

- “Quality is more important than quantity. Growth is not an end in itself.”
- “Charter schools must achieve at high levels – not just offering something marginally better than failing neighborhood schools, but providing the kind of education that equips graduates for success in postsecondary education, fulfilling work in the 21st century economy, and responsible citizenship.”

And we announced a new name, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. It was intended to emphasize “national”; “Alliance *for*” (i.e., not a membership organization) and most important, “public” – because our polling showed a dim appreciation that charters were indeed public schools.

Early policy work included September 2005 publication of Principles for renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act -- then thought imminent, although the Every Student Succeeds Act wasn’t signed until 2015 -- and the first of many budget battles over the Credit Enhancement Fund.^{vi}

The Alliance moved quickly to take on challenges in the states, where most charter school policy is actually decided. Initial efforts included

- 2005: Filing our first *Amicus* brief in the Ohio Federation of Teachers lawsuit to overturn Ohio’s charter law.)
- 2005-6: Working in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, including hosting a meeting of community leaders that resulted in formation of New Schools for New Orleans under the leadership of Sarah Usdin.
- 2005-6 Beginning several years of work in Ohio, starting with a report entitled *Turning the Corner to Quality*, jointly authored by the Alliance, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), that began with a recommendation to “clean house.”^{vii} The Alliance also fostered the creation of a new, quality-focused state organization.
- 2006: Fighting for a statewide charter district in South Carolina.

2006

The next year was pivotal, with the Alliance moving into real national leadership on several fronts.

NAPCS won two federal Charter School Program grants, one for state capacity building and the other (with the Colorado League, NACSA, and Center for Research on Educational Outcomes At Stanford University) for Building Charter School Quality – which developed a multi-level approach to developing accountability indicators, measures, and metrics, still in wide use today.^{viii}

The National Charter School Conference, which had been run by the federal Department of Education, was taken over by the Alliance in 2006. That year, in a sort of trial run, it was co-sponsored in Sacramento with the California Charter Schools Association. Since then, it has been the Alliance’s solo show, overseen by the remarkably capable Angela Christophe, and accounting for a significant share of each annual budget.

A Joyce Foundation grant enabled the Alliance to conduct research on the charter leadership pipeline and also to support work by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools in expanding that state’s movement beyond its Chicago base.

In August, when the US Department of Education released yet another rehash of the 2003 NAEP data, the Alliance conducted a press pre-briefing with a panel of respected researchers who explained why the NAEP data was unsuitable as a gauge of actual performance.

Finally, 2006 saw the beginning of a long-term strategic planning process which produced a new round of sustaining grants – and also surfaced some familiar tension with funders about how the Alliance’s “leadership” mission should be interpreted.

2007

On the federal front, the Alliance succeeded in getting several of its post-NCLB proposals submitted in both Houses. The appropriations process was problematic, however; Sen Tom Harkins’ objection to

facilities funding produced a major dent in overall appropriations. However, the Alliance did succeed in getting the three charter- school line-items consolidated into one, making each less vulnerable and giving the Secretary greater authority over how to allocate the funds.

The Alliance worked with New York State charter leaders to produce ads promoting Gov. Spitzer's plan for relief from the state's restrictive charter cap. It was raised from 100 to 200 that year.

While all this was going on, the Alliance had also begun issuing a series of issue briefs on charter funding, facilities, and state-level issue. Prominent among them was Paul O'Neill's *Charter Law Deskbook*, published in 2007 as the Alliance's first foray into cataloguing and evaluating state charter laws.^{ix}

In December, the Alliance was awarded \$5.5 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the largest such grant it had made to that point, to work on a new grassroots strategy including "microtargeting" and list-building. Although the microtargeting venture produced disappointing results, the list-building work helped state association work – particularly, the Georgia campaign for a new state charter commission.

2008

Under the leadership of state policy guru Todd Ziebarth, who had joined the Alliance in 2006, and calling on Paul O'Neill's *Deskbook* expertise, the Alliance began work on creation of a new model state charter school law. In contrast to other such efforts, it would place the emphasis on accountability and quality rather than just growth.^x

Ursula Wright, a banking executive who had come on board as CFO the prior year, was named Chief Operating Officer. She would later be interim CEO following the departure of the Alliance's second CEO, Peter Groff.

In the interest of building organizational capacity with the firepower needed for fundraising and outreach to national leaders, the Alliance reconfigured its Board, with several of the state-level founders departing. To guarantee grassroots representation, a new State Leaders Council was created, with two board seats reserved for its nominees. Board chair Bruno Manno devoted much of his tenure to deft management this difficult transition.

Also in 2008 the Alliance and the Colorado League of Charter Schools hosted the first national meeting of lawyers working on charter-related issues. This led to formation of the Alliance of Public Charter School Attorneys.

The national conference was held in New Orleans, fulfilling an ambition that had burned since Katrina. This was the first year the city's hotel and convention capacity was finally able to handle such a gathering. It was quite a spirited event!

The Building Charter School Quality project formally released its *Framework for Academic Quality* and a website allowing schools and authorizers to use their framework in building accountability programs.

In the presidential campaign, both Barack Obama and John McCain praised charters, and the Alliance began working with Obama staff after his victory.

Yet as the year ended, the nation was deep in financial crisis. The Alliance quickly became both a voice for charters in the recovery funding bills and a conduit for the movement about events in DC. The point person for this remarkably nimble work was Brooks Garber, who led weekly calls that drew up to 125 participants.

2009

2009 was dominated by the Administration's efforts to pull the nation out of recession. When \$100 billion was allocated to education under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), with \$5 billion reserved for discretionary funds, the Alliance worked successfully to get charter-related eligibility criteria into the Administration's Race to the Top grants. This had the effect of moving numerous state laws closer to the quality criteria in our Model Law.^{xi}

To build capacity in state charter organizations, the Alliance inaugurated a series of "Master Classes" where state leaders could hone organizational skills by hearing how best-in-class leaders handled school accountability, membership development, financial management, and other tasks.

Beginning a new quadrennial tradition, the national conference was held in Washington, enabling attendees to meet with members of the new Congress. Education Secretary Arne Duncan delivered a strong keynote address, including a surprising call for charter founders to undertake more turnarounds.

We dealt with "friendly fire" when CREDO issued research seemingly critical of charter performance. (Happily, an updated report issued in 2013 show strong improvement.)

Although an advocacy organization, the Alliance also embraced its responsibility as a source of reliable research on charter schooling. In 2009, a data-rich charter Dashboard developed by research director Anna Nicotera made its debut, and continues to be an important resource.^{xii}

Another Alliance perennial is the annual "market share" report; in 2009 the fourth edition was released showing explosive growth: 14 communities now had more than 20% of public-school students in charters.^{xiii}

2010

A Facilities Task Force, launched the prior year, released in 2010 a study on the paucity of options and financing for building and renovating charter schools. This became an ongoing concern for the Alliance, which now hosts the Charter School Facilities Center, which researches how charter schools can access school buildings, including through public policy and private financing.^{xiv}

Taking a step beyond the model law, the Alliance released a new annual report ranking states against the model law's components. It advanced the principles of quality and growth – and generated terrific coverage in the process.^{xv}

A good deal of energy was spent playing defense in 2010, after historian and former ally Diane Ravitch published a memoir regretting her previous advocacy of charters.

Finally, the Alliance welcomed Bill Gates as keynoter at its Chicago national conference. That conference was also my swan song as CEO, although I remained as Senior Advisor for an additional year.

i I have multiple copies of “charter a Clear Course” (on school/CMO relationships) and “If the Shoe Fits” (on adopting a comprehensive school model” – I can send if they’re not already in the CFNN archives.

ii [Studying Achievement in Charter Schools: What Do We Know? | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

iii [State of the Charter Movement | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

iv Conference proceedings: [Chartering 2.0 Summit Proceedings Document | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

v [Renewing the Compact: A Statement by the Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

vi [Policy Principles for Creating New High Quality Schools Under NCLB's Restructuring Requirements | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

vii [Turning the Corner to Quality: Policy Guidelines for Ohio Charter School Program | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

viii Here is the basic Framework developed by BCSQ: [FrameworkForAcademicQuality.pdf \(charterschoolquality.org\)](#). The project website is still live, and contains a wealth of tools and reports for schools, authorizers, and policymakers: [Publications & Tools - Building Charter School Quality](#)

ix Still available on Amazon: [Charter School Law Deskbook 2007 Edition: Paul T. O'Neill: 9781422434659: Amazon.com: Books](#)

x [A New Model Law for Supporting the Growth of High-Quality Public Charter Schools | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

xi The outline of our recommendations: [School Improvement Grants - American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 - Proposed Requirements | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

xii [2009 Public Charter School Dashboard | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

xiii [Top Ten Charter Communities by Market Share: 4th Annual Edition | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

xiv [Making Room for New Public Schools How Innovative School Districts are Learning to Share Public Education Facilities with Charter Schools | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

xv [How State Charter Laws Rank Against The New Model Public Charter School Law in 2010 | National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)