

Remarks of Gov. Owens
10th Annual Colorado Charter School Conference
October 10, 2003

It wasn't all that long ago when discussions of education reform would remind me of a plane flight I had recently. The flight attendant stopped at my seat and said, "Will you be having lunch, Governor?"

"Absolutely," I said. "What are my choices?"

She said: "Yes. Or no."

Isn't that what too many children have heard when they want better choices in education? You can attend the school you've been assigned to. . . or you can attend the school you've been assigned to.

But, here in Colorado, we've worked hard to change that. And that's why it is such a pleasure to join you. Because together, we've worked to give our children the best possible chance at success. And that could not have been done without so many of you I see here today.

Let me first say thank you for your commitment to our charter schools and to Colorado's children. Thanks to you, thousands of families across the state have a brighter future.

I'd also like to recognize the Colorado League of Charter Schools for hosting today's conference and for being a strong advocate for charter schools. Thank you for helping to debunk the myth that these schools are expensive and don't work.

Because we know choice works. Ten years of success stories prove our case. Let me take you back to the days before charter schools. Just ten years ago, our children had no choice but to attend the school they were assigned to. Even if that school failed to meet their needs, they were told to "make do." Those students who couldn't "make do" stopped trying. Others dropped out altogether.

That's when we came together to propose a better solution to educate our children. To make sure no student slipped through the cracks.

Ten years ago, together, we stood by the belief that if the system is not serving our children, then it must be changed. A belief that if the system is failing to deliver results, then it must be challenged and improved.

If the system is not meeting the needs of all our children, then we haven't done our job. Because you know, as well as I do, that a quality education delayed is a quality education denied. That every child trapped in a failing school, is one child too many.

These simple truths shaped our arguments ten years ago and they continue to provide the foundation for why education reform is needed today.

Here in Colorado, we've always been at the forefront of education reform. From introducing statewide public school choice to charter schools – two bills I was very proud to sponsor when I was a state legislator. We have enacted the type of reforms that President Bush's education secretary calls "the envy of the nation."

For years, we've been building a system that can deliver a quality education to every student in our state. It's what Colorado is known for. Working together, we've established a system that focuses on the student.

So today has a special meaning to me, because I know how far we've come. Ten years ago, when I was pushing to get Colorado's Charter School Act passed, the resistance to establishing charter schools was fierce. The bill barely passed the legislature. And we were forced to put on restrictions such as limiting the per-pupil revenue to just 80 percent.

Since then, we have worked hard to give charter schools more of the benefits they deserve. Now, charter schools receive 95 percent of the per-pupil revenue available to public schools. And two years ago lawmakers voted to allow school districts to include charter school construction projects in local bond issues. This past year, I signed a budget that included \$5 million for charter school capital construction.

We've come a long way to give students a successful future. Today, there are almost 100 charter schools. And this school year alone, over 30,000 students will attend a charter school. That's 30,000 lives changed for the better.

We're also seeing great results particularly among students who were considered "high risk." Nearly half of Colorado's charter schools are designed for students who are having a hard time in traditional schools.

These schools give students an option. They tell students: Even if you've struggled before, we're not giving up on you now.

Let me share with you a story of a girl who transferred to the Academy of Charter Schools in Adams County because she was having problems at her public high school. At the Academy of Charter Schools, she received specialized attention and help with her academics. After graduation, she enlisted in the Navy, scored second in the nation on the mathematics training test and now is chief of control for nuclear reactors on the USS Enterprise.

This student is just another example of how charter schools can reach out to students that are failing in traditional schools. And that's important because there is more than one path to success. If we are committed to the academic success of every student, then we must look at many approaches.

That's what charter schools set out to do. And to measure their success, we need to look no further than our School Accountability Reports. According to the most recent reports, 20 percent of charter schools compared to eight percent of public schools received an "excellent" rating.

That's encouraging.

Even still, while we've had great success, there is still more we can do to ensure that our children are receiving a quality education. Earlier this year, I stood on the Capitol steps, surrounded by hundreds of children from our schools, to sign our school choice bill.

I met with parents who thanked me, because now their children have a chance for a better education and a better future.

This is the type of reform that Colorado is known for and why other states look to us as a model of success.



The great novelist Graham Greene noted “there is one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.”

Friends, can there be any higher stakes than improving the future for all of Colorado’s children? We cannot falter in this task, or weaken our resolve – we cannot shut the doors on our children because they may have special needs or are considered “high risk.”

All across Colorado charter schools are creating environments that foster innovation. What’s more, they’re showing strong results. Proving once again that a good education is not always found in a cookie-cutter mold.

-END-