

# Democrats for Education Reform - Oral History

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## SPEAKERS

Ember Reichgott Junge, Joe Williams, Caprice Young, Shavar Jeffries

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Ember Reichgott Junge 00:08

Hello, my name is Ember Reichgott Junge, and as the Minnesota State Senator who authored the first charter school law in Minnesota in the nation over 30 years ago, I often celebrate the bipartisan roots of chartering. In my view, that's what sustained chartering for all those many years, and why chartering has spread to 45 states, serving nearly 4 million students in charter schools today in 2022. But what is overlooked often is the outsized role that Democratic leaders and policymakers played in that journey. It's not always an easy road for Democrats like me. There's a lot to learn from our history. And that's why the National Charter Schools Founders Library has invited these three distinguished chartering pioneers, all Democrats to talk about that journey. Our library is digital, and it's all about recording and preserving chartering history, so we can better inform our future. And with that, I welcome our panelists. First is Joe Williams of New York City. He is the founding director of Democrats for Education Reform. Previously, Joe worked as an award winning educational journalist for The New York Daily News and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He writes and speaks extensively on education, policy and politics. He authored a book in 2005, and has built a reputation as one of the most effective strategist and coalition builders in the education reform community. Currently, Joe serves as political director for Walton Enterprises. I also welcome Shavar Jeffries of Newark, New Jersey, the current president of Democrats for Education Reform, and President of Education Reform Now, a national advocacy organization that pursues educational equity for low income students and students of color. Shavar is a civil rights lawyer and pioneer and executive leader with over 20 years of experience fighting for equal opportunity and racial justice, representing clients individually and in class actions. He serves youth on the boards of the KIPP Foundation, National Mentoring Partnership and New Classrooms. And he too, is a frequent speaker and media presence on public policy. He also served a three year term on the Newark Public Schools Board. And finally, I'm pleased to welcome my longtime friend, Dr. Caprice Young, the founding CEO and President of the California Charter Schools Association. She's a fellow inductee in the National Charter Schools Hall of Fame. She served as superintendent of four charter management organizations ranging from 4000 to 49,000 students in nine states. She is past chair of the Board of Directors of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. And she serves on various boards, including the Fordham Foundation, and lectures at several universities. So I want to thank you all for being here. Really, welcome to this taping for the

National Charter Schools Founders Library. And I just want to start out with each of you to tell your personal story and just a few words, a few sentences, a few minutes to talk about why you got into chartering in the first place. What drew you to that? And tell a little bit about your personal history. So I'm going to start with you, Joe, in New York City.

**J** Joe Willams 03:44

Thanks, Ember. Thanks for doing this. I think, it's great that we can have a chance to get the story out there. As you noted in the bio, I was a newspaper reporter in first in Milwaukee and then in New York City, and was writing a lot about attempts to reform public education, frustrations on the ground by parents and families. And increasingly through the charter story, attempts by educators to sort of take these ideas they had for building a better mousetrap and, putting them out there in their communities to see if there'd be a response to it. So I've never been involved in starting a school. I've always been an advocate. I went from journalism to helping charter school supporters, charter school founders tried to advocate for the ability to serve, to serve kids. And it's, you know, one of the things I noticed as a journalist was there was a perception, despite the bipartisan aspect that was obvious if you're close to the work. There was a perception that this work was led by Republicans and that it was Republican thing. Even even opponents of charter schools called it a sort of Republican plot to dismantle public education and when you hear that, and it's so different from what you see, in real life, it kind of motivates you to try to get the story right in the public square. I always tell people, I think when I first met Caprice, years ago, you go to a charter conference, and that's where I think I met Caprice, if you ask people in a room with several 1000 people, like, "Are you a Democrat, raise your hands" most of the room would raise their hand and show that these are the people that were on the ground doing the work at schools. And that the mismatch between that dynamic that this was work being done in communities, by people from those communities, who cared deeply about those communities. The mismatch between the perception that this was some sort of plot to harm communities. And it was just, it was something that was so important to change, because the reality was so much more refreshing.

**E** Ember Reichgott Junge 05:54

Well, thank you, I think that we have all experienced that. And so many Democrats and people who really have no political affiliation at all, are attending these charter public schools. And sometimes their voices just aren't heard. So thank you for that. Shavar will go next to you.

**S** Shavar Jeffries 06:15

So I got started in charter schools, really, as an outgrowth of my work as a civil rights attorney. So I'm from the city of Newark, I grew up in a city in Newark, was blessed to receive a quality education through scholarships. So I grew up well before the public charter schools came to New Jersey, so I receive a scholarship to go to a college prep high school and scholarships to go to college and law school. So I was always motivated to come back home and be a part of ensuring that other young people had the same opportunities I had. So I litigated all sorts of cases, school funding cases, special education cases, racially discriminatory tracking cases, and had always had an interest while creating a school where we could serve kids the right way. And so I met a young person named Ryan Hill who had come out of the KIPP Fisher program.

KIPP was not known at all, at this point, KIPP might have had two or three schools, he was in the kind of first group of school leaders that KIPP trained to set up new schools. I didn't know what KIPP was. But I knew when I met with him, he said, "You know, we know our babies are geniuses, we know, they're amazing. And it's going to be our job as adults, to make sure they have every opportunity not to just go to college, not to be as good as anybody else, but to go dominate the world, right, to lead the world in a powerful transformation way." And that's what I believed when he said that I was like, i'm in. I don't know what a charter school is but I like that. So let's go create this school and do it. So I became the founding board chair of KIPP in Newark at that time. Now we, you know, we're in Newark, we're in Camden, we're in Florida. And we've sent more low income students to college most years in the state than any other public school system in the States. I'm very proud of that. And so through that work, and also my orientation that I believe I felt parents needed more options within the public education space, because we have a lot of machine politics in Newark and in New Jersey, and the idea that the only game in town for parents ought to be that system. Notwithstanding fact, there are many individual schools within that system in our city. But it was very clear to me we needed some competitive pressure and some other alternatives and some ability to try new things. From a curriculum standpoint, from a pedagogical standpoint, from a teaching and learning standpoint. That was my introduction into the public charter school space. And as our schools grew, in the beginning, were so small we weren't a threat to anybody. But as we became a threat, then I became introduced to the politics of public charter schools. And some of the issues you talked about in terms of the degree to which, you know, some people want to demonize charters, they want to engage in political misinformation. And frankly, that's just what politics is. Right. And so for me, it's not anything different than almost any other issue. Those who oppose, they tend not to have substantive conversations in our country, they tend to be ad hominem sort of conversations to demonize a variety of political issues by demonizing the individuals behind it. And so for me engage in this work when I hear advocates from time to time, I don't hear as much now, but sometimes I'm trying to advocate, "Why does this have to be so political? Why are they calling us names? This isn't fair." I'm like, Are you serious? Have you have you had any passive acquaintance with American democracy since the beginning, right, Jefferson and Hamilton weren't engaged in tiddle you know, in in, you know, niceties they were going at each other's necks because they were deeply invested in what it is they were fighting for. If we're deeply invested in transforming our schools the system in a way that's going to work for low income families, strap it up, and lets get to that let's get to the business of fighting for these babies.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 09:52

Never thought of it from that perspective before. Thank you. That was just great. I'm just gonna take it over now to Caprice, go ahead.

C

Caprice Young 10:01

Sure. Um, you know, my first encounter with charter schools was actually back in '94. I mean, I knew about them before that, but at the time, I was working for the mayor of Los Angeles, and I met Yvonne Chan, who was the dynamic founder of one of the first charter schools in Los Angeles. And, and she was so full of energy, and determination, and, and frankly, joy, you know, and, and it was that kind of spirit of education that really sparked my curiosity and my interest at that time. And I became more and more interested in education reform, even though

my training was all in technology, and finance. And so in '99, I got elected to the school board in Los Angeles. And what I would find was, when I went to traditional public school campuses, a lot of what I would hear on those campuses was, well, we can't do this, we can't do that, we wish we could do this other thing, the kids really need it. But the system, the system, the system, and when I would go to charter school campuses, it would be like, come see my robotics lab, and look at this amazing group of students that are being competitive in really positive ways and succeeding. And so there was a different kind of a different kind of energy that I think came from the fact that with charters, there, is no them in the sense that it's all about, you're the leaders on the school site, it's you, it's the community, it's the stakeholders, it's the families, the students, you're all responsible for the success. And there's an energy that comes with that, that I found really inspiring. So when, when I left the school board in 2003, I was chatting with some funders and with some charter school leaders, and what they said was, look, we really need to have a more powerful organization in California to really grow this thing. And so that was when I was, you know, given the honor of starting the California Charter Schools Association. And, and I was also on the founding board of Democrats for Education Reform, which I'm really proud of, I really am proud of that, that work, that, frankly, that the three of you have been leading, and particularly you, Joe and Shavar over the years. I was happy to be part of the kindling in the spark of that organization and to see what it has become. Because the truth of the matter is, every year we need it more and more and more, you know, for exactly the same reasons that have been said, and that is that somehow, when you do good things with students, that's considered a threat. And when students find their voice and find their power, somehow that's considered a threat. And when students are academically successful, again, somehow that is considered a threat, which I don't understand it. But it certainly is a fact. And so we have to be there to fight on their behalf with them.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 13:08

I have seen that energy that you talked about in some of the charter school founders. And when I would see Yvonne Chan speak, she would say, I mean, she reminded me of 'The Little Engine That Could'. I mean, that was just what she kept going and going and going. You raised the fact that that Joe and Shavar have been leaders in Democrats for Education Reform, I was so thrilled to find out there was such a thing because I needed to have a community to work with not only my state, but around the country. And so Joe, I'm going to turn to you and just say, so what caused that to be created? How were you involved in the creation of Democrats for Education Reform, and when was that?

J

Joe Willams 13:53

So this goes back to the middle of the 2000s, 2005, 2006, 2007. And it was sort of what I described before the sense, as a journalist, I was running into a lot of people that were doing work in the charter sector that I that I knew were active Democrats, and I ended up meeting other active Democrats, particularly democratic donors who would get involved in supporting charter schools or organizations like Teach for America, and they would be at cocktail parties, and people would say, wasn't that a Republican thing. I thought you were a Democrat? And so this is, this is crazy. How did our philanthropy start to get treated as if it was as if it was partisan? And a lot of them were the types of democratic donors in New York City that wrote a lot of checks to candidates that were that were coming through federally at the state and local level. And started talking with them about is there what if there's a way to get us all together to

just sort of say, put a shingle up and say, look, there are Democrats that believe that we can do better for kids when it comes to education. It seemed like if you were if you were suggesting that we could do anything better, that itself was considered anti public education. That's how sort of stifling that the conversation was at the time. And what if we could all just sort of get the same language and vocabulary, can we all say the same thing so that these people running for office would hear messages over and over again. So that's sort of what we tried to do was, was combine grass tops with grass roots. And really try to inject a sense into the conversation, that there was a battle that was to be had within the Democratic Party, that not all Democrats agreed on this kind of stuff. And that, particularly for those of us who thought we could do a lot better for the kids that we claim we're trying to serve, you know, you should be able to say that without getting kicked out of the Democratic Party. And that's, that's over, you know, overstating what was happening at the time, but but not by much. It's sort of the, the unions in particular, were very good at just dominating the conversation about education. And what we wanted to say was that the unions have a role in this conversation, teachers deserve representation. I, after writing about urban school districts all over the country, I feel for the teachers that have to deal with the bureaucracy that treats them the way that they get, they often get treated, but that that representation of teachers shouldn't be the representation of public education writ large, that the public ought to get involved in this conversation. And that's what we set set out to do. There were a couple of different groups that we were trying to organize, just to give you a sense of what we were dealing with in the beginning. There was a group of Democrats that were frustrated because they cared about accountability, and usually was accountability with heavy doses of equity, injected into it. And there were others that were frustrated by the choice issue, they wanted more parental choice, like Shavar, described. Whether it was public school choice, or even in some cases, like in Milwaukee, there are a lot of Democrats that were pushing for private school choice, because they were so frustrated with the options that they had in the Milwaukee Public Schools. What charter schools ended up doing for Democrats for Education Reform was giving us a really comfortable place for both of those wings to come together. Because the combination of accountability and choice together just it became a really good Democratic position in and of itself.

C

Caprice Young 17:26

Well, you know, and when I was running for reelection, in 2003, and the school board is a nonpartisan office in Los Angeles, but everybody knew me as a Democrat. I'd been involved in democratic politics. I married the president of California Young Democrats. And was really frustrated, really frustrated that other Democrats didn't see this as just an obvious thing. Why? Why wouldn't you want schools where parents and community members were welcome to be part of the decision making process and where students were actually succeeding. And so that was, it, it got it was even to the point where I sat down with Antonia Hernandez, who was the head of Mexican American Legal Defense Fund at that time prior to Tom Signs. And she's a very, she at the time, and still now is a very powerful Democrat in Los Angeles, who, who was known for a program among MALDEF families to turn to basically teach parents how to become entitled white women. And the end, the parents really took power over their own children's education, and we're very pro charter. But Antonia was still so frustrated that she even said at the time, I'm thinking about coming out in favor of vouchers, because the traditional school districts in this town are so intransigent, when it comes to taking seriously the need for, for kids who live in high poverty situations to be successful. And, and so it just didn't make sense to me that things were the way they were. And really, it, it doesn't make sense to other charter school leaders when you're first in it. I mean, Shavar, you're so right about the fact that, you know, people will say, "Why does it have to be so political", right, because most charter school

leaders, as Joe said, they're, they're liberal, they're Democrats, they care about kids. They want everybody to get along. They want the community to be engaged and to do positive things. They see themselves as positive forces in the world, and then get very confused when people who they thought were their allies on issues like abortion or gay rights or equity concerns, are somehow calling them the devil. And so the need to be able to have a political voice, a strong political voice to be able to say you can be a Democrat, and know that the system that we all quote, believe in, can be better and should be better. And that that was a really critical impetus for DFER. And, and the nice thing was, we had some great proof points to, I mean, KIPP is probably, in some ways, our greatest proof point because it has been the organization that has, that has proven that something that has actually been done, which is kids from very high poverty backgrounds being very, very academically successful. The proof is that it's positive, it's possible because it is being done. And getting that word out has been absolutely vital.

S

Shavar Jeffries 20:44

I think what Caprice, and Joe said is so on point, in terms of the impetus for DFER and why we exist, and I just think building on Caprice's last point, I think, you know, it's a power conversation, right for the teacher unions. I mean, bottom line is they don't want to, you know, public charter schools tend not to be unionized. Some are, but it's very rare. And, you know, they don't want to lose members. And, you know, they don't want their members to have to compete with another public system for resources and dollars. And I think there's a cognition piece, too. I mean, I think any group of human beings who have been doing the same thing for a long period of time, because I don't want to suggest it's only a transactional piece, I do think that's a significant part of it. Also, there's a poor words of cognition, right, where you've been thinking a certain type of way, you've been around other people thinking a certain type of way, you've been doing it for a long period of time. And so as a consequence, it'll cause many folks to, to think that things beyond that, that way of thinking are problematic. And the teachers union have been very effective, and not only in terms of inculcating this, this type of thinking in their members. But also, they're the biggest spender in democratic politics. And not only in the country, but in most states. And so they've invested in civil rights groups, they've invested in coalition groups, they've invested in, you know, influential pastors and other influential community based leaders. And when people have a relationship with people, you tend to respect people, you tend to listen to them. And if you've been listening to people with a certain orientation for 30-40 years, because as Joe talked about, this space, we're talking about, you know, we're 15 or so years old, 15-20 years old. There's a lot that you're going to be up against. And so, for me, at least, particularly because I started local on my local school board, in my city in Newark, lot of politics all the time. It was just what it is, right? It's this is what folks do on all issues. I mean, you pick an issue, you pick tax credits, in a city like Newark, you pick who's going to get certain zoning, zoning variances to build from a developer standpoint, it's this power, you know, conversation. I wish it were more principled and substantive. You know, just like I wish the Supreme Court nomination hearing yesterday was was substantive and wasn't as rooted in personal character attacks and alarmist appeals as as it as it as it is. And I think that's really where the power of what DFER has been able to do, that Joe, and the founders created and we work to build upon is to create this infrastructure, right to create an infrastructure so that when those Democrats who are open to thinking about this differently, can have some sort of political commerce, some capacity to be able to generate research resources, to communicate a message in one election, some ability to have some volunteers, and some endorsers and some influencers, you know, we're still working hard to reduce the

gap, because it still is significant. But we have reduced it because it worked that Joe and what we build on have been able to do, and that's enabled more Democrats to embrace these issues, significantly more than there would be if we didn't have this type of infrastructure.

**E** Ember Reichgott Junge 23:59

How did you reduce that gap? Talk about that. What did you do to make it okay to give Democrats cover to become involved in charter?

**C** Caprice Young 24:08

Well, I mean, I lived it as an elected official, but also, um, you know, what, what DFER has been able to do is, is first of all, to give elected officials or people wanting to become elected officials who are Democrats access to a network of funders, and and those and those funders are coming through with the financial means to help them be competitive in their races, and more as a big part of that be able to counter the attacks against them, most of which are founded on lies and are not true or misinformation and having the ability to defend yourself and be able to get your message out is absolutely crucial. And so and so, you know, money counts, money counts for a lot in democracy. But, but more than that, it also I think, DFER has done a stunningly amazing job of getting smart people into the room with policymakers at critical moments in the in the dialogue. Whether, whether it's federal legislation that's coming down or some targeted state legislation that's happening because of those relationships and because of the money, DFER punches above its weight, when it comes to injecting choice and quality and equity and excellence into the conversation around education. And that those two things together have been what have made DFER powerful.

**J** Joe Willams 24:10

It also DFER when I mentioned the years that DFER got out of the gate. It coincided with the rise of Barack Obama as a political force. And Obama himself ended up giving cover to Democrats who wanted to talk about doing better 'si se puede', yes we can. It was his optimistic view of the future that allowed you to talk about what's wrong with today, and what we need to do to get there. And as a party, we were kind of stuck. Our education message was basically, this is as good as it gets. And if you know, let's just give it more money, reduce class sizes, more money, and maybe things will get better. It was a really lethargic, uninspiring vision. And candidate Obama and then President Obama allowed DFER to do its work at a time when when you could talk about doing better. And it was it was not seen as anti public education, but pro community pro America, and that Obama gets a lot of credit for helping open up all these doors that we're talking about here.

**E** Ember Reichgott Junge 26:41

And even before that, I will just comment that President Clinton gave me cover, all eight years. I mean, he was on a mission to have 3000 charter public schools, by the end of his term, he came very, very close to that. And without him, I don't think we would have been on the path

so that President Obama could have picked up that mantle. Shavar what's going on today now, and you're still in the throes of this this battle, if you will, within the party. What are you doing today to try to deal with that?

S

Shavar Jeffries 27:14

Yeah, so I mean, a lot of the same tools remain, you know, relevant today. And so, one, we do tons of work, to win our C 4 side, to make sure we have the resources for Democrats who embrace these values to be competitive in races. We, in addition to the work we do on independent expenditures, you know, we'll we'll do work on the hard side to raise money directly into candidates campaigns, to the point that, you know, Caprice raised, you know, we have a tremendous policy team that works with those that we built these relationships with, and others who are open to our agenda at key moments to engage them on the kinds of policies that will really move the needle for for young people. We've done a lot of coalition work as well. So we've worked, we've worked to develop deeper relationships with a lot of the influential coalition organizations within the Democratic Party umbrella, civil rights groups, other center, left groups, even some groups that claim to be progressive, but who really say that they're committed to education equity. So we've been able to build a lot of these relationships that have been helpful, not only to engage policymakers at those key moments on important policies, but they also help in a political environment to which you have community based organizations, that will endorse some of the folks that that we support or will bring, you know, volunteers and other community based resources to bare as well. I think there's unique opportunity, you know, given the pandemic, a lot of parents were exposed firsthand to some of the challenges of public education, even the threshold issue of the school being open. And the degree to which that was rooted in adult interest and not children's interest, it was quite clear pretty fast, that schools being closed for an extended period of time, would do tremendous damage to all children, but even more so low income children from low income families who parents don't have the privilege of working from home, or who may not have access to high speed broadband or may not have access to synchronous learning opportunity for many of them all of the above. And so we've seen in Virginia, we've seen in some of the data out of New Jersey, that parents, that there can be an opportunity here if we can leverage this the right way to build upon some of this parent concern to build even a broader political coalition to support a variety of different policies that are really student centered, including choice, including accountability. And so we continue to be at it, we're very excited about you know, where we are, we of course, have many, many challenges throughout the country, but we also have a lot of Democrats out there who are continuing to, to fight the good fight in the midst of a lot of opposition. And so you know, we're excited for what's to come. But we know you know, this fight is gonna be never ending for us and we're up for it.

C

Caprice Young 29:57

You know, the thing about it being never ending is really important point, I just want to stress that. I had a conversation in Texas with a group that had that does a lot of community organizing the Industrial Areas Foundation, which, which is very grassroots. And the, the leaders of the organization said to me, "Caprice, you know, um, we actually secretly love charter schools and send our own children to charter schools. Um, but as a as an organization, we can't support charter schools, because the organizations that fund us whether they're money coming from labor unions, or left leaning foundations or individual donors, don't agree

with charter schools." And the truth is that their money, the money that they're getting funded by now is money that's been there since the 40s, 50s, and 60s. A lot of it is deep civil rights, labor, money, and multi generational relationships. And the charter school funders are often with some very notable exceptions, fairweather friends. It's like, well, are you going to go rent a rabble, so you can have a rally so that you can get these elected officials to vote for this one bill. Whereas the these deeper community focused civil rights organizations that are interested in things like housing and poverty, have been at this for generations, and have developed long term funding models largely through labor dues, for their movements. And so even when people who are our allies and our ideological compadres believe in what we're doing, love what we're doing, they cannot support us. Because as a movement, even after 25-30 years, we don't have the maturity to be thinking multi generationally. And that's where we have to get to, we have to engage in multi generational relationship building that is going to stand the test of time. And it's a big change, I think.

S

Shavar Jeffries 32:22

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. I mean, I think what Caprice just said, is so on point. Right. And that gets to the point we started with, you know, there should be no surprise in many of the state capitals were really all of them were we do work. Within a mile of the State Capitol, there's a big teachers unions headquarters that's been there for decades. And they send scores of lobbyists day in and day out with you better do the things we need you to do. Because, you know, we got this ie, you know, we got these members, you know, we got these other legislators that we've also supported. We have a whole ecosystem surrounding you. So you better do the right thing. And forever for people. Oh, why are they not? I'm like, Are you serious? Right. This isn't romper room here. Right. It's clear what's going on. Right. So to Caprice's point, we were able to build an infrastructure, and our infrastructure is not one to one is just enough where they can be competitive, right? Because there are many Democrats who recognize the current state of affairs is not working for young people. So we just give them opportunity to have a fighting chance. We're going to be able to continue to do this work and build things but to Caprice's point, it has to be long term, because we definitely have some stakeholders. Wow, that was a tough couple of election cycles. We lost a couple. I don't know if I want to do this anymore. Right. I had one donor, I won't name they, you know, they were like, yeah, the union's hired somebody to get an airplane and say bad things about them above the house in the Hamptons, right? I don't want to do this anymore. Right? This isn't fun. And it's like, okay, well, then we're not serious, right? We have to be in this for the long term. We'll win, I'm very confident we'll win because we win a whole lot more than others might think with with the disparities we have, but we have to sustain it. It can't be five years with folks are tired now, it's getting too hard, let me go to do something else. Because that's part of what the opposition knows. And they say this to our electeds. They say, "Oh, these charter school people, you can't depend on them, we're gonna wait them out. We're gonna beat them up in a couple cycles, what they're going through, they gone put their, you know, their tail between their legs, they're gonna go run it, we'll still be here. So think twice about what you're going to do, because you don't know if they'll be here. But guess what, we got a 99 year lease on this facility, right, right across from the State House. So you know, we're going to be here." And those are the conversations that happen. And so we have to understand that and act accordingly.

J

Joe Willams 34:43

So you know, what's interesting about this part of the conversation is when we were when we

were getting the original materials together for DFER and trying to figure out, you know, what the argument is, what the pitches that we make to the Democratic Party. We met with a lot of people within the party to get their feedback. And there were a lot of people that did not want us to mention teacher unions in anything because it was like, we don't want we don't just need to open up that Pandora's box and create a battle that doesn't need to be there. Yet it was it was other union leaders that encouraged us with with the most force to go right out the teacher unions. Because they they're frustrated themselves. So like, we're part of these labor coalition's we feel like we're doing our part for them. And when we talk about trying to do something better for the families that are, you know, members of our unions and their kids, we get no respect from the other half of that equation. So they were, they were egging us on from from the side. And and I think it's just it's important to remember that that this is not, this is not a labor problem. This is a problem about the role of teacher unions in a larger conversation about how we educate kids. And winning some day, as like Shavar mentioned, I don't think any of us to imagine that a win means we've crushed the unions and put them out of existence. It's that we finally have a party that can have an honest conversation about what we're doing and what we're not doing for our kids, where everybody's roles are respected and the public's role, as as you know, the great stewards of public education that the public gets to say what happens in our schools.

C

Caprice Young 36:14

Yeah, that is so so vital to point that out. My mom, my mom, I grew up in a labor family, my parents considered themselves realistic socialists, which is that they were barely Democrats. My, my mom was one of the people who created UTLA in Los Angeles as a teacher, which is the the teachers union in Los Angeles. And, and a big part of why they created the union in the early 70s in the first place through a variety of mergers, was that they wanted to actually have a voice in making schools better. And, and she will tell you to this day, and she's in her 80s, that it wasn't about more money, although that was part of it. But it was also about making sure that they were allowed to teach what they knew was going to work for the students, that it was also about making sure that arts programs got protected, that it was also about making sure that principals were selected based on who would be a great instructional leader, as opposed to who just happened to be the PE coach. And that there was also a very significant civil and women's rights component to the creation of it. And when you look at the the sort of the foundational principles that she describes, actually, a lot of those things are our charter school principles where you know about being able to use high quality curricular materials, about being able to engage the public in the educational learning, about being able to have diverse curriculum that meets the needs of the students. So somewhere under all of it, it seems like there should be some commonality, unfortunately, that's just not where things are anymore. And when I became, I actually became friends with the head of the teachers union in Los Angeles, and he and I were at dinner one night talking about charter schools, and I said, "So hey, Duffy, how'd you get into teaching?" And he said, "Well, I wanted to pick the next President of the United States." I was like, "What?" Like, yeah, as a social studies teacher, I have been able to amass power, I've been able to bring people together and now I get to spend \$20 million a year to decide who gets to be the next President of the United States. He was that clear about it. And, and honestly, I actually voted for the person that he wanted to have as President of the United States. Unfortunately, his power was going to come at the cost of half a million students that getting a crappy education. And I you know, I think that's why DFER is so important, is we have to be able to speak up about that. And that political cover and that money is just absolutely key. And making sure that it doesn't go away, that it's long term, that we're in it for the long haul, and that we realize that high quality education is something that we don't

fight for and win. There's not like a day where we get to declare victory, oh, great, you know, high quality education is here for to stay. No, it's something we have to do every single day for freaking ever. And that's just what it is.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 39:35

I think in Minnesota, we have an example, a different example of how the unions responded to this. Of course, they were very strong opponents to the original legislation. There was no question about it, we had to battle them in order to pass it with a very much bipartisan majority. But what happened in 2011 just was something I never expected. The union leaders who had dramatically opposed me years before in 1991 decided that their hands were being tied by the district, they couldn't do what they wanted to do in the Minneapolis public schools. So those leaders then decided to create the first union initiated charter school authorizer in the country. And that is still going strong. It's called the Minnesota Guild of Charter Schools. And they basically authorize charter schools that many of which are teacher powered schools, where the teachers have the ability to lead, to lead the school and make the decisions on the budget and the curriculum and all of that. And so I've always seen this as an opportunity for union leaders to do different things. And I was very grateful for the Minnesota Guild to be created with those same leaders. I also want to just say one point to what Shavar was saying about the parents and their power. It might be short term, but I, I think that the one error I made, the one one big error, I made many, when I ran for Congress in 2006, I was not elected in the primary, but what I should have done to inoculate the charter school issue, which was used against me by the teachers union, was to inoculate it by gathering all of the parents in the district together and have a big rally ahead of time and just, you know, say, "Hey, she's really helped us with these public school opportunities. And so you know, if you have problems with her position on that, we're not with you, basically." So there, there are ways that we can work with this, but we have a long way to go, as you say, Caprice, it's forever and ever and ever.

C

Caprice Young 41:52

Yeah, well, and it's not about charter schools, per se. And I know that sounds weird to say, coming on a panel like this, but, um, you know, I got elected to the school board in in Los Angeles in 1999. And there were only 17 charter schools in the whole, in the whole school district, out of out of more than 1000 schools, it was tiny, tiny. But what we saw really quickly was that, um, that long term power comes from long term funding, and long term funding comes from government money, it comes from public money, right. And so the teachers union have power because they have dues, and the dues comes automatically just by the paychecks. Right. And, and if we want to, we we've sought, we've seen, you know, different waves of education reform in Los Angeles. In the early 80s, there was something called Learn, which was all about having much more locally driven site leadership and giving principals more power. There was the Lamp program, which was a similar coalition of different civic, but they all had cycles, and they all ended, and, and they lived and breathed based on whoever whatever philanthropist was willing to fund them at the moment. But what we saw was that the union had money, and constancy, always. And so part of what charter schools are also is creating a long term, a long, long term coalition for education reform, because charter schools are publicly funded. And so they are funding the leaders who are the innovators, who are the reformers, who are the ones that are always going to keep the students interests at the top of the pile. And it is designed that way through the accountability system, which says, guess what, if

you're not, if you're not doing what's right for kids, you don't have the right to run the school. But what it did was it actually funded a whole generation and now almost two generations of reformers and their ability to make their dreams for the students real. And then now we're at the point where it's the students themselves, who have been part of that first dream, who are leading the schools now. And so by being able to give reformers access to ongoing long term public funding, then we're able to create and to grow this movement of reformers with longevity that isn't dependent upon a particular foundation or individual. So it becomes a systemic counterweight to the teachers union and their publicly funded status quo system.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 44:30

We don't have a lot of time left. So I want to make sure everybody gets a chance to say something that maybe you weren't able to say but also what is your advice to new democratic policymakers who are being elected today who want to support chartering but they know there's pressure against it? What is your advice to them?

S

Shavar Jeffries 44:52

Yeah, my advice is to lead obviously lead intelligently, right you don't you know, if you lead in a way that doesn't, isn't responsive to remaining in office, then you're on the outside looking in. You know, our polling data shows that on most of these issues the parents and families are with you. And so you have to be very smart to make sure they can hear you and get your message out. And that's where we have a role to play. There's obviously many candidates who have their own ability to generate resources and their own ability to get their message out. So you want to be very smart and thoughtful about your message. You should be very smart and thoughtful about working with coalition partners because in all of the places where we work, there are a variety of different community based coalitions who are open to these ideas. There's definitely a bunch who you know, who are rooted in traditional values, and frankly, are funded by those who are opposed to charters. But there are significant opportunities, and particularly in this moment now, where parents are very frustrated about school closure, very frustrated about learning loss, very concerned about the extent to which the system was responsive to adults and not to students, that there are significant opportunities here to lean into that from a political standpoint, I also think there's opportunities with so much money into the system to tie some investments and teacher pay with, you know, maybe the teachers unions being a bit more muted on certain aspects, right, I think there could be some opportunities to cut some deals, those are always short term, we absolutely did this in work and we see they'll cut the deal, but then within a few months, they're gonna be back to trying to cut your legs out. So you need to understand that don't be naive about that. But there may be some opportunity with so much money in the system to cut some short term deals, give yourself more room, as you build your community based coalition's and your, and your political standing to then push on some of the tougher issues. But at the end of the day, the point we convey is we're going to have this infrastructure, we're going to continue to build it so you have more support, at the end of the day, if you're in this position, or you're not going to lead in a way that's going to produce significantly better results for low income students and their families, then why are you in this position in the first place?

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 47:08

Exactly. Joe?

J

Joe Willams 47:12

My advice to a policymaker looking to get into this is to really develop a sort of macro vision for what you want schooling to accomplish. And if you can describe how chartering fits into that. I think, I think it's better for the issue and it's better for the candidate. For example, I've told, I've told people running for mayor is, get a simple message that everybody can understand. We want more good schools in our city and fewer bad schools. Anybody want to disagree with that? Go ahead. And then at that point, then you can sort of start to articulate how charter schools are one part of the way that you're going to try to do that. When we treat charter schools as an end instead of a means to an end. It's a lot harder to make the case. But when you make a really convincing big picture case for what the community needs, it's really hard to argue against all the different pieces that you're going to want to put in place to make that happen, including charter schools. Yeah.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 48:09

And Caprice as you end this would you also speak to the leadership of a very important Democrat in California Senator Gary Hart, who has just recently passed away. And I think people forget that Democrats really lead on this, not only in my state, Minnesota, but in California with Senator Hart, Colorado with Representative Peggy Kearns. They really were the foundation of the start of chartering. So maybe you could talk a little bit about him as you close for your closing comments.

C

Caprice Young 48:44

Well, I think, Senator, Senator Hart's life was actually instructive in this in this process, because going into getting the charter school law adopted, there was competition within the Democratic Party for which law would get adopted. Was it going to be Delaine Eastin's law that was written by the teachers union or was going to be Gary Hart's law that was written with a more of a broader coalition and and ultimately, his won. And it won for a whole lot of reasons, not the least of which that he was a very, very skilled legislator and understood the legislative process well enough to to keep it from getting death by 1000 cuts which so happens in bill tree, but also because just he as an individual had had 30 years of even at that point almost 30 years of relationships with with coalition's so to Shaver's point he he was a coalition builder from the very beginning, and no one ever had any doubt about his integrity, his concerns for youth, his his track record at fighting for kids and fighting for better better outcomes in our communities. And so no one could wave wave their arms at him and say, "Oh, you're just, you know, you're just some right wing, you know, right wing lunatic pretending to be a Democrat." He had the street cred of decades of work and that, is what makes the difference. And for anyone who's going into politics right now and wants to try and move the system as an elected official, the answer is you have got to have the street cred. You can't just show up for the, for the ribbon cuttings, you have to be the one that's been there getting the money for the community organizations that need it, you have to be the one fighting for their rights to do hard things. Because this is not, gentle or easy work. This isn't work where you go home at the end of the day, and everyone declares you a saint. This is the kind of work where, you know, the old

saying is 'sometimes it's just between you and God.' And sometimes it's just between you and God. And if you don't believe in God, then it's you just got to know. Right. And that's it. I mean, I think ultimately you have to have, you have to have the confidence that your integrity is in the right place, and that you're doing the right thing every minute. And then you just have to be smart. And Joe and Shavar have given the advice, I think here around being smart. And I would I want to just I wouldn't, I wouldn't allow this conversation and without expressing my gratitude to Joe and Shavar for, for building Democrats for Education Reform. It has become a major, major foundational point for education reform, not just charters, but for all students of all ethnicities, and all backgrounds, and all abilities. And I am just immensely grateful for the work, for the work that you two have done.

E

Ember Reichgott Junge 51:55

And I will second that story as one who very much needed the the community and cover of having a group that was aligned in our thinking. So I want to thank all three of you for your pioneering leadership and for the conversation today. And I'll just kind of go back to my initial comments. Chartering has always been bipartisan, but we have forgotten about the Democratic side of it. And this, I think, has really helped to bring that to light. And what I want to do and what I see as my mission, my personal mission, is to educate the next generation of chartering leaders about this history with the National Charter Schools Library. You know, before 2016, two thirds of America supported chartering, and there's not a lot of things that two thirds of America supports. Today, we can bring that back, we need to bring that back. It's one of the areas where in this very divisive partisan time that we are in in 2022, that we can bring people back together, because it's about the kids. It's about the kids. It's about the parents, it's about the families, it's about opportunity for people to be able to survive and to thrive. And so that's why I think there's such such promise in chartering. I thank you all for this oral history. It will be on our website at [www.CharterLibrary.org](http://www.CharterLibrary.org). I hope that people will check it out. And I appreciate your your leadership now and in the future, thank you!