

FAMILIES MATTER

A Guide for Parents
to Publicly Engage on
School Choice

presented by



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SECTION ONE

INTERACTING WITH THE MEDIA

Talking to a reporter for the first time can be intimidating, and we've all seen viral clips of celebrities and politicians saying the wrong thing on TV. Relax. Those are the exceptions to the rule.

Most reporters are just doing their job trying to tell a story with words, sound or video. As a parent, you play a critical role in telling the real story of school choice. Your voice is authentic, and you speak from the heart. That's a valuable thing in today's cynical media world.

If you are contacted for an interview, here are a few tips and tricks to help guide you through the process.

GENERAL TIPS

- **Boil down your message.** Write down the three key points you want to hit related to your subject matter. Don't let the camera or a reporter distract you from what you want to say. You should avoid reading a statement, but bringing notes or bullet points is fine. Be clear and concise while answering questions directly.
- **If you don't know the answer, don't make it up.** This is obvious advice that so many people fail to follow. Our natural human impulse is to respond to every question. There's no shame in saying to a reporter, "I don't know off the top of my head, but let me check and get back to you." If you say that, make sure you get back to the reporter by his or her deadline.
- **There's no such thing as off the record.** This isn't always true, but it's a rebuttable presumption. You might have a great relationship with a reporter that lends itself to off the record or background conversations, but your assumption should always be that what you're saying -- no matter where you say it -- could be printed

on the front page. That includes social media, e-mail and text messages, too.

- **If something is misreported, call the reporter first.** Mistakes happen, and sometimes those mistakes get printed or broadcast. You have to correct the record, but you should always start with the reporter. Explain what you think went wrong and why, and listen to his or her explanation. If you believe a correction is necessary, ask for one. But start with the reporter before you go above his or her head to an editor or producer.
- **Reporters have a job to do. So do you.** If you begin to interact frequently with reporters, you will develop friendly relationships with some of them. It happens. And you might even have reporters you consider friends. That's fine, too. But be aware that they have a job to do, and that job is reporting the news. Your friendship is secondary to that job. Likewise, your job is to advocate on behalf of your clients. It might be tempting to try to leverage a friendship for special treatment, but it's inappropriate, and it rarely ends well.

BROADCAST INTERVIEW TIPS

- **Forget about the camera.** You're talking to a person, not a black box. Relax and make the conversation as conversational as possible – imagine that you're explaining your story not to a stranger with a camera, but rather to a friend in a coffee shop. Unless otherwise instructed, you'll want to look at and engage with the interviewer while ignoring the camera. (If you are taping a remote interview, ask the producer for tips on where to look, how to make it seem as though the interviewer is with you in the room.)
- **No one can see you on the radio.** If you're calling in to a radio show, you can have as much information at your disposal right

in front of you. Find a comfortable, quiet spot and prepare your notes before you call in. Also remember that they can only hear your voice, not see your facial expressions or body language. Avoid sarcastic comments or flip responses that could be misinterpreted, and make sure you slow down your answers so people can understand each point you're making.

- **Listen to the cues.** There's a lot of lingo in the business, and you may hear words and phrases you don't recognize. Most producers and interviewers are very patient with sources because they know that most folks don't spend their lives on television. If you hear something that you don't understand, ask for clarification. No one will think you're any less the expert on your subject matter if you don't happen to know what B-roll or a setup shot is.
- **Dress the part.** You know your style better than anyone else, but you'll want to keep everything in moderation when you're on television. If you don't normally wear a tie, don't put one on just for the camera, but avoid crazy patterns and clothing that will distract from the main event: your side of the story at hand. A couple quick tips: Avoid light colors and whites, and make sure you iron your outfit and tame your hair. You might consider a little bit of makeup depending on your complexion and facial features. If you don't ordinarily wear makeup, make sure you try it out a few times beforehand to get the look just right.
- **Pamper your voice.** Before you start talking, consider a few vocal warmup exercises (tongue twisters, scales, poetry) and a cup of hot tea with honey or, at the very least, a bottle of water.
- **Be flexible.** Things happen at the last minute in television, especially if you're part of a live broadcast or working with reporters and producers who might be called to work on other breaking stories. It's difficult to mentally prepare yourself for an interview that doesn't happen, but know that you'll probably get your chance. Work with the outlet to reschedule.

- **Don't be afraid to ask the reporter questions.** What is your story? What is your angle? Who else are you talking to?

PRINT INTERVIEW TIPS

- **Plan how much time you want to spend.** If you're sitting down with a reporter, block out a specific period of time. Set the alarm on your phone if you have to, but don't get stuck talking for an hour if you've only got 15 minutes of material to cover.
- **Know what the reporter is looking for.** Is this a quick interview for one line in a story or a deeper explanation of the issue at hand? It's okay to ask the reporter that question, and the answer will help you prepare your response. If the interview goes into greater detail than you're comfortable discussing, please let the reporter that you're not the best person to answer that and redirect the conversation to your personal story.
- **Stop talking.** The best reporters in the business are the ones who make you feel comfortable enough to tell them things you shouldn't or who ask great questions -- and then let you fill in the rest. You don't have to be guarded, but you need to always be aware that what you're saying is on the record. It often feels unnatural to stop an answer short or let uncomfortable silence hang in the air, but sometimes it's the only thing you can do.



**YOUR SCHOOL
CHOICE STORY
IS POWERFUL!**

SECTION TWO

TELLING YOUR OWN STORY: SOCIAL MEDIA, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND ONLINE PUBLISHING

There's a greater chance than not that you'll never be called by a mainstream reporter for a print or broadcast interview, but that doesn't mean you can't champion school choice in a number of other ways.

The tips in this section will help you amplify your story in ways that are often times more powerful than a short clip on the evening news or one line in a newspaper article. In those instances, a reporter is likely to "balance the story" with criticism of school choice.

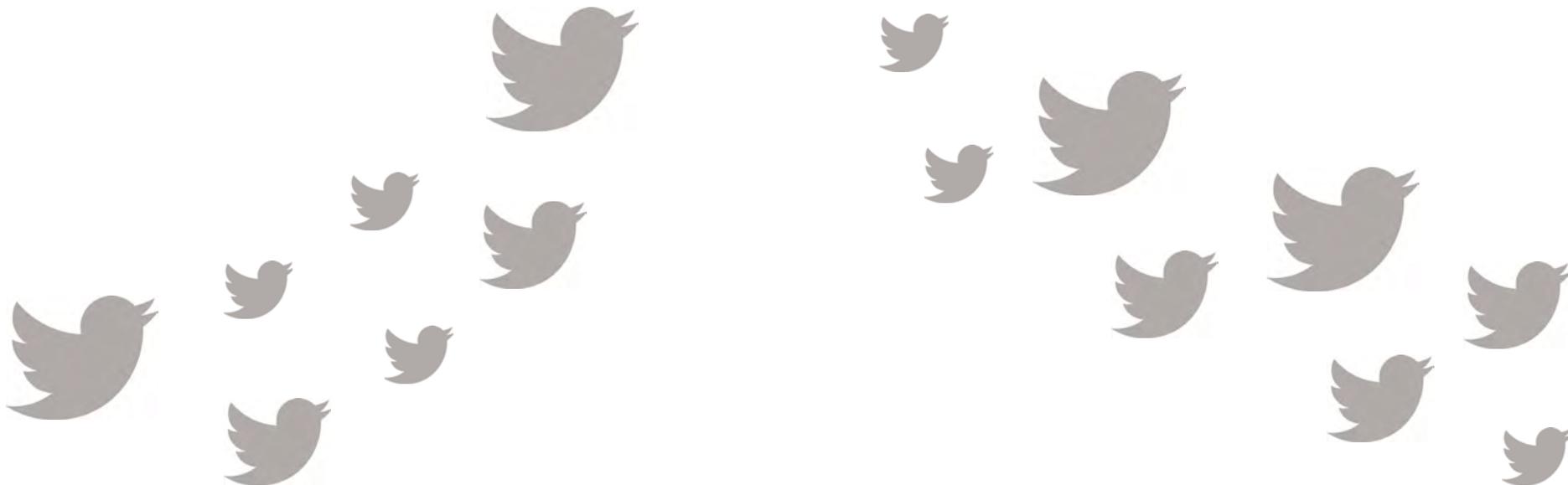
That's why generating your own content and sharing it with your personal network or in an opinion forum can be far more effective. This section will help you engage on social media to share the message of school choice and respond to others who are talking about educational options.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Engaging with others via social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other online networks – is a great way to spread your message. Each medium is different, and you don't need to feel like you have to set up a new account just to promote school choice.

However, if you're already using one of these networks, you're already connecting with people you know or who have similar interests. They are more likely to share your story or engage with you about school choice than those who do not know you at all.

Once you've finished reading through these tips, if you have more questions, you can contact Katie Brooks at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice at katie@edchoice.org.



SOCIAL MEDIA DOS AND DON'TS

DON'T	DO
Create "word salad."	Be clear. Use correct grammar and spelling whenever possible. (Yes, even in 140 character tweets.)
Overuse hashtags and mentions/tags.	Use relevant hashtags and give credit by mentioning authors.
Shut down in vulnerable moments.	Acknowledge if you've made a mistake and correct it.
Curse.	Show passion and emotion.
Use combative or condescending language.	Correct others' misinformation
Assume someone's beliefs or political affiliation.	Ask questions to get to know people.
Feel that you must always go it alone.	Tag friends (like @edchoice) who can provide support with research, data, and messaging.
Be afraid to engage with opponents of school choice.	Engage with opponents of school choice.
Keep your personal stories under wraps.	Share your real life school choice experiences in social media with advocates, opponents, and even news reporters.
Be fake. (Even if you're just trying to appear "professional," that scripted stiffness can come off like a paid testimonial.)	Be yourself. Tell the truth. Be real and unscripted.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENT ADVOCATES TO HELP SCHOOL CHOICE

- Find conversations and engage (social networks, news story comments sections, blogs, etc.).
- Write "letters to the editor" to bloggers, too.
- Create a video log (vlog) where you and your family keep a video diary of your experiences as people who use choice and/or as people who are in the fight for choice.
- Volunteer to share your personal school choice stories for big school choice advocate groups (Friedman Foundation for one!).

- Offer to guest blog for education bloggers—those for and against school choice. (You never know who might be moved by your story.)

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO HELP SCHOOL CHOICE

- Know your students, graduates, and their families, especially those using school choice programs, and identify those who would be willing to tell their stories in media.
- Actively reach out to bloggers (including advocate groups) and be there to connect them to your student advocates.
- Share important school data such as grad rates, college acceptance rates, average growth rates of students in remedial programs, transportation assistance, before or after school care, your student diversity compared to local public schools (for context), percentage of students with special needs, unique offerings, proficiency scores on the big things (reading, math, science) and more
- By not being willing to track down and be transparent about this type of information, the media and opponents assume you have something to hide.

HELPFUL TOOLS

Pagemodo.com and Easel.ly are free tools you can use to create cool, diverse, and spec-optimized images for your posts.

Twitter Search and Google+ Search allow you to find people who are having conversations on the issues about which you're passionate.

To start, try:

"school choice" "#schoolchoice" "#edchoice" "school choice Indiana" "Indiana education" "Indiana education reform"

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL LETTERS AND BLOG POSTS

There are a number of print and online outlets where you can submit a letter to the editor or write a guest blog post about your school choice story. These include local newspapers, organization newsletters, faith publications and education/political blogs.

Some of these outlets will have word limits while others will invite you to take as much space as you need. Always err on the side of brevity. You should be able to tell your story in a persuasive and compelling manner in no more than 400-500 words (most newspapers ask letter writers to stick to a 250-word limit).

These tips will help you compose a letter that connects with readers:

- Have a strong opening that clearly identifies who you are and what you want to say.
- Keep it simple. You don't need to tell every detail about your family or your experience. Imagine you have 30 seconds to explain what you want to say to a stranger on an elevator. Those are the facts you should include.
- Make sure to mention why school choice is important to you.
- If appropriate, include a call to action that directs readers to learn more information or get involved. (This is particularly effective when writing blog posts where you can include hyperlinks to other websites.)
- When you submit your story, include your full name and way for the editor of the publication or website to get in touch with you. (Many newspapers have a form where you can submit letters; some require you to submit this information and will call or email to verify your identity.)

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

As a parent and founder of Restore the Role, nothing is more important to parents and our state than educating our young people. That is why it is so discouraging to read news articles degrading school choice programs, or hear about politicians proclaiming anyone who supports school choice is “anti-public school.” I’ve never been anti- anything except poorly educating children.

We have choice in every other area of our lives. It just makes sense that the most important area of a child’s life — their education — should be something parents have the freedom to choose. Choice doesn’t take away from public education; it helps to level the field for all children to receive what’s due to them — and that’s an exceptional, quality education regardless of socioeconomic factors and race.

When did education become more about the school and less about the kids? It is disappointing to hear adults proclaiming they are anti-charter, anti-voucher or anti-school choice. Stop assuming that parents are incapable of making the right choices for the children in which they’ve had. It’s time we focus the conversation on being pro-students and worry less about the type of school they attend. When that happens, everyone will win.

*Tamika Bennett
Indianapolis*

Originally printed in the Indianapolis Star on Nov. 4, 2014.

SAMPLE BLOG POST

I'm an education "reformer" and proud of it.

It's not an easy thing to say. The Internet is littered with articles about reform that point fingers, assign blame and call names. It's sad, but I've come to expect attacks and hostility from people who must think public shaming will shut me down. They call me "naïve" and suggest I can't think for myself. When they really want to shut me up they call me "corporate."

I am a lot of things—frustrated, angry, fired up—but I'm far from "corporate."

I organize activists on college campuses to fight for better schools, and the real motivators for me are the two precious girls who call me mom, including one who has struggled in school. Everyday I'm working to make sure the challenges I had in school don't repeat themselves with my kids.

My Schools Failed Me

I grew up in poverty, as did generations of my family. At the same time, I was always motivated to do well in school and respect my teachers. College was always a goal, and with hard work I made it there.

Unfortunately, once admitted I realized just how unprepared I was. I needed remedial courses. How could that happen? I had met and surpassed the expectations of my high school education. Was the bar really set that low?

It was obvious that doing well in a poor school was illusory success. College shattered that illusion for me because it was an uphill struggle to keep up with the work.

I Want Better for My Children

Now it's like history repeating itself as I again face educational struggles, this time as a mother.

When my oldest daughter was in second grade, her teacher told me she was behind in reading but offered this reassurance: "Don't worry, we're working on it."

I stayed on top of the problem. I supported our teachers and assumed we were making progress. We weren't. The years passed, and my daughter was not improving. Test scores revealed she was actually several years behind in reading. I was shocked and angry.

Taking a closer look at my daughter's school revealed a lack of supportive resources that could have helped teachers work with parents; inadequate funding for additional tutoring; and obvious inequalities in curriculum offerings. I found other concerned parents and students who saw the same issues in their schools.

And there was a point that truly converted me from concerned mom to straight-up activist: I heard a community member say prison planners use fourth grade test scores to forecast the number of beds needed in the future. I didn't know if that was true or not, but it absolutely terrified me.

Let's Demand Justice in Education

As a non-traditional college student, I activated my fellow students around the education issue. I started a campus group that turned into a chapter of Students for Education Reform (SFER). In the process I developed a voice and a passion for organizing.

Doing this work full time has its hazards. Reform opponents are well-connected and well-organized. Lawmakers and community-based organizers tell me they are afraid to work with me because of

the organization I represent. I get hostile messages online, I've had people attend my events with the intent to sabotage them, and it seems every day my integrity is questioned by local bloggers.

Still, it's more than a job that keeps me fighting. I want all little girls like mine to have every opportunity to succeed. I want more parents like me to be on the front lines demanding justice in education. I want people who have overcome real inequities to have more voice in education policymaking.

Here's what I know for sure: There will be no prison beds reserved for my little girls.

Two years ago I put both daughters in high-performing charter schools, because those schools are getting some of the best results for black children in Minnesota. More than that, these schools have incredible principals and teachers who work tirelessly to keep kids on track. I don't want my girls to face the frustration of taking remedial classes in college. These schools have a longer school day and year that helped my kids catch up. And, these schools have a reputation for believing all children can succeed.

This year my oldest daughter is in 6th grade. This little girl who was once several years behind received her first report card with straight "A's." I can hardly express how amazing that felt.

All I ask is that instead of criticizing me for my advocacy, stand beside me so we can fight for more children to get the education my daughters get now. That's what justice looks like.

<http://educationpost.org/education-reform-isnt-game/>

SECTION THREE LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

As a parent who supports school choice, you may be asked to testify for or against legislation at the Statehouse. This is not as daunting as it may seem!

The Indiana General Assembly is a part-time legislature comprised of "citizen lawmakers." That means they're people just like you who come to Indianapolis from different parts of the state with different backgrounds. Regardless of their partisan affiliation, most of them are parents or grandparents just like you.

You will likely be called to testify in legislative committee, where bills receive their first review by a small group of lawmakers. These hearings can be quick, but they sometimes last for hours. Your testimony will probably only last a few minutes, but your story can have a tremendous effect on a proposed piece of legislation.

Here are a few tips to help you prepare:

- Write out what you plan to say, and stick with your script. Your time will be limited (typically 2-3 minutes), and lawmakers are used to those testifying working from prepared remarks.
- Talk about your personal school choice story. No one is expecting you to be an expert on the legislation at hand. They want to know why you support or oppose it based on how it will affect your family.
- Open your testimony by clearly stating whether you support or oppose the legislation: "Hi, I'm [NAME] from [CITY/TOWN], and I'm here today to let you know why I'm in favor of [BILL NUMBER]."

- If there is a lawmaker on the committee who represents your part of the state, politely reference him or her in your remarks so he or she knows you are a constituent.
- It's unlikely, but lawmakers may ask you questions. Don't be afraid to say you don't know something, and always bring your answer back to how the legislation affects your family.
- Make sure you sign up to testify. There is usually a sheet at the front of the room. Your name must be on it if you want to be called to testify at the appropriate time.
- Arrive early, and be prepared to wait. These hearings can be very long. Lawmakers typically show deference to citizens who are there to testify, but contentious or complicated issues often take time to debate.

WHEN LAWMAKERS HEAR FROM PARENTS, THEY LISTEN.



SECTION FOUR ENGAGING THE OPPOSITION

Not everyone understands or appreciates the value of school choice and how it empowers parents and students to find the best educational fit, but the arguments against choice fall apart when deconstructed.

Whether you are engaging in mainstream media or promoting your story via other media, you will almost certainly encounter critics and opponents of choice. They will ask questions or make statements such as:

- How can you take away funding from traditional public schools?
- You're supporting a system that cherry-picks the best students and leaves traditional public schools with the rest of the kids.
- Choice only helps parents who are smart enough to take advantage of the system.
- Private and charter schools are set up to undermine teachers' unions and undercut teachers in the classroom.

When engaging a critic, you always want to be polite but forceful and, if possible, use something from your personal story to defuse their line of attack.

Here are a few suggested answers to the criticisms above:

- As a parent selecting a school, I don't think about my student as funding. I think about his opportunity to learn and what will be the best fit for him in the classroom. Schools aren't entitled to our kids; kids are entitled to great schools. That means something different for every family, but the most important thing is

focusing on school quality over school type.

- When we start referring to kids as “good kids” and “bad kids,” we’re failing all kids. Every student has different needs, which is why it’s important for families to have the ability to find the right fit for their kids.
- We need to make as much information as possible available to parents about their school options. When we do that, we empower parents like me to make the best choice. I believe families want their kids to succeed, and I question why anyone would want to call parents, students or schools names.
- Great schools are places where teachers and students can learn and succeed. When we start fixating on the type of school, we lose sight of that relationship. I want great teachers to be paid well for the incredible job they do.

SECTION FIVE

SPREADING THE WORD TO OTHER PARENTS

As a parent, you are connected to other parents at your school and in your community. With the information in this booklet at your fingertips, you can help other parents become involved in telling the school choice story.

Here are a few ideas:

- Host a letter-writing party at your house. At the end of the night, each person will have 2-3 letters they can submit to the newspaper or other publications.
- Ask to speak at a PTA/PTSA meeting and talk about the importance of sharing stories with others in the community.
- Invite the media to tour your school and have parents on-hand to talk about their experiences.
- Host a Community Day at your school and have parents on-hand to talk about their experiences.
- Ask parents to sign up to receive school choice updates from the Friedman Foundation and IQE.

FAMILIES MATTER

Thank you for your commitment to school choice and making sure all Indiana students have an opportunity to attend a school that works for them!

If you have questions about this booklet or need additional support, please contact:



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