

DEMOCRATS

for EDUCATION REFORM

8. We don't control the message/medium.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Get parental choice supporters to spend money on black media; build relationships among influential media outlets.
- Be aggressive about outreach and messaging within your community.
- Make sure that we define the message, don't leave it to others.
- Identify links to high-profile Black people who could speak up on this issue (Bill Cosby, Will and Jada Pinkett Smith).



Amy Wilkins, The Education Trust and John King, Uncommon Schools at the DFER *Ed Challenge for Change* event at the August 2008 Democratic National Convention

9. I'm afraid I'll lose my existing base of support if I become a Parental Choice supporter.

How Do We Combat this Barrier?

- Educate your base; control the conversation about the issue with your constituents.
- Utilize your network of existing supporters (BAEO Board, etc).
- Constant contact and communication with your base; reminding/reinforcing why your constituents like you.
- Identify "soap box" people and provide them with information.
- Know the full scope of issues.
- Door-to-door on a continual basis.
- Distribute newsletters.
- Key on the children and their families.
- Set up meetings at community centers.
- Connect with grandparents.
- Partner with churches.
- Use students and parents to lobby **and educate**.



Peter Groff, President, Colorado State Senate

10. I'm afraid that people in my community will lose jobs in the traditional system if parental choice becomes popular. I'm also worried about having these jobs – or new jobs – taken over by outsiders. This is a major economic issue in my district.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Make sure people are accountable.
- Change is the reality; **figure out how to use it to create new economic models.**
- Work relationships with constituents.
- Create a fact sheet with the number of jobs and resources that will come into your district.



Doing The Right Thing: Top Ten Barriers To Supporting Parental Choice (And How To Blow Right Past Them To Save Children)

One of the objectives of the first several BSLI *Seminar on Education Policy and Parental Choice* for black elected Democrats was to identify the most commonly-cited "barriers" between black politicians and their support for parental choice legislation. While individual elected officials from various parts of the country sometimes identified specific obstacles which were unique to their own experience, some clear patterns nonetheless emerged.

The most common responses – pulled together from spirited discussions and note-taking – are outlined in this document. While previous seminars also included accompanying discussions on how to overcome these barriers, our hope is that in putting both these barriers and the solutions together here, it will spur an even more robust discussion this year on more specific tactics so that our movement can collectively move forward to get the job done for our kids.

Please think of this as a launch pad for an important discussion that must happen if we are to realize the dream of making sure that all of our children have access to the kind of world-class education that will prepare them to survive and thrive in the changing world.

With that in mind, the Black Alliance for Educational Options presents to you its *Top Ten Barriers To Black Democrats Supporting Parental Choice* with the hopes that together, from coast to coast, we can help each other blow past them.

DEMOCRATS for EDUCATION REFORM

Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) is a New York City-based political action committee whose mission is to encourage a more productive dialogue within the Democratic Party on the need to fundamentally reform American public education. DFER operates on all levels of government to educate elected officials and support reform-minded candidates for public office.

We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. This requires opening up the traditional top-down monopoly of most school systems and empowering all parents to access great schools for their children.

www.dfer.org



Mission: To actively support parental choice to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children.

Purpose:

- Educate and inform the general public about parental choice initiatives on the local and national level
- Educate Black families about the numerous educational options available
- Create, promote and support efforts to empower Black parents to exercise choice in determining how their children are educated
- Educate and inform the general public about efforts to reduce or limit educational options available to parents

www.baeo.org

1. The power of the existing public school establishment makes it hard work.

This is an issue of speaking truth to power. If the existing establishment was getting the job done for all of our children, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. It is a brutal truth that ruffles a lot of feathers, but it is one which must be addressed by-leaders in our communities.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Disarm people by not using anti-public school rhetoric. **We are not against public schools. We are against schools that do not educate our children.**
- Identify school system insiders who are willing to speak out in support of you.
- Tap into existing charter school parents and leaders.
- Point out historical patterns of discrimination within the status quo (lack of minority vendors, etc.) **-Show how this is not a pattern of inclusiveness.**
- Show people alternatives to the current establishment.
- **Show people the data (i.e. graduation rates, test scores, etc).**
- Promote cultural competence, holistic learning, and forward thinking.
- Make the connection between the failure of the traditional system to educate kids and the prison system.
- Make connections between the grassroots and the business community.
- Start with choice in public schools.

3. Our opponents have such a vast infrastructure. We don't.

This is a perfect example of how quickly things are changing in the Parental Choice arena. Groups like BAEO and Hispanic CREO are actively working to get the word out in communities about the importance of the issue, and helping the public and policymakers understand how Parental Choice can – and should – be part of the solution to our nation's education problems. Other groups, like Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), are trying to create a political infrastructure to assist candidates when they are threatened or attacked by special interests.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Use groups like BAEO, DFER, All Children Matter, and the Alliance for School Choice to counter opponents.
- Create a network of supporters with money and resources.
- **Don't overestimate** the opponents' infrastructure. It is only as strong as you perceive it to be.
- Provide the data.
- Set up a problem-solving center.
- Networking, teleconferences with allies and experts to talk about the issues.
- Share resources nationally.
- Distribute newsletters once a month.
- Use blogs to communicate your issues.
- Steer the public conversation – communicate issues before they surface in the community with someone else's spin attached.



Corey Booker, Mayor of Newark, New Jersey at the DFER *Ed Challenge for Change* event at the August 2008 Democratic National Convention

2. If I support Parental Choice, the teachers union will run an opponent against me. I could die a premature political death.

The list of parental choice "survivors" is growing quickly and includes such popular politicians as Newark Mayor Cory Booker. "Ten years ago, when I started talking about parental choice, I was tarred and feathered," Booker said at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. "I literally was brought into a room by one of the union officers. ... He threatened me that I would never win in office if I kept talking about school choice and kept talking about charter schools."

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

The times are changing, and Democrats in many states are now leading the crusade for **parental choice**. It has become far more "safe" politically than it once was.

- Constantly work constituents and communicate with them about what you're trying to accomplish. Serve them with integrity. Keep on running.
- Energy that is spent worrying about fear of an opponent is better spent governing for the people who need you.
- This isn't really a barrier – anything can bring forward an opponent.
- Welcome your opponent, it provides a platform on which to speak about the issue.
- **Seek out** choice supporters to rally around you with **resources (funds, volunteers, etc.)** to defeat your opponent.
- Even if you lose the first battle, it does not mean you will lose the war.
- All children matter, you should not have fear.

4. The Democratic party agenda is not determined by people who look like me.

Not so fast. This year, a year when we have a chance to have the first black President of the United States, we also saw the party's platform committee chaired by Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick. We also saw significant changes in the platform's language regarding support for charter schools, and making sure that ineffective teachers are not placed in front of classrooms. The lesson here: There are ways to push issues like **Parental Choice** from the inside, but you've got to be in it to win it.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Live as an independent Democrat trying to bring change to a party that doesn't always well serve your constituents.
- Become more involved in the party (local DEC meetings, etc).
- Be "at-the-table" and dues-paying.
- Redefine the party, even by contrition.
- Participate in a national convention where we invite presidential candidates to come and speak.
- Push the agenda within the Black Caucus.
- Work to create support within the party.
- Conduct independent fundraising to help elected officials apart from aligning with the party.



Adrian Fenty, Mayor of Washington, DC at the DFER *Ed Challenge for Change* event in August 2008 at the Democratic National Convention

5. In some instances, white Democrats threaten black Democrats to oppose reforms that are popular in black communities. Sometimes black Democrats are treated like the "workers" and their white colleagues in the party assume the role of "supervisors."

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a political problem. But that means there is a political solution as well.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- It's politics – threaten back!
- African-Americans should stick together on this issue.
- Play hardball.
- Black Democrats should learn the rules and work the system.
- Become engaged – don't allow others to put you in your place.
- Educate yourself – speak up with an informed voice.
- Be willing to negotiate. Your vote is needed on their pet causes. Hold out for their vote on yours.



Joel Klein, Chancellor, New York City Schools and Peter Groff, President, Colorado State Senate at the DFER *Ed Challenge for Change* at the 2008 DNC

6. Some of the schools that benefit from parental choice simply aren't all that great.

This is an important discussion to have, but it is important at the same time to remind people that a whole lot of the schools in the traditional system aren't all that great either. In all cases, it is crucial to support efforts that improve the quality of all schools, traditional public, charter, and private schools.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Remind people there are bad schools in the traditional system.
- Be honest!
- Provide tools to improve, merge, or close schools.
- Define what a bad school really is.
- Deal with bad schools through legislation.

7. The right-wingers are killing us: Some supporters of parental choice are opposed to many other bedrock issues of the Democratic Party.

Look, if we want parental choice to become something that isn't perceived as a "right wing" issue we need to be the ones out there pushing these things. As for some of the people who finance the movement? Remember that some of the most powerful coalitions in politics form when people of diverse background come together to work on issues on which they agree, with the understanding that they will part ways on issues on which they disagree. This is politics. It is nothing personal.

How Do We Combat This Barrier?

- Establish PAC's or other organizations, such as Democrats for Education Reform that specifically work on parental choice.
- Have direct conversations between political funding experts and parental choice strategists.
- Create a comfort zone for our colleagues whose hearts are in the right place and who are open-minded by:
 - Inviting outside speakers so they can hear the message from others (grassroots organizations, education leaders, financial backers).
 - Host symposia where you can educate your colleagues.
 - Use ads and taped testimonies.
 - Don't position yourself as a promoter of ideas. Put families out front and show that you are supporting them.
- Black Democrats should introduce **parental choice** bills.