CASE STUDY: 2019 MICHIGAN CHARTER SCHOOL FUNDING VETO

AN ANALYSIS OF STRATEGY LED BY:

mapsa

Michigan's Charter School Association

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THE ISSUE

SEPTEMBER 30, 2019-DECEMBER 20, 2019

On September 30, 2019, MI Governor Gretchen Whitmer used a line item veto to strike a $240/per-pupil funding increase for charter school students alone, while simultaneously OK'ing the same funding increase for traditional public school students. Charter funding was just one item in a long list of other line-item vetoes that were assumed to be part of a political strategy to get legislators to the table for budget negotiations. Our opponents messaged the move under the same rhetoric used to target charters nationwide - that we are for-profit entities, that we steal funding that could be used for struggling traditional districts, etc. This attack required an immediate and strong response. Had we not successfully fought the veto, this could have set a dangerous precedent that charter schools can and should be treated differently than other public schools in Michigan.

THE STRATEGY

To successfully restore charter funding, we had to accomplish these fundamental tasks, working collaboratively across our initiatives to have impact:

- Apply pressure to elected officials by giving our advocates a simple, impactful outlet to share their outrage
- Communicate this attack to our audience base in a compelling way, so that our advocates understand the implications and want to take action
- Humanize the attack to the general public, showcasing the very real impact this attack will have on public school educators and public school students
- Engage our base of member school leaders and strategic partners to help us amplify the reach of our response by giving them tools to inform their unique audiences of the attack and the plan of action

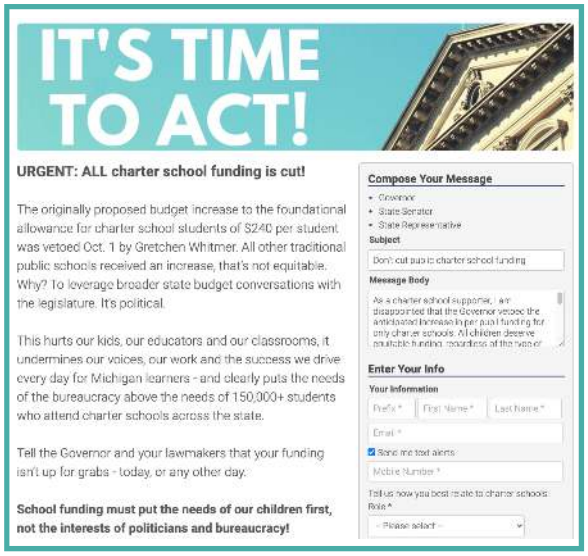
THE ACTION PLAN & RESULTS

DIGITAL ACTIVATIONS

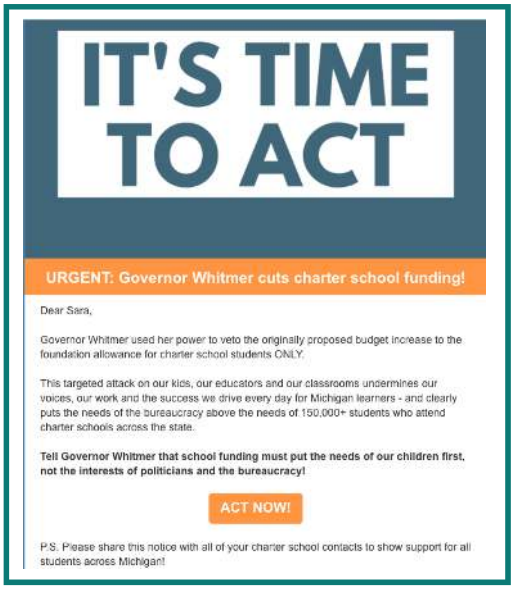
Utilizing VoterVoice, we implemented an immediate strategy urging our engaged base of over 10,000 charter educators, parents, advocates and partners to contact their local lawmakers and urge them to restore charter funding, then to forward the activation to their engaged audiences. Over the course of the campaign, we created 5 unique activations, generating over 46,000 messages sent from over 15,000 charter advocates.

GOAL: 15,000 INDIVIDUALS SENDING AN ACTIVATION

RESULTS: 12,515 INDIVIDUALS SENDING AN ACTIVATION

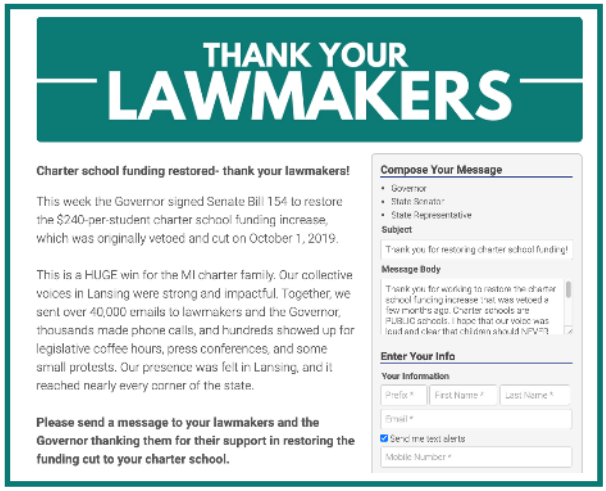


Our main activation generated over 33,000 messages sent by over 10,500 charter advocates. It was so effective that we received many "turn it off" phone calls from legislators overwhelmed by messages.



[LEFT]

Our digital activation emails has specific brand cohesion with our digital activation page, with clear instructions for our audience to first take action by contacting their lawmakers, and second by forwarding the activation to their friends/school communities.



Using the "spank and thank" concept, we encouraged our audience to thank lawmakers once charter funding had been restored.

[RIGHT]

We utilized our strong existing communications platforms to heavily discuss the Budget Veto issue and drive traffic to our digital activation, including our monthly Charter Connect newsletter.

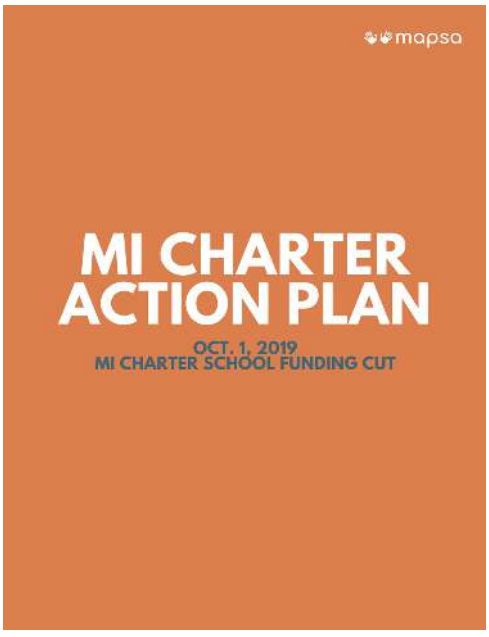
MEMBER RESOURCES

Over the course of 20 years, MAPSA has built critical, strong relationships with key charter school leaders, operators, authorizers and advocates across the MI charter movement. As the attack hit, we initiated a strategic communication tree to alert our member base, calling, texting and emailing our partners to ensure they were informed and organized as we coordinated the activation strategy and facilitated large scale phone calls. We also created a digital, downloadable guide titled the "MI Charter Action Plan," which included the following:

- An overview of the attack and three immediate actions our members could take
- A phone script for members to use when calling their local lawmaker to address the attack
- Downloadable social media images with pre-formatted social media copy to use on charter school/advocate accounts
- FAQ's around the issue
- Pre-formatted messages to include in e-communications to their engaged audiences (like a parent newsletter, press statement, etc.)

GOAL: 100 'MI CHARTER ACTION PLAN' DOWNLOADS

RESULTS: 324 'MI CHARTER ACTION PLAN' DOWNLOADS

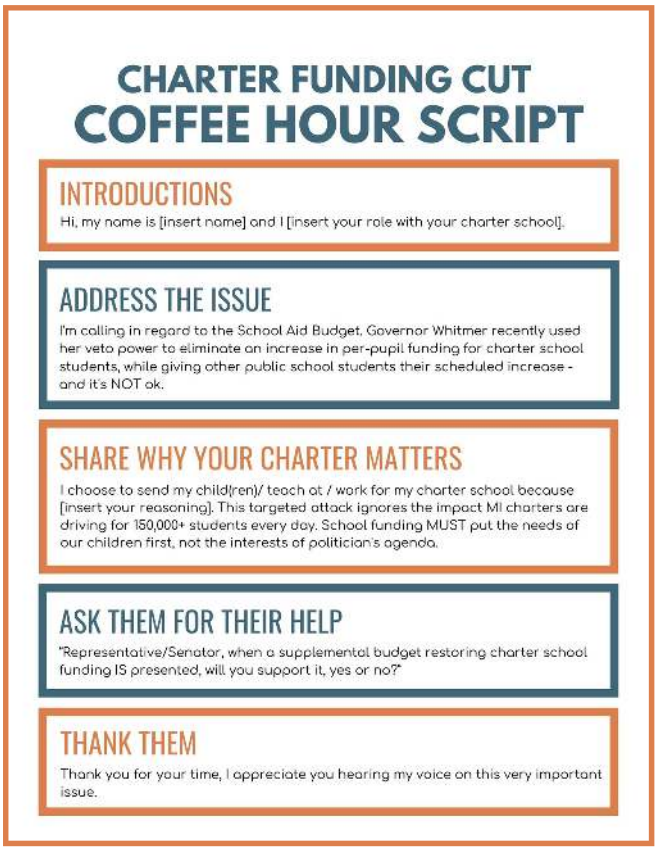


TARGETED GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT

We prioritized Michigan lawmakers into key categories based on their positions on charters, how many charters were in their district and their potential for influence. Then, we coordinated in-district office hours, sometimes called Coffee Hours. MAPSA worked within our network of educators and advocates to schedule our people at these Coffee Hours, and empowered them with resources so they knew what to say, and how to advocate for their students. This was not only a way for us to be even more visible, on top of digital activations and phone calls, but also a strategy for helping demonstrate to charter advocates the importance of legislative engagement. We had one advocate who was so appalled by her lawmaker's lack of knowledge about charters that she is now highly invested in school-legislator engagement.

GOAL: 20 IN DISTRICT ACTIVITIES ATTENDED BY CHARTER ADVOCATES

RESULTS: 10 IN-DISTRICT ACTIVITIES ATTENDED BY 34 UNIQUE CHARTER ADVOCATES



CHARTER FUNDING CUT
COFFEE HOUR SCRIPT

INTRODUCTIONS

Hi, my name is [insert name] and I [insert your role with your charter school].

ADDRESS THE ISSUE

I'm calling in regard to the School Aid Budget. Governor Whitmer recently used her veto power to eliminate an increase in per-pupil funding for charter school students, while giving other public school students their scheduled increase - and it's NOT ok.

SHARE WHY YOUR CHARTER MATTERS

I choose to send my child(ren)/ teach at / work for my charter school because [insert your reasoning]. This targeted attack ignores the impact MI charters are driving for 150,000+ students every day. School funding MUST put the needs of our children first, not the interests of politician's agenda.

ASK THEM FOR THEIR HELP

"Representative/Senator, when a supplemental budget restoring charter school funding IS presented, will you support it, yes or no?"

THANK THEM

Thank you for your time, I appreciate you hearing my voice on this very important issue.

Coffee Hour Date	House Dist #	Name		18-19 Enrollment	17-18 Enrollment
Oct 28	15	Academy for Business and Technology Elementary			
Oct 28	15	Advanced Technology Academy		1,185	1,202
Oct 28	15	Henry Ford Academy		523	510
Oct 28	15	Riverside Academy - East		940	953
Oct 28	15	Riverside Academy - West			
Oct 28	15	The Dearborn Academy		491	499
Oct 28	15	West Village Academy		427	486
TOTAL ENROLLMENT IN HOUSE DISTRICT #15				3,566	3,650

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Month	Official	Type	School	Coffee Hour Date/time	Confirmed night before?	Emailed talking points?
October	Adam Hollier	Senator		Oct. 21, 6:30-7:30pm Hamtramck High School	☑	☑
	Stephanie Chang	Senator		Oct. 4, 12:00pm Westfield Activities Center	☑	☑
	Vanessa Guerrera	State Rep		Oct 18, 8:00-9:30am Dawn of a New Day Coffee House	☑	☑
	Abbdullah Hammoud	State Rep		Oct. 28, 12-1pm Ford Community & Performing Arts Center, Senior Room Oct. 28, 5-6pm Biggby Coffee	☑	☑
	Tim Sneller	State Rep	Woodland Park	Oct 5, 10-11:30 at Scotti's Coney Island	☐	☐

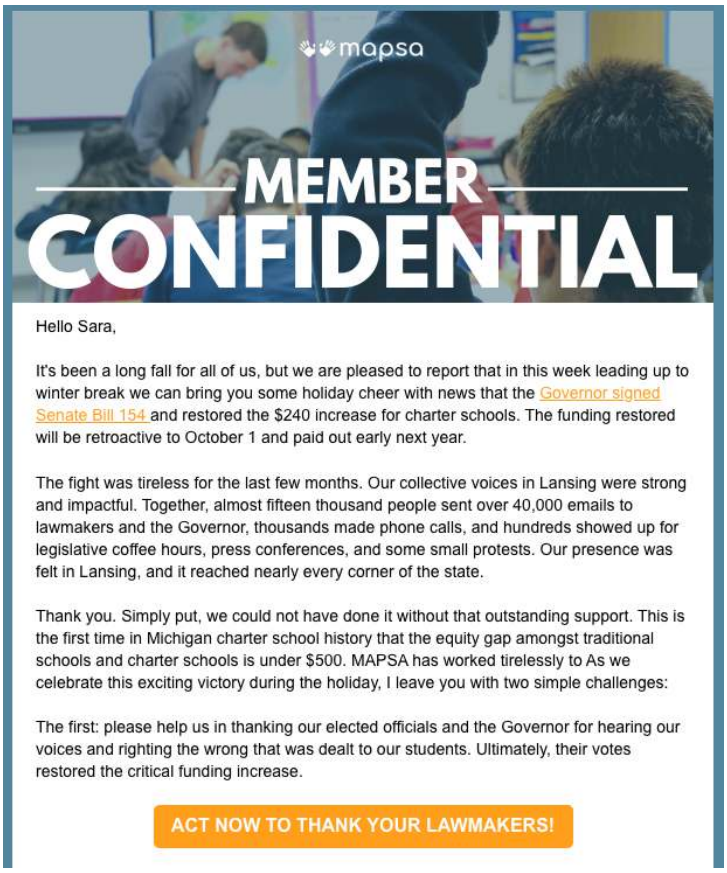
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS STRATEGY

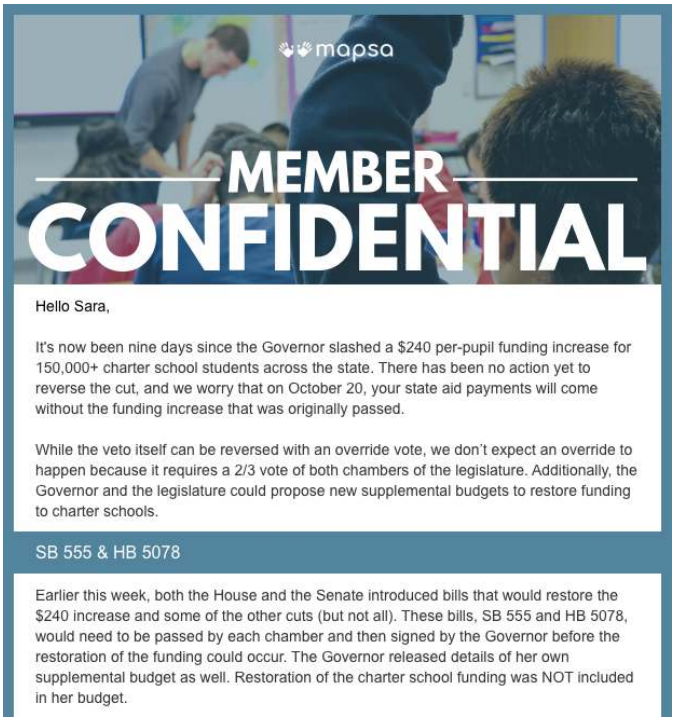
With this issue, we needed to hit fast and hard to send a message to MI lawmakers: targeting charter schools is the WRONG move, and it will cost you political capital if you do so again. Charter funding was just one of many line item vetos by Gov. Whitmer - each symbolizing a project generally supported and protected by GOP legislators. We believe that her strategy was to strong arm those very GOP legislators to the table to negotiate road funding on her terms - but they didn't take kindly to the move, and as a result we were left in the middle with only a few friendly politicians standing up for us. For this reason, our initial digital activation strategy targeted everyone equally - both charter friendly and unfriendly. We received multiple phone calls from lawmakers, asking us to "turn it off" as they continued to get message after message - we knew our strategy was working.

Our internal lobbying strategy was more differentiated, and working with a multi-client lobbyist actually opened up a lot of doors during this issue. We stayed in touch with members by sending special "Funding Veto" Member Confidentials, encouraging them to spread the digital activation, make legislator phone calls and attend Coffee Hours.

GOAL: AVG. 38% OPEN RATE ON MEMBER CONFIDENTIAL EMAILS

RESULTS: AVG. 45.6% OPEN RATE ON MEMBER CONFIDENTIAL EMAILS



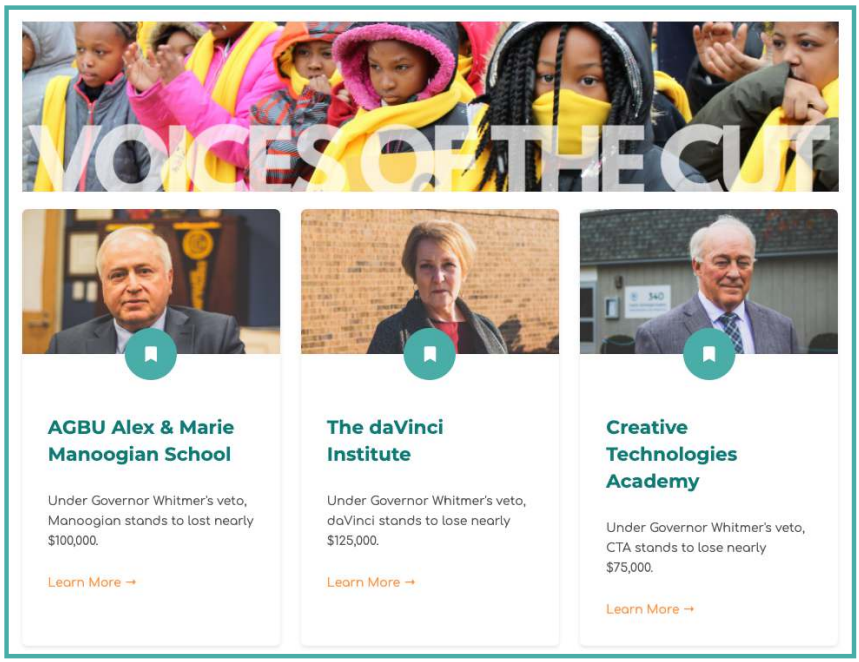


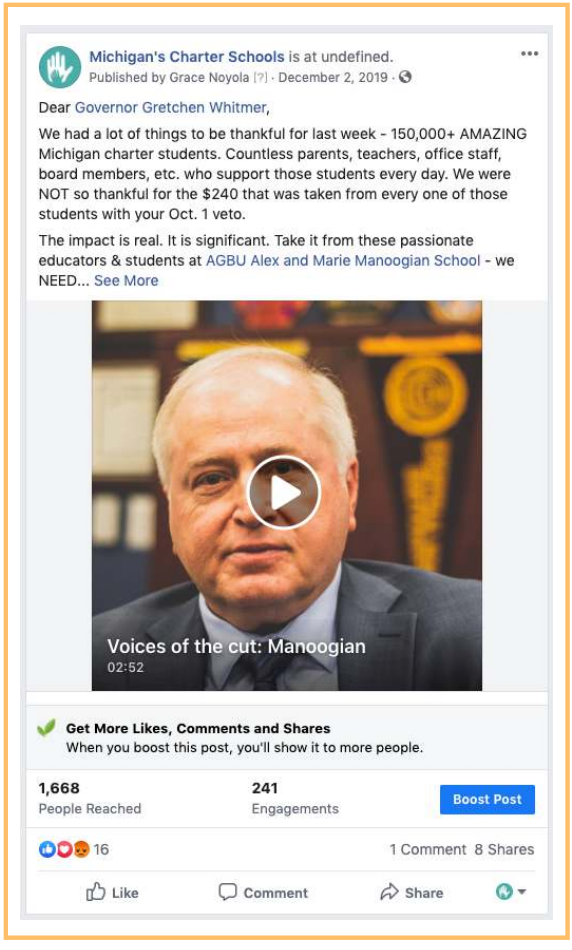
STRATEGIC DIGITAL STORYTELLING

In an effort to humanize the funding cut and help the public understand the significant impact it posed to our schools across Michigan, we quickly curated the "Voices of the Cut" project, where we created a video and editorial piece around three independently managed schools, who don't have an operator to fall back on when School Aid funding is sparse. The goal was to showcase both the outstanding things they do for students and families to our internal base of supporters and the public. We also curated six "Letters to the Governor" editorial pieces, based on Google Form submissions from six charter school leaders across the state. The letters outlined the students and families served at the school, a cost breakdown of how much the cut would cost them, and simple ask to Gov. Whitmer: why are my students worth less?

GOAL: 300 'VOICES OF THE CUT' WEBPAGE VIEWS, 500 'LETTERS TO THE GOVERNOR' WEBPAGE VIEWS

RESULTS: 937 'VOICES OF THE CUT' WEBPAGE VIEWS, 440 'LETTERS TO THE GOVERNOR' WEBPAGE VIEWS



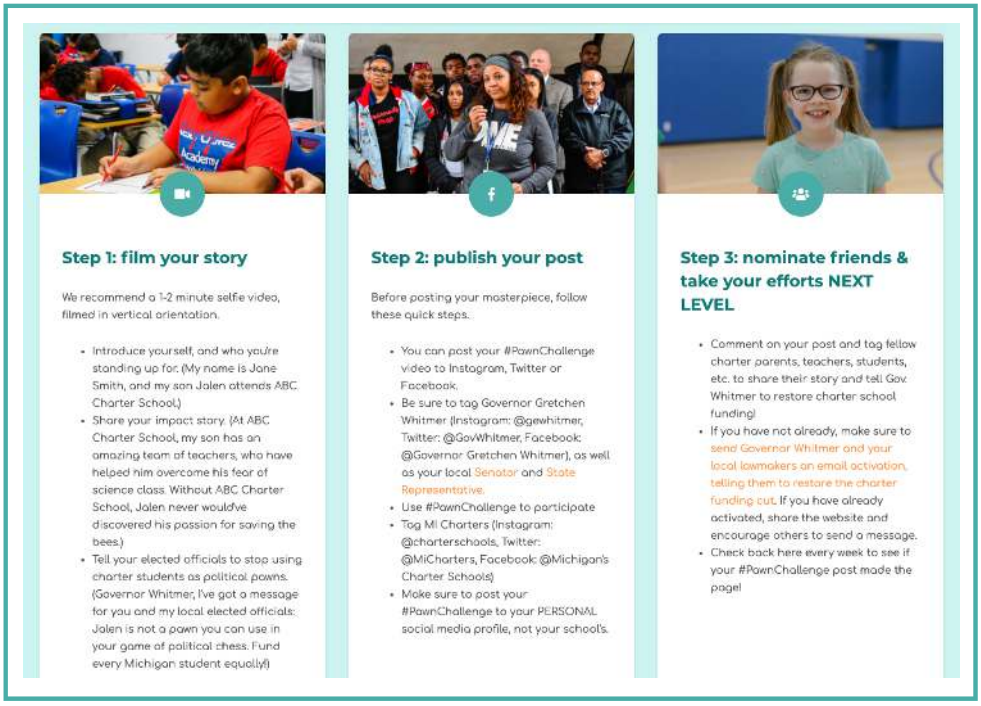


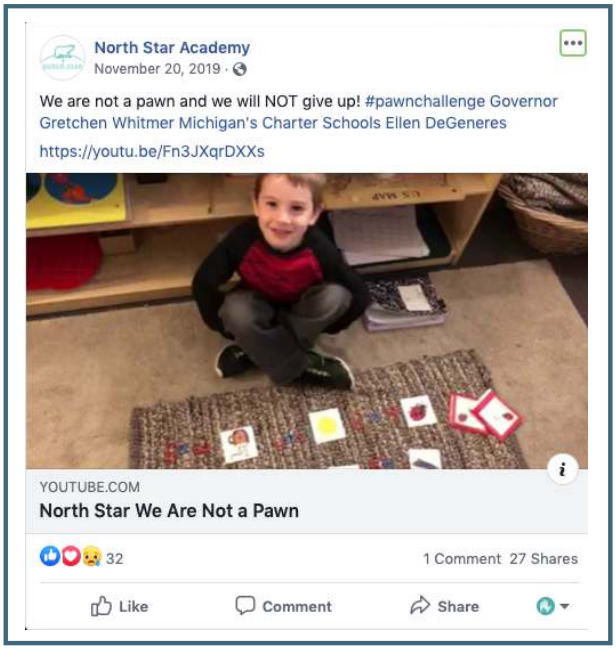
#PAWNCHALLENGE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

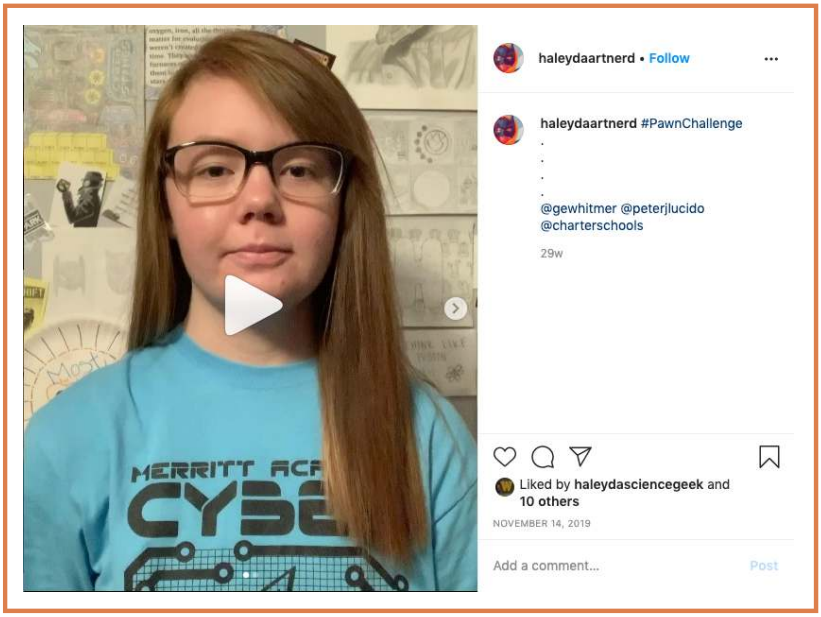
The #PawnChallenge called on charter educators, advocates, parents and students to share real stories, about our real kids - showing Gov. Whitmer & our elected officials that MI charter students are not just faceless pawns to be used as bargaining chips in their political game. As charter advocates completed activations, legislator phone calls/coffee hours, this served as one more outlet to spread the word about the injustice and apply political pressure.

GOAL: 100 'MI CHARTER ACTION PLAN' DOWNLOADS

RESULTS: 324 'MI CHARTER ACTION PLAN' DOWNLOADS







'ONE A WEEK' PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY

To ensure the issue was prevalent not only on social media, but also traditional media, we set out to coordinate at least one press event or special press release every week until the funding was restored. The events included press conferences in front of Gov. Whitmer's Detroit office and in Lansing, the most powerful of which was led by charter school leaders, educators and students, who called for restored charter funding and included a special delivery to Gov. Whitmer of 294 pawns, each representing one MI charter school. While MAPSA organized these events/releases, we recruited a diverse group of charter educators and advocates to serve as spokespeople to the media. We also saw press events and opportunities led by passionate charter advocates, who came to Lansing unprompted to protest the issue, wrote special letters signed by their entire class, etc.

GOAL: 12 PRESS EVENTS/RELEASES, 10 EXTERNAL MEDIA ARTICLES/TV FEATURES COVERING THE ISSUE

RESULTS: 8 PRESS EVENTS/RELEASES, >50 EXTERNAL MEDIA ARTICLES/TV FEATURES COVERING THE ISSUE

Over 50 resolutions from charter school boards across MI were delivered to Gov. Whitmer via this event, calling for fair funding for all schools. Laura Burwell, Board President at a charter school helped deliver the powerful message.

WAY Academies (Fint, MI) Superintendent, Madeline Black, led our powerful Detroit press conference, telling Gov. Whitmer "I know a lot of parents who would gladly drive over a few potholes if it meant their child would have equitable funding."

This student from Mid Michigan Leadership Academy in Lansing, MI, helped us deliver the symbolic pawns to Gov. Whitmer in a special social media presentation to Gov. Whitmer.

Kimberly Sedlmeyer, teacher at Escuela Avancemos Academy in Detroit, MI, held up a symbolic pawn at the Detroit press event, which represented her school in this special pawn delivery to Gov. Whitmer.

LESSONS LEARNED

WE HAVE TO UNITE IF WE WANT TO WIN.

Our strength as a movement lies in our differences - but sometimes it's also our biggest weakness. We serve different communities, champion different models, and face different challenges - and it's easy to forget we are of one, united movement. With this issue, we saw thousands activate and get involved, but as we continue to face legislative attacks, it's going to take even more of us. Our job as CSO's has to be to build cohesion across different operators, models and geographic locations by creating a shared identity that every charter educator, student, parent and advocate WANT to be a part of. That is done in part by strategic storytelling and branding, and an in part by creating collaborative experiences for educators and advocates to engage with one another.

WE CAN'T BE PROTECTIVE OF OUR GREATEST ADVOCATES.

We have seen before, and we saw with this issue, that leaders in our movement (especially operators) are fearful of getting students, parents and teachers involved in advocacy - largely because they are afraid the advocacy will scare them enough that it will negatively impact enrollment & educator retention. But those personas are the best spokespeople, and we're going to need them if we want to continue winning these battles.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERTHING.

As this issue unfolded, our greatest asset was our connections with educators, operators, authorizers and strategic partners. We have invested as a CSO in building membership value around our ability to serve as the connective tissue of this movement, working collaboratively to identify and address shared pain points and successes. Invest in strategic relationships now, so that when crisis hits you have a broader team to help amplify the message.

COMMUNICATION DRIVES EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY.

It is absolutely critical as a State CSO to invest in a powerful digital communications infrastructure for your organization, and to invest in supporting your operators, authorizers and schools to do the same. In times of crisis, we must be able to amplify messages and instructions for action, and that cannot happen in a large-scale way without effective website, email and social media tools. It is also key to build this infrastructure INTERNALLY, versus contracting with external organizations to do communications work.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

Through this project, there were numerous programs, softwares and tools that ultimately made our strategy successful, on top of a few key items we budgeted in as we went.

A STRONG GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY SOFTWARE.

Each year, MAPSA invests in a powerful grassroots advocacy software to help our advocates easily connect with state legislators around issues like the School Aid Budget and other charter-related policymaking. Recently, we are using Voter Voice, but we've also used Phone2Action in the past. This software not only allows us to build custom landing pages describing the issue with a customized message to lawmakers, but also gives us powerful analytics to help measure our effectiveness.

COST: $3,300/YEAR (VOTER VOICE)

AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM.

Our website, email platform and social media channels were the delivery system for all of our messages, and connected us with advocates in real time to address this issue head on. Our annual investments in our website builder (HubSpot), email software (Constant Contact), graphic design tool (Canva), and social media channels meant we were prepared to organize creative deliverables quickly and get the message out to our advocates. It is also important to note that we have a team of experienced communications professionals, on staff, who were all trained on digital strategies - this was possibly the most important initial investment. All of our communications engagement was 100% native, we did not employ paid media for this campaign.

COST: $2,400/YEAR (HUBSPOT), $3,000/YEAR (CONSTANT CONTACT), $144/YEAR (CANVA- NONPROFIT PRICING)

ADDITIONAL PROJECT COSTS:

- Umbrellas (for press conference attendees) - $80
- Pawns (symbolic objects to deliver to elected officials, representing the charter school(s) in their district) - $90
- Mileage (to press conferences, in-district events, etc.) - $720
- Coffee (in-district events, press conferences, etc.) - $45
- Printing (in-district events, press conferences, lit drops for legislators) - $95

TEAMWORK
MAKES THE DREAM WORK

MAPSA is a small, but highly effective, team of seven. Our internal focus on driving positive, proactive relationships between our schools and MI lawmakers, and building a powerful foundation of digital storytelling enabled us to react quickly and effectively to this attack, organizing our advocates to help reach our advocacy goals.

DAN QUISENBERRY
PRESIDENT

Dan has over 20 years experience in the MI charter movement. His ability to unite our team, and key leaders in the movement, was paramount to our success.

BECKY CARLTON
STRATEGY & PARTNERSHIPS

Becky served as our project leader, organizing us weekly and ensuring each of our activities were actionable, goal-oriented, and coordinated.

HEATHER RISNER
MEMBERSHIP & SPONSORSHIP

Heather was our eyes and ears amongst charter leaders and strategic partners, helping us identify and address roadblocks our members were struggling with as they activated.

SARA VANDERBILT
OPERATIONS & FINANCE

Sara served as our data & information manager, adding new contacts to our CRM from VoterVoice, pulling custom lists for communications and analyzing data sets.

BUDDY MOOREHOUSE
PUBLIC RELATIONS & MEDIA

Buddy used his connections with MI traditional media to develop unique PR opportunities, coordinating with charter advocates to be the face/voice of the issue.

GRACE NOYOLA
DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Grace was our digital translator, building webpages, social media content, video assets, etc. aligned with key messaging, in real time as our strategy unfolded.

ALICIA URBAIN
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Alicia led our legislator strategy, keeping track of our 'friends & foes,' coordinating with lobbyists and strategic partners, and guiding us on where to apply political pressure.