

# Growing The Resistance to Corporate Education Reform

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## 1. Motivation

It is key to figure out what motivates people to act. This may be different in different areas. Know your audience by tapping into the “locals” in any given area.

- A. Are there particular concerns of parents in this area?
- B. Explain how these policies will affect their own children
- C. Keep it local. Parents want to hear about their specific districts, schools, and children. Larger regional sites are important for information, but actions need to be filtered down to the local level.

## 2. Educate yourself

Gain as much knowledge as you can about regulations for your state or specific area.

- A. Read through testing manuals, education laws, State Education Department regulations and requirements, etc... Everything you can get your hands on. You need to know about the consequences, loopholes, restrictions, and laws for your state testing.
- B. Look through websites such as [www.nysape.org](http://www.nysape.org) in NY to see what their state regulations are. This will give you a starting point to compare to your state and what the differences are, if any. United Opt Out and FairTest are great resources and have information on almost every state.
- C. Connect with legal experts. We have a number of attorneys on our steering committees. They did not initially become involved in a legal capacity, but rather, were involved parents who happened to be lawyers and volunteered their time and expertise. They have been invaluable to our movement.

## 3. Organizing

Another key ingredient.

- A. Set up a structure. Start small with launching a social media Facebook site for one region (can be a county, geographic region, large district). Don't start too small - you will be able to reach smaller areas through “satellite pages.”
  - Once the page is up and running, ask for volunteers from different districts and schools. For example, over the past two years, Long Island Opt Out has built up a team of liaisons that represent many of our 124 districts. These representatives act as the point people (often in teams of two) for their districts, relay information back to me, activate their local communities, advocate for our cause, and are our “boots on the ground”. They also set up local district pages to give parents an even more direct local action plan for their schools. They have also acquired their own point people within the different schools of the district. Again, this organizational structure takes the pressure off just one person and creates many active leaders. We have a separate closed FB page for this group so they can discuss strategy in a smaller setting. I consider this group my steering committee. This is also the way in which we collected opt out totals. Each representative was responsible for contacting administrators/BOE members to obtain totals. Uncooperative districts were FOILED (Freedom of Information Law).
  - A statewide organization can be created to coordinate the efforts of local leaders across the state. In NY, we created NYSAPE. Over 50 organizations have signed on. When we have actions, they can be pushed out through all member organizations. Hundreds of thousands are reached.

## 4. Messaging

You need to change the conversation. You want your message to be heard over and over until it is the accepted thought of the masses. Take lessons from the marketing community.

- A. Keep the message positive. Sensational negativity and controversy may bring crowds in temporarily, but a message of hope, power, unity, and inspiration keeps them there. If they feel good being part of your movement, they will stay with you.
- B. If there is a false belief out there that has been propagated by corporate reformers, change the message. Say your message louder and clearer than they do.
- C. Keep it simple. It is fine to give the academic explanations of things, and to get down to the nitty gritty, but make sure you have a “lay-person translator” on hand to explain things. People tune out when they have to struggle to understand what you are saying. We have a “terminology guide” to help with this.
- D. Keep the message non-partisan. This is very hard to do during election season, but your followers shouldn’t automatically know what political party you belong to. This will be the biggest challenge. I don’t allow postings of ultra-conservative or ultra-liberal articles, because it only creates in-fighting and drama. Stick to education issues when discussing candidates.
- E. I have a strict “only posts that inform are allowed—no posts that inflame” policy.
- F. No teacher bashing allowed. Often, sites set up for parents to discuss education can turn into a bitch fest about “what this teacher did to my kid”, or “what that teacher said to the class”. Keep that off your page. Confirm all reports about problem administrators before you post about something they have done. (Example: we report on administrators who take punitive actions against opt out students or those who send out threat letters against test refusal. This often results in quick reversal of policy as it attracts media attention).
- G. Fact check, fact check, fact check. Before jumping on spreading new information, make sure it is accurate. Once it’s out there, it’s out there. Mistakes are bound to happen, but the less, the better.

## 5. Spreading the word

Once you get a firm grasp on your message, spreading that message is important.

- A. Forms of free advertising:
  - Mom and pop local book store collaboration—we offered free promotional advertising on our FB page (telling members to shop there), if they set up a display for “refusal reading” (books for kids to read during testing when they refused/opted out).
  - Print Post-it notes with a simple message such as “opt out—learn more at...” Or “choose to refuse”, or “our children are more than a score”, “more teaching, less testing”. These notes can be left all over various places (bathroom stalls, grocery stores, gyms etc); this is also called guerrilla marketing.
  - Download a flyer app. Using pictures and colorful flyers with a simple message is shared more easily and often on social media sites. People often read a colorful flyer message before they will read simple plain text in a post. (I use PosterMaker, but there are many apps out there).
  - Post flyers at libraries, grocery stores, Starbucks, etc...
  - Soap crayons on car windows—this worked very well for us.
  - Rubber stamps on bills, papers, flyers...
  - Ask parents to email a simple message to other parents in their class/grade about why and how to opt out. (Shouldn’t be pushy and demanding—offer them a drafted letter). Ask parents to “reply all” with their opinions (ask close friends who are opting out to respond quickly with a “yes we will be refusing to protect our children and public education!!”). This may help sway those that are thinking they would be alone if they refused.
- B. Advertising with minimal \$\$ —all can be ordered in bulk to save \$\$
  - Lawn signs (We bought and sold/distributed thousands).
  - T-shirts (Again, thousands—local teacher unions bought and sold these as well with the opt out message).
  - Bumper magnets/removable stickers.
  - Pins, buttons, hats, etc...

- Our local teacher unions took out full page ads in local papers encouraging parents to refuse with messages like “we are teachers and we are refusing to allow our own children from taking the assessments.”
- C. Using sites like Indiegogo and gofundme.com for raising money for larger cost advertising.
- Billboards (stationary on the interstates and highways and mobile billboards)
  - Subways, buses
  - Radio ads
  - TV ads (very expensive but very effective)
- D. Community events.
- Marching in parades with banners and shirts.
  - Getting a table at local fairs and festivals (we had a table at a fair called MamaCon - gave us access to thousands of parents and media).
  - Setting up a table at local sporting events or even town fields on game days.
- E. Media
- Start with small local media. They often struggle to get good stories handed to them. This issue is becoming big news, and they will be more than happy to get a scoop. Try to generate close contacts with as many media outlets and reporters as you can. Over the past two years I have grown my list of close contacts with reporters, and even consider a number of them friends! I keep them in the loop with our actions, and they are always fair with reporting my stories. If you have a reporter who is not being fair or has reported you purposely in a bad light, don't work with him or her. Don't post his/her articles, and don't offer quotes. Or, only agree to send written quotes so they cannot misinterpret you.
  - Write op-ed's and encourage others to do the same.
- F. Hold local forums** —this is emphasized because this was a main ingredient in the success of NY's opt out movement. On LI, we began with small groups in living rooms - wine and cheese with a little education activism information thrown in! We would get 10 parents or so. I would tell them what I knew about high stakes testing and common core, would usually bring a teacher with me to back up what I was saying and what was happening in their classrooms. As word spread, we moved to libraries which offered free space. This was another job for my liaisons. They would advertise the forum, book the library (or Knights of Columbus, firehouse, etc... meeting rooms) and I would schedule the panel of speakers. A good panel is so important to the success of the forum. I would bring a teacher, a principal, a superintendent, and others, to present to the crowd. You want a panel with individuals that those in the room can relate to. We always left room for discussions and questions. This was duplicated all over the state and all across Long Island, sometimes up to three times per week. It was important to go into each local area, as people seem much less motivated to travel outside their district/town. The message was simple: here is what is happening, this is why, and here is what you can do about it. Parents left feeling angered, but hopeful and empowered to act. Opt out letters and fact sheets were handed out at these forums.
- G. To find educators willing to speak out, look for op-ed's, quotes in articles, and local union leaders, BAT's. If they are already speaking out, they may be willing to join you in speaking at a forum. Look for educators outside of the forum area. In many states it could be dangerous for educators to speak where they work.
- H. Ask to speak at local colleges. I have spoken to education undergrad classes at a local college. This can often spark tomorrow's educators to become involved in the fight for their future profession.

## 6. Legislation/campaigns/elections

Once you have enough of a following and parents begin to take mass action, you can have a big effect on local and state campaigns.

- A. Make appointments with as many local legislators as possible. They should know who you are and have a mix of fear and respect for you. Realize that most likely you know more about the education issues than they do. Be very specific on what you want, what they can do, and what you expect from them. Have examples of what other legislators/states have done. Learn as much as you can about who the power players in your state are. Who are the majority leaders? Education committee members? Look into their voting records.
- B. Voter scorecards—can be helpful when you don't want to be too political but you want to show your followers where legislators stand. Surveys can also be sent to candidates before elections.
- C. Set up a program that generates automatic emails to local, state, and national politicians. The easier it is for people to be involved, the better. These programs can easily generate tens of thousands of emails.
- D. Set up phone banks. Unions often do this very effectively. Again, have all the information on hand.
- E. Rallies at legislator offices, state capitols, fundraising events, parks, on important dates, etc... It is important to get the crowds seen by media. Legislators HATE rallies against them.
- F. Endorsements of local school board candidates. Give candidates the opportunity to share their views on testing/CC/opt out through a survey and offer a link to those surveys. Endorse candidates you feel support your cause or set up a scorecard. I had my liaisons from each district choose the candidate they felt would help them with their advocacy efforts. This is a very effective way to get allies on the school board, having a major effect on the future direction of the district. These new board of education members can help to get anti-HST resolutions passed which further spreads the message.

## 7. Coalitions

It is important to join forces with organizations that share your vision and have similar goals. This can get tricky, as you need to navigate around organizations that have been corrupted by reformers or politics, but there are many good ones around. Local education groups, statewide organizations aimed at maintaining arts and music, urban groups working toward building community schools rather than charter takeovers, grassroots organizations, and local and sometimes state PTA organizations can all be allies. I work very closely with local teacher associations, regional union leaders, and caucus leaders (caucuses within the union often take a stronger stance to support the cause). It is important to maintain an independence from these groups, but certainly use the resources and access to people to your advantage. Whenever I run across an individual or an organization that seems to be getting themselves “out there” with a similar message, I reach out to see if we can coordinate actions or efforts. A word of caution: make sure the groups you collaborate with have motivations that match yours. Once your group's name is linked to another, even briefly, it becomes difficult to distance yourself from its name. Example: we have had many groups pop up briefly in our region that come on strong, then descend into political extremism, hatred, and in-fighting. When it comes to grassroots organizations, much of our power lies with our reputations. Keep your reputation above the fray.

- A. Groups to connect with:
  - teacher associations
  - retired teachers
  - civic groups
  - education non-profits that support public education
  - PTA/PTO
  - Town Mom and Dad FB pages
  - Local colleges and universities
- B. Work with your school district. The very first thing I did was to meet with my administrators to express my intentions and my motivations. I clearly expressed that I was on their side and was doing this in SUPPORT of the district, public education, teachers, and most importantly the students. Establish a sense that you are on the same team and although they may not be able to speak out with you, that

you will speak for them. You do NOT want the districts to see you as an adversary. This is inevitable with some administrators, but should be avoided whenever possible.

- C. Inspire courage. When an administrator, PTA leader, teacher, legislator (or anyone else in a position of power/influence) speaks out about these issues, encourage praise. Send emails, tweets, and post praise, and thank the person for speaking out. This almost always results in the individual continuing to speak out.

## **8. Social Media**

This is key to any movement. You can have access to thousands with a single post.

- A. Consider “boosting” a great post (for a small fee) so it is seen by those outside the group.
- B. Keep the page open so people can browse without the fear of their name officially listed as a member. (Helpful for teachers, administrators, and BOE members)
- C. I approve all posts. This keeps my page moving with my vision. It prevents a lot of inflammatory posts, as well as prevents spammers.
- D. Keep the number of administrators to a minimum, and only with those you 100% trust. Nothing ends a movement’s momentum faster than administrator in-fighting.
- E. Don’t be afraid to remove trouble maker members (those that constantly pick fights). While at times quite entertaining, they can often distract attention away from the issues at hand.
- F. When posting an article, pull out a quote from it that makes people want to read the rest of the article.
- G. If you want to share an article that is against what you are doing, copy and paste the text, so it will not generate \$\$ and attention through “hits” to the article.

## **9. Creating leaders**

This movement is successful, because there are so many amazing leaders throughout the country. Each has his/her own personal strengths that he/she brings. No one is looking to be the hero—we all want the same thing—to save and protect our children and public education. We will never be free of the assault on public education. Once the flood Gates (pun intended) were opened for corporate greed in education, it will never fully close. It is our responsibility to create new leaders to continually add strength to this movement. Give others responsibility and they will rise to the occasion. Everyone can have a voice in this. Every parent is an expert on his/her own child and what his/her child needs. Give them the opportunity to be heard, and heroes will rise out of the masses.

## **10. Random actions**

A. Paint the Road Red - we chose one road (with a lot of traffic) that ran across the entire south shore of LI (45 mile stretch). Union groups, parents, kids, and community members all wore red and went to the closest location to them along that road with signs. There were thousands that participated all across the Island with lots of press.