

“WATCHDOGS ARE SUPPOSED TO BARK”:

A CASE STUDY OF THE CHARLESTON EDUCATION NETWORK

by

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(Under the Direction of Nancy F. Knapp)

### ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s, a group of prominent citizens in Charleston, South Carolina, became increasingly concerned about the deteriorating performance of their public schools and the seeming unwillingness or inability of the district administration to improve them. Students in Charleston County schools, especially those serving poor or minority children, have for many years scored near the bottom in a state ranked consistently 48<sup>th</sup>-49<sup>th</sup> nationally. Forming the non-profit Charleston Education Network (CEN) in May 2000, these citizens, most of whom had no children in the school system, undertook “to be a staunch advocate for children, a dynamic catalyst for change, and an unrelenting force for accountability to achieve excellence in public education.” Their tactics toward this end include activist strategies and adversarial stances uncharacteristic of most community school reform groups. This study, informed by critical theory, investigates how and why these citizens felt compelled and equipped to leverage school reform from the “outside.” It outlines specific goals and strategies they have adopted, looks at evidence of the effects of these strategies, and considers what similar communities might learn from their story.

Describing their role as “both the conscience and watchdog of public education,” CEN members successfully advocated for a policy allowing Charleston parents to transfer their children out of failing schools two years before federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation required it. They won a civil suit forcing the repeal of a 90-mil property tax cap that was crippling school tax revenues. They are politically active, initiating and shaping public debate on education, encouraging the election of better informed and qualified school board candidates, working for legislation to reform the outdated local school board governance system, and playing a significant role in the selection of the new district superintendent. Members acknowledge that their “edgy” stance, often unpopular with the district, is not for the timid, and on occasion must be recalibrated by CEN itself. However, they believe only such activist strategies will move a cumbersome and seemingly unconcerned district establishment to action to improve the education of Charleston’s children, especially that of children of color or living in poverty.

INDEX WORDS: community-driven school reform, educational reform, community activism, achievement gap

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Roy and Crystal Kight,  
for all that they have given me that made this dissertation possible –  
their genes, their encouragement, their values about learning and accomplishment,  
their love, and their emotional and financial support.  
I simply could not have done this without them.

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With love

To my daughters, Erin and Lauren

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As the late Harvard professor and former deputy superintendent of New York City Schools, Ronald Edmonds, once said, “We can whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” ([www.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.gse.harvard.edu)).

Dr. Edmonds should know. As one of the “founding fathers” of the Effective Schools Research, he and others produced extensive empirical research during the 1980s that demonstrated that, indeed, all children can learn (Taylor, 2002). Yet, in America year after year in district after district, public schools fail to teach many of our children, especially children of color and children living in poverty. *Brown v. Board of Education* “made equal access to public education the law of the land,” yet America has not delivered public schools that provide “all children with equal access to success in school” (Wang and Kovach, 1996, p. 10). This disparity in educational performance between white and minority students, called the achievement gap, has persisted since that 1954 Supreme Court decision (Balanced View, 2000). Today, on most educational measures, the average African American or Hispanic student scores with the bottom quarter of white students (Greene, 2001). The national graduation rate for African American students is reported at 56%, and for Hispanics 54%, compared to 74% for White students (Greene, 2001).

Further complicating the picture for minority students is the element of poverty; studies show that in schools serving a high percentage of students in poverty, children who are non-poor also perform below expectations. Since minority students are far more likely to attend high poverty schools, both poor and more affluent African American students who attend high poverty schools are adversely impacted (Balanced View, 2000). Moreover, this cycle of poverty is perpetuated. As adults, 55% of school dropouts typically report no earned income; for those who do have earnings, their median income is approximately \$15,000 annually, compared to \$29,000 for those with a high school diploma (Greene, 2001). A GED “graduate” fares little better; for those 21- to 26- year-old white, non-Hispanic, adults who obtained a GED with a score that was just passing, their average earnings were about \$11,000 in 1995 – less than the poverty level for a family of three that year (Murnane & Tyler, 2000).

Children, therefore, may pay a lifelong price for a poor education. Moreover, there is growing evidence that it is the quality of the teacher and the curriculum, not the child’s family, that is the major influence on his success (ASCD, 2003; Ascher & Fruchter, 2001; Chidolue, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Haycock, 2001; Haycock, 1998; Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000; Wenglinsky, 2002;). Schools, however, have been notoriously recalcitrant in making the difficult systemic changes necessary to reform public education (Fine, 2000; Mizell, 2003; Sarason, 1996). Some scholars assert that excuses are more prevalent than progress. Asa Hilliard (1991), for example, asks, “Do we have the *will* to educate all children?” (p. 31).

It is these persistent and widespread inequities and the complacency of many in the public educational system to confront them that led me on this journey of

investigating school reform. It has been said that if one scratches the surface of a dissertation, one will find an autobiography. My own study certainly supports this belief. I am sympathetic at best, biased at worst, about the topic of school reform and those trying to accomplish it. I have studied the literature on school reform, I have experienced the need for school reform first hand in the public schools for 25 years as a school psychologist and as an administrator, and I have used my own voice to advocate for disenfranchised students and families.

My personal journey into school reform began over 25 years ago in West Virginia, where I worked in a district that served 30,000 students of varying means and geographical locations. Based in the capital city of Charleston (West Virginia, not to be confused with Charleston, South Carolina, the site of my research), Kanawha County School District has urban, suburban, and rural schools, poor, middle class, and wealthy families, and white and non-white students. At one point in my career, I was charged with the task of designing, implementing, and finding funding for alternative programs, for which the district was experiencing a growing need. The alternative programs were intended to serve children who did not fit into a regular school program, for a variety of reasons, including behavior problems, academic deficiencies, and personal complications, such as pregnancy or the need to work during the day. (Some programs were held in the evenings.) Within five years, there were over 1,000 students enrolled in the alternative programs in Kanawha County Schools, more than in any other high school in the district. I believe that one of the reasons our referral rate was so high was that, when we first started the programs, referring schools did not have to include the test scores of their alternative school students in their school profiles. Thus, if a school referred a large

percentage of their failing students, a technique I dubbed “purifying the population,” then their school’s scores would artificially inflate. These observations, and my mostly positive interactions with the many students who were destined for the alternative programs, caused me to be continually troubled by the repercussions of bad schools.

Not only were we failing to adequately teach children with educational deficiencies, which was no surprise to me since I had previously served as a school psychologist and had evaluated many of those students, but we were not maximizing the potential of our more capable students. Often, the students who were referred to alternative schools were those who were bold, independent thinkers and actors who had chosen to not “play school by the rules.” These students were not motivated in a context that rewarded conformity and punished non-conformity. When they were placed in alternative programs, in small classes with dedicated and concerned teachers who believed in their potential to succeed, these students often flourished in ways that surprised both them and their families. But “surprise” was not what was often expressed by the regular public educators that had failed to educate them; it was disbelief. On more than one occasion, the alternative education teachers were accused of “giving grades” to students who were successful in our programs. The message being sent was that if these students could not be educated in the “regular” school’s 30- student classroom, then anything that we were doing for them in alternative school had to be bogus. It also seemed that the more autocratic the teacher, the more likely she was to make referrals to the alternative program. It was not uncommon for even the most disruptive student referred to be experiencing difficulty in only some of his classes, whereas others of his teachers had found ways to develop positive relationships with him.

I also became aware that certain secondary principals seemed to feel that some students were deserving of an education and others were not. Students told me horrifying yet substantiated stories of how they had been told by the principal, not even in “so many words” but just plain bluntly, that they were not welcome in “their” (that being the “principal’s”) school. The families of these students confronted similar barriers. Students were suspended “until your parent brings you back for a conference,” not an easily accomplished assignment for parents who were without transportation or job leave. Parents were told that the principal refused to allow their child back into the school after a suspension, even though district policy required it. Clearly, in too many cases, the “public schools” were not the *public*’s schools; they were the “principals’ schools.” My dilemma often was whether to “win the battle” and require the principal to do the right thing by the student, and thereby “lose the war” knowing that retribution would likely be taken against that student, or to go ahead and welcome the student into alternative school.

My frustration in this setting was compounded by the knowledge that if the students I was working with had received a good education in elementary school, perhaps they would not have been sitting in my office with so few educational options left. It was also compounded by the fact that there were excellent teachers, administrators, and educational outcomes in some of our schools in the district; it seemed as if the students who attended these schools had won some sort of genetic or financial lottery. My frustration reached a breaking point when I found myself, as an insider to the public schools, and having 25 years experience as a district administrator in the same central office facility, lacking the support and the means to make the systemic changes that would lead to significant reform. This is what led me to leave public education, at least

temporarily, and to return to graduate school for the primary purpose of becoming smarter about educational reform.

Thus, without question, I bring my own significant personal subjectivities to this research.

### The Study

In the late 1990s, at about the same time that I was struggling with the shortcomings of public education in Charleston, West Virginia, a group of citizens in the “other” Charleston – Charleston, South Carolina – also had become increasingly aware of national trends such as those cited above and had become deeply concerned about the performance of their neighborhood schools. They, too, were confronted with similar intractability from their school district administration. In response to these concerns and the lack of responsiveness from the school district, they initiated the Charleston Education Network (CEN) in May 2000, and this study chronicles their story. As a non-profit organization, funded totally by private donations and supported by the Mayor of Charleston, CEN has undertaken a bold agenda of school reform that includes activist strategies and adversarial viewpoints uncharacteristic of most community school reform groups. CEN’s stated purpose is to demand a quality education for the children of Charleston, since it sees the school district as making little progress, a view supported by district data. CEN’s informal motto regarding public schools – “You get what you pay settle for” – is issued as a challenge to the community. The stated mission of CEN is “to be a staunch advocate for children, a dynamic catalyst for change, and an unrelenting force for accountability to achieve excellence in public education.”

I decided to study how and why this group of citizens in Charleston, South Carolina, felt compelled to foray into school reform and to adopt an adversarial position with the school district. I wanted to know what characteristics of CEN or its members might cause this organization to function differently than most community school reform groups. I wanted to find out if there was any evidence that their efforts are being successful at reducing the achievement gap. I wanted to know what the reaction of the school district and the community has been, and what might this and other communities learn from CEN.

CEN's unconventional and bold methods seem compatible with the beliefs of critical theorists. Critical theory is defined as the "attempt to understand, analyze, criticize, and alter social, economic, cultural, technological, and psychological structures and phenomena that have features of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, and misery" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 146). Critical theorists "view society as consisting of various groups that compete for scarce resources" (Sullivan, 2001, p. 50), and they see society as made up of oppressors and oppressed. The oppressors are viewed as being selfishly interested in keeping the scarce valued resources out of the hands of the oppressed in order to preserve the dominant ideology. Critical theorists believe that social researchers should not simply chronicle society, but rather they should "strive to change unfair or immoral conditions" (Sullivan, p. 80).

Bennett (1990) notes how critical theorists view the solution to the inequities of public schooling in America. She states that "classroom teachers can resist merely reproducing the class structure of the dominant society and can structure the school process so that the oppressed groups are able to successfully attain the education they

need to empower themselves” (Bennett, p. 29). Giroux (1985) argues that both Marxist theories of reproduction (“the main functions of schools are the reproduction of the dominant ideology” [Giroux, p. 257]) and neo-Marxist theories of resistance (“there are complex and creative fields of resistance through which class- race- and gender-mediated practices often refute, reject, and dismiss the central messages of the schools” [Giroux, p. 260]) are incomplete. He posits a “new sociology of education” that is based on the belief that “power, resistance, and human agency” will all be important factors in achieving equitable public schools (Giroux, p. 257).

As I was doing my research, I also found that questions posed by critical theorists in the literature helped me to expand my research questions into additional areas. For example, I wondered if CEN uses power and resistance (Giroux, 1985) as strategies in their efforts to achieve equitable schools. Noblitt (2003) writes of “better serving the interests of oppressed peoples by giving ‘voice’ [Fine, 1994] to the oppressed. Yet, as Fine notes, voice all too easily gave way into ventriloquy” (Noblitt, p.8). Another question I began to consider was whether CEN, comprised primarily of the bourgeoisie, might unintentionally use the oppressed people (the families of poor and minority children) for their own agenda, further reproducing the dominant culture. Finally, I noted Anyon’s (1997) bold assertion about the necessary qualities of school reformers: “outrage, combativeness, and courage” (p. 186). I wondered if outrage and combativeness were the goals, or merely the means to the goals, for CEN. Are these attitudes necessary for success? Might they impede collaborative relationships between community and schools?



To begin addressing all these questions herein, I will first discuss the context of the schools in Charleston County.

### Context

The Charleston Education Network is concerned with the education of students living and attending public schools in Charleston County, South Carolina. Since these students are impacted by not only the district and county in which they live, but also by the state's history, geography, and educational system, a brief overview of each follows.

#### *The State of South Carolina*

Nicknamed the Palmetto State, South Carolina boasts 4 million residents, living in towns ranging from 40 to 100,000 inhabitants (in the capital city of Columbia). This makes South Carolina the twenty-sixth most populous state in the country. The state is nearly evenly divided between urban areas (55%) and rural areas (45%), and one can cross the state in any direction in less than five hours. The population is 69% white, 29% black, and 1.3% Hispanic ([www.sciway.net/facts](http://www.sciway.net/facts)).

With 182 miles of oceanfront beaches and a temperate climate, tourism is a vital industry in South Carolina's coastal region, called the Lowcountry, which includes the port city of Charleston. Nearly 30 million annual visitors, spending over \$7 billion dollars, create many seasonal, low paying service jobs that require little education. In the Upstate, which is the western area of the state around Greenville and Spartanburg, agriculture is still an important source of income, as it has been throughout the state's past; the leading crops are tobacco, cotton, and soybeans. In the central Midlands, the state government housed in Columbia is the major employer. The median household income in the state is approximately \$26,000, and the average hourly wage for all jobs is

\$12.53. South Carolina's per capita income is 85% of the national average per capita income. Being a right-to-work state, union membership is very low – less than 3% in manufacturing jobs and non-existent in education ([www.sciway.net/facts](http://www.sciway.net/facts)).

South Carolina's history is inextricably entwined with the Civil War and other struggles over racial equity. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union. The following April, the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter in the Charleston Harbor. After the war ended, racial segregation and discrimination continued unchallenged in the state for the next 75 years. Following World War II, however, Civil Rights became part of the national agenda, and in 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. South Carolina responded by passing laws making integrated schools illegal. It was not until 1970, when the Federal Courts required it, that K-12 public schools in South Carolina were officially integrated.

#### *Public Education in South Carolina*

The state educational system today includes 85 school districts serving over 670,000 students in 1,110 public schools. Districts range in size from about 400 students to nearly 60,000 students, and from 48 square miles to 1200 square miles. According to Huntley (2002), 55% of the state's public school students are White, 42% are African American, and 46% are poor or near poor. Individual districts, however, range from 8% to 98% African American, and from 18% to 98% living in poverty (EOC, 2002), demonstrating a pattern of separate schools for different races and classes that is common in other southern states, as well. The percentage of African American students in South Carolina public schools is one-third greater than the number of African American state

residents (32%), in part due to the number of White students who opt for private schools. African American teachers comprise a disproportionately low 16% of the public school teaching force.

The mission of the South Carolina State Department of Education is stated as follows:

. . . to provide leadership and services to ensure a system of public education through which all students will become educated, responsible, and contributing citizens.

(<http://www.sde.state.sc.us/superintendent/mission.htm>)

The State Superintendent of Education is Inez Tenenbaum, a Democrat, who was elected to her second four-year term in November 2002. However, she is running for Congress and the seat of retiring Senator Ernest F. “Fritz” Hollings in the fall 2004 election and is currently in the midst of that campaign. The 17 member State School Board is appointed. One member is appointed by the legislative delegations in each of the 16 judicial circuits, and one member is appointed by the governor. These methods of selecting the state superintendent and state school board open up the possibility of having a politicized and partisan state educational system.

South Carolina has a long history of being at or near the bottom of the nation on nearly all measures of public education, and of maintaining de facto segregated schools. Recent efforts by the State Department of Education to set higher standards for all students have met with praise from independent organizations that rate standards, but insignificant results in terms of actual improved student achievement have been shown. Progress in South Carolina’s schools is monitored by the Education Oversight Committee

(EOC), which is billed as an “independent, nonpartisan group made up of 18 educators, business people, and legislators who have been appointed by the legislature and governor to enact the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998”

(<http://www.state.sc.us/eoc/>). The EOC’s mandate says that it “provides regular, routine and ongoing review of the state's education improvement process, assesses how our schools are doing and evaluates the standards our schools must meet to build the education system needed to compete in the next century.” However, as will be shown, the EOC often reports even miniscule progress in an overly favorable light.

The committee uses the South Carolina 2010 Education Goal as its benchmark:

By 2010, South Carolina’s student achievement will be ranked in the top half of states nationally. To achieve this goal, we must become one of the five fastest improving systems in the country.

In December 2003, the EOC published *Learning Matters: South Carolina’s Progress to the 2010 Educational Goal*, evaluating annual progress towards nine sub-goals derived by the EOC from this benchmark. These were:

- (1) South Carolina will rank in the top half of states on NAEP examinations and other international and national measures.
- (2) Nine out of ten SC students will score at or above proficient on the PACT,<sup>1</sup> SC's standards-based criterion-referenced tests.
- (3) SC will rank in the top half of states on the SAT and ACT.
- (4) Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) passage rates will be at or above the national average.

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<sup>1</sup> Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests, the SC state-made achievement test given annually in grades 3-8.

- (5) SC's high school completion rate will be at or above the national average.
- (6) SC's dropout rate will be in the lower half of states.
- (7) SC will be in the top half of states in percentage of students with disabilities earning a high school diploma.
- (8) SC will be in the top half of states in freedom from drugs, weapons, violence and teacher victimization by students.
- (9) The gap among achievements of students of different racial/ethnic groups and different economic status will be eliminated.

It is noteworthy that in seven of the nine goals, there is no benchmark for actual student progress set; rather, the measure is based solely on how South Carolina compares to other states. Thus, for example, if the national dropout rate rises and South Carolina's dropout rate rises to a lesser degree, the EOC could say that South Carolina is moving towards accomplishing sub-goal number six by improving their national ranking. Conversely, if South Carolina improves, but the rest of the nation improves even more, South Carolina can drop in ranking even though they may be moving in the right direction. These benchmarks, therefore, do little to measure how students are actually faring in these nine areas.

Furthermore, the data reported by the EOC in its 2003 report under each sub-goal are presented and discussed in a manner that implies more progress towards the goals than actually exists. That is, the *narrative* written under each goal is often much more favorably stated than the data would actually suggest, if the reader takes the time to extrapolate from the *charts*. Following is a brief discussion of the actual data on South Carolina Public Schools, contrasted with examples of the exaggerated language of the

EOC report. For Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9, additional data had to be obtained from other sources or extrapolated from the EOC charts in order to present the complete picture.

*(1) South Carolina will rank in the top half of states on NAEP examinations and other international and national measures.*

EOC reports: “The most recent (2003) results reveal steady improvement in reading and math” (EOC, p. 1).

However, the actual complete data reveal scores ranging from no practical change in Reading (214 to 215 in fourth grade from 2002 to 2003) to 16 points in math (220 to 236 in fourth grade from 2000 to 2003). In all cases except 4th grade math, the South Carolina’s ranking compared to other states declined. For example, 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading fell from a ranking of 32<sup>nd</sup> to 36<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading fell from 32<sup>nd</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math fell from 29<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade math ranking improved from 30<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> over the last three years.

*(2) Nine out of ten SC students will score at or above proficient on the PACT, SC's standards-based criterion-referenced tests.*

EOC reports: “Nearly three out of ten students” scored proficient or above in Language Arts, and the change in math performance “represents an increase from 2002” (EOC, p. 2).

While true, the actual goal is 90%, and only 27% of South Carolina’s 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient or above in English/Language Arts. This represents a *decline* at all grade levels

except for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, which improved 3 percentage points. In Mathematics, only 29.6% of students scored proficient or above, which was a *1 percentage point improvement* from 2002. Additional declines are seen when viewing scores for essentially the same students from year to year. For example, 32.5 % of the students who were 4<sup>th</sup> graders in 2002 scored proficient or above in English/Language Arts; of the following year's 5<sup>th</sup> graders, only 19.7% scored proficient or above. These declines in performance of the same students from year to year were seen at every grade level in English/Language Arts and at 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in Mathematics.

(3) *SC will rank in the top half of states on the SAT and ACT.*

EOC reports: “Since 1999, SAT scores in South Carolina have increased 35 points” (EOC, p. 3).

However, the state still remains ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation, ahead of Georgia and the District of Columbia, which the report later notes. South Carolina students scored 493 on the Verbal (compared to a national average score of 507), 496 on the Math (compared to 519), and a composite score of 989 (compared to 1026). An oft cited explanation for the state's low ranking is the “high” percentage (59%) of students who take the SAT. The data that dispute this are not included in the EOC report, but are available from the SAT website. Fifty-nine percent of South Carolina's students take the SAT. When compared to the 23 other states who test 54% or more of their seniors, South Carolina ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> out

of 24. Thus, contrary to the frequent claim of educators in South Carolina, the participation rate does not seem to be a significant factor in the poor performance of the state's students on the SAT.

EOC reports: "SC [ACT] scores have changed little between 2001 and 2003" (EOC, p. 3).

In fact, looking only at the charts the EOC provides in the report, it is clear that scores have stayed the same or declined in all areas tested.

While it is possible that the small declines may be statistically insignificant (no such evidence is provided), when apparently insignificant *gains* are recorded, they are touted in the narrative. No national ranking for the ACT is reported in the EOC document. However, the ACT website (<http://www.act.org/news/data/03/states.html>) does provide this information. South Carolina ranks 49<sup>th</sup>, ahead of Mississippi and the District of Columbia. Moreover, when considering the subset of students who had taken all of the recommended Core Courses (at least four years of English and three years each of mathematics, social sciences, and natural sciences), SC's composite score increases only ½ percentage point, and the state still ranks 49<sup>th</sup>. Finally, when comparing South Carolina to other states who tested the same percentage of students (34%) or greater, South Carolina ranks 27<sup>th</sup> out of 28, with only Mississippi showing a worse performance.

*(4) Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) passage rates will be at or above the national average.*



EOC reports: “AP participation is increasing at the national and state levels” (p. 4).

The EOC reports *participation* rates as a measure of progress, even though the goal targets *passage* rate. The passage rate for the more than 17,000 AP exams given in 2003 was 57%, compared to a national passage rate of 60%. The number of IB exams passed has declined since 1999 from 76% to 73%. No national comparisons are given, thus making progress towards the goal as stated difficult to assess.

(5) *SC's high school completion rate will be at or above the national average,*  
and

(6) *SC's dropout rate will be in the lower half of states.*

EOC reports: “This [annual dropout] rate ranked 8<sup>th</sup> lowest among 45 states” (EOC, p. 5).

The EOC reports high school completion and dropouts in three different ways, a common educational practice which often leads to confusion and misrepresentation. The high school *completion rate* for the most recent data (2001) reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics is “calculated by comparing the estimated number of public high school graduates in 2001 with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment in the fall of 1997” (EOC, p. 5). Transfers to adult education programs are not included in this statistic. This score simply calculates the percentage of students who started ninth grade who then graduated four years later. South Carolina’s *completion rate* is reported as 51%, compared to a national rate of 67%,

placing South Carolina 50<sup>th</sup> among states. Most statisticians consider this the most accurate means of reporting dropouts, although any student who dropped out before the first day of ninth grade will be excluded, so even this measure is inflated.

The high school *graduation rate* is “calculated by comparing the number of graduates in 2003 with the ninth grade enrollment in the fall of 1999” and “includes transfers to other high schools and/or adult education” (EOC, p. 5). This will yield a higher number than the above calculation, because schools can add to the number of “graduates” the students who said they were going to get a GED, without accounting for whether or not they, in fact, did. This number is the rate reported on the state Report Cards issued to each school district annually. For the entire state, the *graduation rate* is reported as 76.5%, but it ranges from a low of 30.9% to a high of 99%, depending on the school.

The *annual dropout rate* is calculated by “dividing the total number of dropouts for grades 9-12 by the total enrollment for grades 9-12” (EOC, p. 5), yielding essentially a one-year, drop rate per grade. This method of calculation does not account for those who ended one school year and did not return for the next, and thus yields a meaningless rate. South Carolina’s *annual dropout rate* is reported at 3.3% for the most recent year reported (2000-2001), which is an increase from 2.7% in 1996-1997, and it is the only one of the three rates discussed in the narrative.

*(7) SC will be in the top half of states in percentage of students with disabilities earning a high school diploma.*

EOC reports: The EOC reports that in 2002, 31.4% of the eligible population of students with disabilities received either a diploma or a certificate, indicating successful completion of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The EOC report says no national comparison data is available. However, since the release of that report, *Education Week* released a national report on test proficiency among students with disabilities (<http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc04/reports/17testing-t1d.cfm>). Only 35 states reported separate data on students with disabilities; South Carolina ranked last among those for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading, tied for next to last for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, and third from last on 4<sup>th</sup> grade math.

*(8) SC will be in the top half of states in freedom from drugs, weapons, violence and teacher victimization by students.*

EOC reports: No national data is reported; only raw frequency counts for school crimes over the last five years are given. Without commenting on these numbers in the narrative, the reader can see from the table that between 1998 and 2002, simple assault, intimidation, and larceny increased, while weapon possession, drug possession, vandalism, and liquor violations remained essentially unchanged.

*(9) The gap among achievements of students of different racial/ethnic groups and different economic status will be eliminated.*

EOC reports: “There has been some increase in the achievement of African-American students in the last decade, but the improvement in achievement for White students has been greater. The achievement gap between the two groups has not narrowed” (EOC, p. 7). “The gap between White and Hispanic students decreased” (EOC, p. 7).

An accurate statement would have been “both gaps have increased.” The EOC displays in table form specific discrepancies in four areas: SAT, ACT, AP, and PACT.

- a. SAT. In verbal performance, the White/African American disparity in 2003 is 96 points, *up* from a low of 89 points in 1996. In mathematics performance, the White/African American discrepancy is again 96 points, *up* from a low of 88 points in 1996. The White/Hispanic discrepancy in math is 38 points, an *increase* of 14 points over last year’s discrepancy.
- b. ACT. In 2003, the composite score for White students was 21, and for African American students 16.3. This 4.7 point discrepancy is an *increase* from the 4.1 point discrepancy in 2001, though consistent with last year.
- c. Advanced Placement. The percentage of qualifying AP test scores for White students in 2003 was 61%, for Hispanic students, 60%, and for African American students, 30%. These proportions have been stable over the last ten years.

- d. PACT. The following table is included in the EOC report, indicating pervasive disparities between White and African American students, and poor and non-poor students, on the 2003 PACT:

	Mathematics % Proficient & Above	English/LA % Proficient & Above
White	41.7	37.8
African American	13.4	13.6
Free/Reduced Price Meal	16.1	14.6
Full Pay	44.5	41.4

Goal 9 concludes with the following, by far the most indicting words in the report:

The percentage of White students scoring Proficient or above in English/ Language Arts was nearly three times greater than for African-American students. The percentage of White students scoring Proficient or above in mathematics was three times greater than African-American students. The percentage of full pay meal students scoring Proficient or above also was nearly three times greater than free/reduced price meal students in both subject areas. (EOC, p. 8)

The picture painted by these data is that of a state department of education that sets lofty goals, selectively reports and highlights results that falsely suggest the state is making good progress, and then uses those same lofty goals as an explanation for why the state does not meet the Annual Yearly Progress benchmarks of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Reviewing similar data, such as PACT, SAT, and dropout figures, the

Southern Education Foundation, an Atlanta-based public charity founded by George Peabody, in conjunction with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Ford Foundation, issued a *Miles to Go* report on public education in South Carolina (Huntley, 2002). This report is one in a series looking at improving educational quality for all students and the “efforts to help students who, through no fault of their own, are too often concentrated in under-funded, hard-to-staff, and under-achieving public . . . schools” (p. ix). After reviewing test data and other factors in South Carolina’s schools, the report concludes:

Despite progress in some areas of education reform, the data . . . reveal the persistence of stubborn patterns of uneven investment in education and serious disparities in outcomes. Too many poor South Carolinians, including large numbers of African Americans, who pay taxes are being deprived of the type of education they need in order to earn livable wages, meet requirements of the technology-driven workplace, participate fully and knowledgeably in civic life, and provide bright futures for themselves and their children. . . . All South Carolinians deserve a chance to be all that they can be. What they can be must not be left to accidents of geography, race, ethnicity, or class. (p. ix)

The Southern Education Foundation challenges the state of South Carolina: Inadequate and uneven patterns of expenditure on K-12 education for low-income and African American students are resulting in low levels of educational attainment, failure to meet standards, and high dropout rates. The lack of adequate college preparatory courses in low-income schools and the concentration of out-of-field teachers in low-achieving schools are

consigning low-income and minority-group students to an unequal and inferior education in South Carolina. The pipeline into higher educational opportunity is too narrow. South Carolina can and must do better.

(Huntley, p. 13)

The tribulations of some of these high poverty school districts in South Carolina have been recently highlighted in a current lawsuit in which eight poor, rural school districts are suing the South Carolina Legislature for more money for public education, to supplement their inadequate property tax bases. An earlier lawsuit filed by numerous school districts in 1993 led to a 1999 State Supreme Court ruling that the state was required by its constitution to provide a “minimally adequate education” for all students. At issue in the current lawsuit is just how much money the state must provide to districts in order to ensure that opportunity, and just how little education qualifies as “minimally adequate.” According to the plaintiffs’ lawyer, Stephen Morrison:

South Carolina’s method of paying for public schools perpetuates a cycle of ignorance, poverty and despair. . . . This is a case about South Carolina’s continuing neglect of its children. . . . The state consistently fails to provide its children with a quality education.

(<http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/living/education/6489037.htm>)

The attorney representing the State Legislature counters that “children in the plaintiff districts have the opportunity for a minimally adequate education” ([www.thestate.com](http://www.thestate.com)). As of January 10, 2004, testimony was continuing. CEN is watching this suit closely, because the outcome could affect funding in all districts,

including Charleston County, and it also could operationally define the standard for a “minimally adequate education” to be used as a measure of the district’s performance.

Now let us narrow our perspective from the state to the local district of Charleston County.

### *The City of Charleston and Charleston County*

Charleston is a historical, culturally rich, authentically preserved, small city on the Atlantic coast boasting a sub-tropical year-round climate. Part of its quaint allure is the deliberately preserved “veneer” of the Old South, and all that implies. Around the area called the Battery along the Charleston Harbor, there are striking ante-bellum mansions, filled with southern traditions and some old Charleston families, as well as many transplants from other parts of the country who have the wealth to purchase and properly maintain these impressive residences. These homes reflect the opulence and the architecture of the pre-Civil War Charleston that was available to its white, wealthy residents.

While not based on scientific data, the city of Charleston has been dubbed the “most polite city in America” for nine years running in a nationally publicized etiquette survey. This honor is perhaps reflective of how people in Charleston society interact and predictive of how acrimony and dissent are received in that society.

Today, Charleston County is comprised of 310,000 residents, according to the 2000 United States census, of which approximately 65% are White, 32% are African American, and 2.4% are Hispanic. The current mayor of Charleston is Joseph P. Riley, Jr., who was re-elected in the fall of 2003 to his eighth consecutive term. Mayor Riley has served as mayor continuously since 1975 and is recognized nationally for his



leadership in decreasing crime and for promoting historic preservation. He has acknowledged that education is the one major area that Charleston has “not gotten right.” Mayor Riley helped launch the Charleston Education Network in the spring of 2000 and remains a member of its Board.

In 2002, according to the Chamber of Commerce, over 4.3 million tourists visited the city of Charleston, creating an economic impact of over \$4.7 billion. Thus, the tourism/service industry is the major employer in the area, followed by the military (United States Navy and Air Force), the Medical University of South Carolina, and the Charleston County School District. Average household income for Charleston County is just under \$50,000 annually, nearly double the state’s average, but this figure does not reflect the great disparity between the lifestyles of those living along the Battery and the minority children on free or reduced lunch who attend the downtown schools. While unemployment for 2002 was only 3.8%, many of these jobs were in the service industry which typically pays low wages. Moreover, making beds and carrying bags requires very little education, a factor that may influence the seeming lack of urgency to improve public schools.

The Chamber of Commerce reports that there are 75 private schools in the Metro Charleston area (which includes neighboring Berkeley and Dorchester Counties, as well), enrolling over 11,000 students. There are nine colleges or universities in the Metro Charleston area, one of which, The Citadel, houses the offices of the Charleston Education Network gratis. There is no official affiliation of CEN with The Citadel, although the current President of The Citadel is a member of the CEN Board, and one of

The Citadel's past presidents, Major General James A. Grimsley, USA (retired), is a particularly active and vocal member of CEN.

*Public Schools in Charleston County*

In the current school year, 2003-2004, the Charleston County School District enrolled 43,700 students in 79 schools and additional programs, who are served by more than 7,000 employees. The district is in the midst of a 5-year, \$365 million expansion, due to a growing population, and includes "four new high schools, two new elementary schools, and numerous school renovations and additions, touching every community the District serves" ([www.ccsdschools.com/](http://www.ccsdschools.com/)). The racial breakdown for the school district is 55% African American, 40% White, and 5% other. Keeping in mind that the county population is 65% white and 32% African American, it is easy to see that the schools are not a demographic microcosm of the community. This may be due to the number of White students enrolled in private schools and also to the number of White adult residents (transplanted retirees and the elderly, for example) who do not currently have children of public school age. There has been a large migration of people of means to the Charleston area from other parts of the country, and it is often the non-native citizen, rather than the native Charlestonian, who has taken up the cause of public education and other social issues.

The Superintendent is hired by the Board of Trustees, which is the atypical name given to the district's Board of Education. At the beginning of this study, the district superintendent was Dr. Ronald A. McWhirt. Dr. McWhirt was completing a four-year term as superintendent, which was his second stint as Superintendent of Schools in Charleston County. His first term as Superintendent was in the 1980s and ended with his

dismissal by the Board. During his most recent tenure, Dr. McWhirt had divided support on the Board.

Dr. McWhirt was not receptive to the efforts of CEN. While not openly antagonistic to CEN, he refused to meet with them or to respond to their requests for information or change. Dr. McWhirt's predecessor, Dr. Chip Zullinger, whose contract expired and was not renewed by the school board because of "style differences," according to CEN members, had been accessible and supportive to CEN, which formed during his tenure. Despite numerous e-mails, letters, and phone calls, Dr. McWhirt did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this study. Dr. Zullinger also was unavailable for an interview. He left CCSD in 1999 for a nine month stint in Denver, and his last known position was as Superintendent of Schools in Manassas, Virginia.

Dr. McWhirt was replaced on October 1, 2003, by Dr. Maria Goodloe. Dr. Goodloe was hired after an extensive nationwide search conducted by a committee of community members and board members, and CEN had considerable input in the process and selection. This is her first position as Superintendent, having come from an Assistant Superintendent position in Corpus Christi, Texas. She is the first female and the first African American to head the district. Her annual salary of \$175,000, with the possibility of earned bonuses for improved student achievement, exceeds that of all superintendents in the state except for the State Superintendent of Schools and has been the subject of some criticism.

On her first day on the job, Dr. Goodloe was quoted in the local newspaper, *The Post and Courier*, regarding her initial observations about the school district. Her words resonated with CEN and their reform agenda, when she said:

When I looked at test scores, it made my heart ache. It's not OK that part of the system achieves and other parts don't. . . . All pieces of the system need to be re-evaluated.

([http://www.charleston.net/stories/100103/loc\\_01goodloe.shtml](http://www.charleston.net/stories/100103/loc_01goodloe.shtml))

These comments, and others she has made publicly, have encouraged CEN and other concerned citizens to believe that Dr. Goodloe will take the bold steps necessary to improve achievement for all students (Butzon, 2004). Although the Superintendent's office had been uncooperative with CEN and its educational goals for the previous three years, due mainly to Dr. McWhirt, there is now the hope that this will change. Dr. Goodloe announced her "turn-around" plan for failing schools in February 2004, which includes a goal that no school will be rated "unsatisfactory" on the Annual School Report Card at the end of next year. Her "belief statement" about education is stated on the district website, as follows:

I believe . . . in life-long learning and the development of a community of learners; in the patience to listen and learn even when we don't want to; that now is the time to challenge our tolerance of inequality, lack of achievement, and poverty; that we should develop, learn, and grow together; that leadership, understanding, vision, and passion will always propel us to higher levels of success; and that there is a time for every person to share their vision, knowledge, and gifts. And, that time is RIGHT NOW!

The Charleston County school district Board of Trustees is comprised of nine members who serve staggered four-year terms and are elected during the General Election every two years. Four members are elected in one election, five in the next.

Current board members are Chairperson Nancy Cook, Hugh Cannon, Hillary Douglas, Sandra Engelman, Gregg Meyers, Jill Conway, Brian Moody, Susan Simons, and Raymond Toler. Members Engelman, Conway, Simons, and Toler were all elected in November 2002, and the remaining five board members' terms will expire in November 2004. Prior to the 2002 election, the majority of school board members (five of nine) were African American, the first and only time this been the case in Charleston County. Currently, Mr. Douglas is the only African American member of the school board. Three African American school board members failed to win re-election in the fall of 2002, and one African American member's seat was redistricted, making her ineligible to run for re-election. Nancy Cook replaced Gregg Meyers, who was interviewed while the CCSD Chairman in this study, as Board Chairperson in November 2003.

The Charleston County School District sets high goals for all students, in words that are fairly typical of all school systems. The mission of the Charleston County School District reads as follows:

The mission of the Charleston County School District, working in partnership with students, families, the workplace and the community, is to ensure that all students receive a high quality education that prepares them to succeed in a complex and competitive world.

The CCSD website continues:

So that students, upon graduation, will demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits needed to be successful in continuing education, the workplace, the family, and life situations, Charleston County School District has established the following learner standards:\*

Students will...

1. read, write, listen and speak effectively.
2. learn and use mathematics concepts and skills effectively.
3. learn and use science concepts and skills effectively.
4. learn and use social studies concepts and skills effectively and develop habits of responsible citizenship.
5. learn and use technology effectively.
6. develop an appreciation for the fine arts and have an opportunity to pursue artistic talents.
7. demonstrate knowledge of and respect for the contributions of diverse cultures and ethnic groups in our community, the nation and the world.
8. demonstrate knowledge and habits that contribute to lifelong physical and mental health.
9. use critical and creative thinking skills to solve problems, work within complex systems, make decisions and generate new ideas.
10. develop skills essential to high performance:
  - learn and work both independently and collaboratively;
  - display courtesy, respect and fairness toward others;
  - resolve conflicts in a positive and constructive manner;
  - develop effective workplace and leadership skills;
  - use appropriate information and other resources to accomplish tasks; and
  - develop and demonstrate effective study and research skills.

11. identify and develop their own talents and interests and appreciate those of others.

12. explore and plan for educational and career opportunities.

\* The special needs of students will be accommodated to ensure that they meet standards at the highest level possible. ([www.ccsdschools.com](http://www.ccsdschools.com))

CEN uses this mission and these goals as the yardstick to measure the district's success.

Linked from the CCSD website is the State of South Carolina Annual District Report Card for CCSD, 2003, which like the EOC's report on state progress, highlights small gains and minimizes the "brutal facts" (Collins, 2001). On the front of the Report Card, it states that the "absolute rating" for CCSD is "average." This score is based on scores on the annual Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT) for elementary and middle schools, and on exit exam results and Life Scholarship qualifications (similar to Georgia's Hope Scholarship) for high schools. However, no explanation is given as to how the "average" designation is determined as opposed to an "above average" or "below average" designation, for example. CCSD scored "average" in the absolute category for 2001 and 2002, as well.

The district's "improvement rating" for 2003 is "unsatisfactory." This score is based essentially on how the same students perform from year to year on the PACT. For example, how did the scores of last year's third graders compare to this year's fourth graders? In 2002, the improvement rating was "below average," and in 2001, it was "average." Thus, the improvement rating for CCSD has declined rather precipitously over the past two years.

According to the 2003 Report Card, student performance is labeled in one of the following categories:

Advanced: Very high score; very well prepared to work at next grade level;

exceeded expectations

Proficient: Well prepared to work at next grade level; met expectations

Basic: Met standards; minimally prepared, can go to next grade level

Below Basic: Did not meet standards; must have an academic assistance plan;

the local board policy determines progress to the next grade level

CCSD's Report Card indicates the following scores on the PACT, given in May 2003, to all third through eighth graders in the district:

Percentage of Students in grades 3-8 scoring at each level:

	Mathematics	English/Language Arts
Advanced	11.7	3.2
Proficient	17.7	24.3
Basic	42.9	42.4
Below Basic	27.8	30.1

When the PACT results for CCSD are disaggregated in terms of racial demographics, the same achievement gap found in statewide data becomes evident. In English/Language Arts, among White students, 10.9% scored below basic; among African Americans, 43.4% scored below basic. At the upper end of the scale, 48.5% of White students scored proficient or advanced; only 12.4% of African American students scored proficient or advanced. In mathematics, among White students, 9.3% scored below basic; among African Americans, 40.8% scored below basic. At the upper end of



the scale, 52.7% of White students scored proficient or advanced; 12.5% of African American students scored proficient or advanced.

When PACT scores are disaggregated for socio-economic status, similar patterns are revealed. In English/Language Arts, among students having subsidized meals, 43.6% scored below basic; among full pay students, 12.6% scored below basic. Again, at the upper end of the scale, 12.6% of the subsidized meals students scored proficient or advanced, whereas 46.8% of the full pay meals group scored proficient or advanced. In Mathematics, among students having subsidized meals, 39.8% scored below basic; among full pay students, 12.1% scored below basic. At the high end of the scale, 13.2% of the subsidized meals students scored proficient or advanced, whereas 50.4% of the full pay meals group scored proficient or advanced.

High School Exit Exams are given to all high school students beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade; a student may take the exams up to four times in order to pass the three subtests, which are English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Writing. Once a student passes one or more subtests, those scores can be “banked;” only those subtests not passed need to be retaken. For the years 2001 - 2003, the results for 10<sup>th</sup> graders in CCSD were:

Percent who...	2001	2002	2003
Passed all 3 subtests	68.7	63.6	64.1
Passed no subtests	5.5	6.8	7.5

These figures again reveal a decline in student achievement; over the last three years, the percentage of students *passing all three subtests* on the first try has *decreased*, and the percentage of students *passing no subtests* on the first try has *increased*.

As with the PACT scores for students in grades 3-8, when High School Exit Exam results are disaggregated for race and socio-economic status, the achievement gap is once again evident. Among seniors otherwise on track to graduate, 98.8% of White students as compared to 89.5% of African American students passed the Exit Exam. Considering financial status, 97.7% of students with full pay meals passed, whereas 87% of students with subsidized meals passed. Perhaps the largest disparity between these student groups is seen in the graduation rate, which is calculated by comparing the number of graduates in 2003 with the number of ninth graders enrolled in the fall of 1999. (Students transferring to other schools or adult education *are not* considered dropouts.) White students graduate at a rate of 71.9%, whereas only 49.6% of African American students graduate. Among full pay meals students, 67.7% graduate, while only 46.5% of subsidized meals students graduate. Thus, a student who is *either* African American *or* eligible for subsidized meals is not only more likely to drop out, chances are greater than 50% that he or she will do so.

While college admission tests are not factored into the official rating of high schools, they are reported on the district's Annual Report Card, as follows:

SAT 2003:	<u>Verbal</u>	<u>Math</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Charleston County	488	478	966
South Carolina	493	496	989
Nation	507	519	1026

ACT 2003:	<u>English</u>	<u>Math</u>	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Science</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Charleston County	18.5	18.7	19.4	19.1	19.1
South Carolina	18.7	19.0	19.4	19.2	19.2
Nation	20.3	20.6	21.2	20.8	20.8

These scores are consistently below the state average, even in a state ranked 49<sup>th</sup>. On the SAT total, Charleston County scores 23 points below the South Carolina average, which corresponds to 60 points below the national average. The disparity between Charleston County scores and the state and national averages exists among all subgroups. For example, disabled students, those living in poverty, those in the bottom 20% of the class, and African American students score even lower than similarly described students in the rest of the state. Moreover, this disparity between CCSD students and the rest of the state exists at the upper end of the spectrum, as well. Even those Charleston County students whose first language is English, or live in homes with incomes exceeding \$100,000, or whose parents have a college degree, or who rank in the top 10% of their class, perform more poorly than their counterparts in the state and nation. Only White students in CCSD fare better than their White peers in South Carolina, but not as well as those in the rest of the nation.

Life Scholarship eligibility (similar to Georgia's Hope Scholarship) for high school seniors is determined by a combination of grade point average and SAT scores. At the high school level, the percentage of CCSD seniors who met the SAT requirement for Life Scholarships was 21.7; the percentage of seniors who met the grade point average was 61.2. In order to qualify for the Life Scholarship, both requirements must be met. In CCSD, the percentage of seniors eligible for Life Scholarships at four-year institutions was 21.7. Thus, 65% of the students with qualifying grades did not qualify for Life Scholarships based upon their lower performance on the SAT, suggesting that CCSD high schools perhaps award higher grades for less actual achievement than others in the state.

Districts are also required by *No Child Left Behind* to ensure that every classroom is staffed by a highly qualified teacher. According to South Carolina's Application for *No Child Left Behind* funding, 50% of all of the state's teachers are defined as "highly qualified," and likewise 50% of teachers in high poverty schools are defined as "highly qualified." This same document defines "highly qualified" as "those teachers that have been determined to have met the content competency component of the highly qualified requirements as a result of having a passing score on a content examination" (Baseline Data and Performance Targets, 2003, p. 1). According to *The Post and Courier*:

States reported anywhere from 16 percent to almost 99 percent of teachers as highly qualified, according to a report from The Education Trust released Monday. Only four states [in addition to South Carolina] reported 50 percent or fewer teachers as highly qualified. . . (Bruce, 2003)

The Southern Education Foundation also noted the paucity of highly qualified teachers in their *Miles to Go* study of public education in South Carolina. They cited "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," in Summary Report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Huntley, 1996):

In the nation's poorest schools where hiring is most lax and teacher turnover is constant, the results can be disastrous. Thousands of children are taught throughout their school careers by a parade of teachers without preparation in the fields they teach, inexperienced beginners with little training and no mentoring, and short-term substitutes trying to cope with constant staff disruptions. It is more surprising that some of these children manage to learn than that so many fail to do so. (p. 7)

Finally, before concluding discussion of the Charleston County School District, it is necessary to explain the unique governance structure that exists there, both because it is a relic of the days of segregated schools and because it makes change within the current educational system even more difficult. This history was derived from the local newspaper (Smith, 1997) and through interviews with members of the Charleston community who recalled many of the events (Riley, Robinson, Meyers, Butzon).

In the years prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark desegregation suit in 1954, Charleston County had 21 separate school districts, each serving grades 1-12. In 1952, a decision was made to reduce the number of districts to eight, following a national trend towards larger districts and as a result of a directive from the South Carolina Education Finance Commission to require larger tax bases. During the 1960s, de facto school segregation of white students and “Negroes” continued in Charleston County, as it did in much of South Carolina and the South. In 1966, the General Assembly and the Department of Education recommended that Charleston County consolidate from eight school districts into one district, and Sen. Charles Gibson introduced a bill to accomplish this the following January 1967. For six months, Gibson’s bill was the subject of heated debate, and opposition ranged from concerns over doubling tax rates in some areas of the county, to fears about manipulation of attendance lines to achieve integration. An excellent example of how segregationists tended to view this consolidation is revealed in a book written by Roeshler (1970) just after the Act of Consolidation was implemented. He writes that Gibson’s explanation of the need for the bill was “pure pie in the sky political hogwash, designed not to inform, but to mislead” (Roeshler, p. 13). He also

offers the following “definition” of the federal HEW in the glossary, demonstrating some decided prejudices of his own:

HEW: Short for the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, a thorn in the side of every freedom loving American because of its disinterest in education and dedication to integration. It ignores the law and rules by “guidelines” it writes and enforces. It is provable that HEW favors the north, the east, and the west, hates the south . . . and is one of the most prejudiced bodies in America. (precedes page 1).

Because of the prevalence of such views, Gibson enlisted Robert Figg, Dean of the University of South Carolina Law School and someone experienced in desegregation, to help write a compromise bill. The resultant structure exists today: “a nine-member county school board and superintendent [that] would handle money and policy issues while the eight school boards already in existence would be converted into ‘constituent’ school boards with continued control over student and teacher assignments, hiring and discipline” (Smith, 1997).

During the 1970s, the constituent districts made some progress towards desegregating schools, although some schools still were nearly all black, as were some of the districts themselves. In 1981, the United States Department of Justice received a complaint that the Charleston County School District was segregated, and a federal attorney named Gregg Meyers was sent from Washington to argue the Justice

Department's case.<sup>2</sup> The two questions addressed by U.S. District Judge Sol Blatt in the federal desegregation suit were:

- Did legislators act with discriminatory intent when they created the Charleston County School District and its constituent districts in 1968?
- Did the county's schools have a larger obligation to desegregate as a result of consolidation? (Smith, 1997)

To both questions, Judge Blatt said no, and his decision stood on appeal in the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. He wrote:

While this court does find that the retention of the constituent districts for attendance purposes has had the effect of making integration slightly more difficult, this finding is undercut by the geography, demography and private school choices of Charleston County. (Quoted in Smith, 1997)

The resultant governance structure has continued to come under review and criticism throughout the years since its adoption. Most recently, the authors of the Regional Economic Development Plan for the Charleston Region, January 2004, state:

Our system of education regulation and administration discourages innovation and excellence. For example, the K-12 system of constituent school boards in Charleston County is anachronistic and discourages innovation. Parents end up micromanaging the schools. Managers become risk averse. The state system of school administration is burdensome and inflexible. (p. 42)

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<sup>2</sup> In an interesting paradox, Gregg Meyers later left the Justice Department, became a private attorney in Charleston, ran for Charleston County School Board, and was interviewed in this study as the Chair of the Board of Trustees of CCSD.

### Summary

While setting lofty goals and optimistically reporting “progress,” public education in South Carolina is failing to meet the needs of many of its children. It is especially failing to meet the needs of poor and minority children, and failing them to an even greater degree than the rest of the nation fails these same students. Furthermore, the South Carolina public schools are not maximizing the educational attainment of even the populations typically easier to teach, such as middle class White students with educated parents. Thus, the system is failing everyone to a certain degree.

Public education in Charleston County reflects these same problems and amplifies them. Charleston County ranks near the bottom within a state ranked near the bottom on nearly all national measures. Issues such as poverty, racial segregation, low paying jobs, and lowered expectations that have plagued the area historically continue to do so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An impractical and antiquated governance structure makes change difficult and subject to political whims. Making significant and lasting systemic change, which is imperative to overcoming the vast inequities in schooling for South Carolina’s poor and minority children, is an extraordinary challenge in this kind of educational environment.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In common with the beliefs of the Charleston Education Network, I begin this review under two assumptions: 1.) there is a persistent achievement gap, especially in urban schools, and 2.) there is adequate research knowledge and evidence that it can be corrected. The first assumption is, I believe, inarguable among anyone who reads the literature. The second assumption may be more disputed, but more recent studies that look at successful *interventions* with high risk students, rather than mere *correlations* between socio-economic status or ethnicity and achievement, are compelling. Thus, only minimal literature will be looked at here to lay the foundation for these two assumptions. Also, inasmuch as this study is not about what schools do to improve, but rather what a *community group* did when schools did not improve, I will omit discussion of the extensive literature on the ways in which schools can reform from within. For a summary and discussion of the components of successful school reform when initiated from *within* or with the cooperation of the school system, see Molnar (2002).

This study is about what a group of concerned citizens did when they were faced with an achievement gap in their own community, and they came to believe that the school district was unable or unwilling to correct it. Thus, those studies looking at the failure of urban school reform efforts to date and the changing role of the community in school reform will be the primary focus of this literature review.

### Assumption 1: There Is a Persistent Achievement Gap.

It has been 50 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) court-ordered an end to racially segregated public schools. It has been more than 20 years since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) unleashed a wave of federally mandated school reforms. The evidence is highly suggestive that neither of these historic events has achieved its intended purpose or desired outcomes.

The current disparity in educational performance between White and minority students is well documented and disputed by few who read educational research. Twenty-five years ago, there had been some initial progress in narrowing the achievement gap, which correlated with increased desegregation of schools during the 1970s and 1980s following a wave of concern generated by the publication of the Coleman Report (1966). For example, from 1970 to 1990, the gap between African-Americans and Hispanics and their white peers was cut in half. Not only were their test scores improving, but college attendance rates for African Americans were increasing, as well (Johnston and Viadero, 2000). However, that progress seemed to halt around 1988, and by the early 1990s, as schools again became more segregated, the improvement began to change course (Johnston and Viadero, 2000). Today, Hispanics are more isolated in school attendance areas than any other minority group, and most “are concentrated in high poverty, low-achieving schools and face by far the highest dropout rate” (Orfield, 2001, p. 14). Consider the following findings (Civil Rights Project, 2004a, p. 1) regarding how America’s schools are becoming again more segregated:

- There has been a substantial slippage toward segregation in most of the states that were highly desegregated in 1991.

- Although American public schools are now only 60 percent white nationwide and nearly one fourth of U.S. students are in states with a majority of nonwhite students, most white students have little contact with minority students except in the South and Southwest.
- The vast majority of intensely segregated minority schools face conditions of concentrated poverty, which are powerfully related to unequal educational opportunity.
- In some states with very low black populations, school segregation is soaring as desegregation efforts are abandoned. (Civil Rights Project, 2004a, p. 1)

The re-segregation of America's schools has had a profound impact on student achievement and the resulting achievement gap between White and minority students. Today, on most educational measures, the average African American or Hispanic student scores with the bottom quarter of White students. The national graduation rate for African American students is reported at 56%, and for Hispanics 54%, compared to 74% for White students, leading to a far greater likelihood of a life lived in poverty for minority students (Greene, 2001). However, more recent data suggest that the odds are closer to 50-50 that a minority student will graduate from high school (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). According to the Civil Rights Project (2004b) at Harvard University, the graduation rates for African American, Native American, and Hispanic *males* are 43%, 47%, and 48%, respectively. Addressing the problem of the national achievement gap becomes complicated by the fact that it is not accurately acknowledged, and this is sometimes called it the "hidden minority dropout crisis" or the "graduation gap" (Civil Rights Project, 2004b). Furthermore, there seems to be little sense of urgency from state

educational agencies to remedy the problem. Consider this finding from the Civil Rights Project (2004b) report:

The Urban Institute Research Associate Dr. Christopher Swanson said:

“The dropout data in use today misleads the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas. The reality is that there is little, or no, state or federal oversight of dropout and graduation rate reports for accuracy.

Incredibly, some states report a 5 percent dropout rate for African Americans, when, in reality, only half of their young adult African Americans are graduating with diplomas. How is such a state of affairs possible? It happens when only nine states report on minority graduation rates and 39 states have no true ‘floor’ for graduation rates that must be met by schools. For example, California sets a goal of 100 percent graduation and yet acknowledges ‘progress’ for ‘any improvement’ — even a tenth of a single percentage point. Given current graduation rates for Native Americans, Blacks, and Latinos in that state, California’s 100 percent goal literally could take over 500 years to achieve for its minority students. (Civil Rights Project, 2004b p. 1)

Even when adding White students into the calculations, “only about 68 percent of all students who enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade will graduate ‘on time’ with regular diplomas in 12<sup>th</sup> grade” (Orfield et al., p. 1). Kati Haycock (2001), Director of The Education Trust, a non-profit organization dedicated to high levels of achievement for all students at all levels, points out that educators tend to blame students and their families when accounting for these failures of public schools. Using poverty, lack of priority placed on

education in the home, limited English proficiency, poor physical conditions, and lack of parental involvement as excuses for children's failure to learn places the blame for poor classroom performance outside of the classroom. Haycock (1998) asserts that, while these factors have an impact on learning, what goes on inside the classroom is more important. Haycock has found that high standards, a strong curriculum, and qualified teachers do produce results for all children, regardless of income or skin color. She cites as part of her evidence unpublished work by Sanders and Rivers (1996) at the University of Tennessee on value-added instruction, and Ronald Ferguson's (1997) unpublished study at Harvard, on the relationship between highly qualified teachers and student outcomes.

Contrary to what these studies recommend, Haycock (1998) observes that too often "we take these students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in school" (Haycock, p. 3). She admits to being "stunned" at how few assignments students in poor performing (i.e., high poverty, high minority) schools are given, and how low-level the few assignments given are. Haycock also notes that we assign to these schools the weakest teachers, many having no demonstrated education or experience in their assigned subject area.

Fossey (2003), too, offers a harsh view of the current state of urban schools.

We must face [a] stark reality . . . Outside the selective, magnet-style schools, education in the minority-dominated urban districts is on the verge of collapse. Educational researchers tend to portray urban schools as basically sound educational environments, which only need a bit of policy advice and guidance to function at a higher level of adequacy. This

is not correct. . . . Any honest review will show that urban school systems are not healthy organisms with a few minor aches and pains. On the contrary, they are deeply and seriously dysfunctional. We must face that reality before we can decide what to do about the endemic racial isolation of public schools in the inner cities. (Fossey, pp. 28, 22)

Johnston and Viadero (2000) cite numerous studies by The Education Trust and others that show that most minority students as a group attend schools that are poorer, more urban, have fewer qualified teachers, have fewer resources, and get poorer instruction. More than a decade ago in a landmark book, Jonathan Kozol (1991) labeled these deficits in resources and results “savage inequalities,” noting that “the immense resources which the nation does in fact possess go not to the child in the greatest need but to the child of the highest bidder” (Kozol, p. 79). Savage inequalities are still evident in the vast majority of urban schools in 2004.

Assumption 2: There Is Adequate Research Knowledge and Evidence that the  
Achievement Gap Can Be Corrected.

In a speech to educational activists, Michelle Fine (2000) said, “I don’t think there’s a mystery to how to educate urban kids. I think we know that one. I think in our lifetimes, we’ve figured that out” (<http://www.crosscity.org/pdfs/PoliticsofUrgency.pdf>). Recent research strongly supports that position; documented results in some high poverty, high minority schools provide evidence that *all* children can indeed learn, when taught to a high standard by qualified professionals having sufficient resources. Douglas B. Reeves, chairman and founder of the Center for Performance Assessment and the International Center for Educational Accountability, says it is a matter of accountability:

"We have done a splendid job of holding nine-year-olds accountable. Let me suggest as a moral principle that we dare not hold kids any more accountable than we expect to hold ourselves" ([www.edletter.org](http://www.edletter.org), 2002). As previously stated, some schools have shown dramatic gains in student achievement with all children, including the most disadvantaged socially and economically. Let us briefly review some results that are labeled the "success stories" of school reform.

The Charles Dana Research Center (1999) at the University of Texas released a study of nine high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools in urban areas across America. These schools, all Title I schools with more than 80% of their students meeting low income guidelines, scored higher than the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading and math achievement for all students in their respective states. Furthermore, they had demonstrated this high level of achievement for at least three years. The "No Excuses Campaign" boldly asserts "there is no excuse for the academic failure of most public schools serving poor children" ([www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org), p. iv). In "Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools" (Heritage Foundation, 2000), they cite schools with enrollments of more than 75% children in poverty, whose students scored above the 65<sup>th</sup> percentile on achievement tests. Over half of the schools scored above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile, as compared to a "typical" school with similar demographics that scores at the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Johnston and Viadero (2000) cite educational performance in one Houston suburban school district over the previous five years. Initially experiencing a 30-point achievement gap between Whites and African Americans or Hispanics, the district implemented strategies that reduced the African American lag to 14 points, and the

Hispanic gap to 11 points. Some schools in the district, in fact, eliminated the gap completely. Their minority students outperform the state average for White students. A Texas A & M researcher, Linda Skrla, explains the district's course change this way: "They have stopped accepting excuses for differential achievement" (as quoted in Johnson and Viadero, p. 1).

The literature also consistently reveals that qualified teachers can make a dramatic impact on student achievement, perhaps even "equal to or exceeding that of socioeconomic status" (ASCD, 2003, p.2; see also Ascher & Fruchter, 2001; Chidolue, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Haycock, 2001; Haycock, 1998; Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000; Wenglinsky, 2002). Haycock (1998) notes a Boston Public Schools study that same year showing that students who had teachers ranked in the top third of the school district (on measures such as teacher education, experience, and knowledge in field) out-performed by six-fold the students of teachers in the bottom third. Haycock additionally cites a Harvard study conducted by Ronald Ferguson (1997) that found that Texas school districts that reversed the typical pattern (i.e., hired "bottom" level teachers for affluent elementary schools and "top" level teachers for high poverty/high minority schools) also reversed the usual outcomes. According to Haycock, by high school, the affluent and poverty groups had "swapped places" in school achievement. She concludes that, based on research from Tennessee, Texas, Massachusetts, and Alabama, "good teaching matters . . . a lot" (Haycock, 1998, p.3).

Finally, in Charleston County, South Carolina, where this dissertation study was conducted, there is the example of Stono Park Elementary School. According to the State of South Carolina Annual School Report Card (2002), Stono Park has a student



enrollment of 160 students that are 85% minority, and 84% are on free or reduced lunch. However, 86% of its students score at the basic level or above on both reading and math on the state's achievement test, the PACT. Schools with similar demographics in South Carolina (according to the Report Card) typically score 60% basic level or above on math and 68% basic level and above on language arts. Moreover, Stono Park has among the lowest proportion of teachers in the district with advanced degrees (33%, compared to the district average of 50%) and more than double the average percentage of teachers with out-of-field permits (3.7%, compared to the district average of 1.6%). Yet, Stono Park produces good student achievement, in spite of what other schools might call handicapping conditions: high minority, high poverty students being taught by less degreed and certified teachers. How does research account for this? What has been the history of efforts at school reform in this and other urban schools?

### The Historical Failure of Urban School Reform

As the achievement gap literature suggests, the need for school reform did not become a new problem in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though there certainly was renewed interest and imperative after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. In *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, Anyon (1997) traces the history of urban educational reform by looking at the sociological impact of economic factors and urbanization throughout the last 150 years. Her review of the history is particularly relevant here, due to the interactions of race, poverty, and urbanization in Charleston, South Carolina, the site of this study.

Anyon (1997) begins her history with the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, noting that cities grew and prospered economically during this time period, and schools

benefited from this prosperity, as well. Educational leaders in urban districts were often nationally renowned figures, including many former university presidents. Teachers, while often lacking more than a high school or normal school education, were perceived as “highly knowledgeable and highly educated . . . dedicated to learning and to their students, and were revered by parents, students, and the community at large” (Anyon, p. 49). City school systems in many urban areas, such as Chicago and Newark, were considered models for the rest of the country.

However, around the turn of the century, cities began experiencing an influx of immigrants, and by 1909, immigrants comprised the majority (60%) of the largest cities’ schools. Unfortunately, the language and curriculum were unfamiliar to many, and some “were taught by teachers who despised them” (Anyon, 1997, p. 49). Because of these factors, Anyon believes that immigrant children and their parents actually preferred the harsh workplace to school, so most attended only a few early years. Many of these larger cities also experienced political corruption and favoritism in all forms of government, including boards of education.

As America moved into the 1920s, factories began leaving the cities, resulting in a reduction of blue collar jobs, and retail, banking, and other white collar businesses grew in the cities. Substantial numbers of professionals moved into the suburbs to commute to their jobs in the cities, and the failure of urban schools grew worse. Anyon (1997) notes:

The failure of the schools to respond successfully to poverty and cultural difference even in a period of relative affluence and strength reveals a phenomenon that continued to grow: . . . the power of social class –

poverty – and racial difference to overwhelm educational efforts to reform schools. (p. 55)

With the economic problems of the 1930s, cities found themselves with a smaller tax base as industry and residents continued to move to the suburbs. The infrastructure of cities was neglected, and that included public school facilities. New buildings were being erected in the suburban areas, but only emergency repairs at most were made in the urban schools. Another change in the ethnic population of urban schools occurred during this time; large numbers of African Americans relocated to northern cities looking for work and for greater freedoms than the South offered. However, Anyon (1997) notes that they faced both housing and job discrimination that prevented them from locating in the suburbs. Discriminatory federal lending policies for home mortgages also contributed to the inability of African Americans to get loans to buy or improve urban properties.

As resources for urban schools decreased, these schools continued to decline. According to a Teachers College survey at the time in Newark, “50% of the school neighborhoods in the city were considered poor, very poor, or inferior . . . served by poor and inferior buildings” (Anyon, 1997, p. 65). Graft, nepotism, and favoritism led to school board members naming many unqualified persons for jobs. Anyon bemoans, “The thirties began the gradual but unmistakable decline in the quality of public education. . . . Of great significance is the fact that the decline has yet to be reversed” (pp. 73-74).

In the forties and following World War II, migration of southern African Americans and Hispanics to northern urban areas continued to increase. This was in part due to the industrialization of agriculture which put the rural poor out of work. Anyon (1997) notes that, in the post-war period, “the 10 poorest states in the union were

Southern” (p. 76). This tally included South Carolina. African Americans who migrated to the cities found that they were denied jobs and union membership. Anyon quotes Adolph Holmes, the Secretary of the Urban League, who commented about the flagging motivation of African American youth to stay in school during this time. Such a youth might ask himself, according to Holmes, “Why should I train for something I will not get?” (as cited by Anyon, p. 78).

During this post-war period and into the 1950s and 1960s, Anyon (1997) reports tax money spent on transportation went predominantly for open highways, and less than 1% went to urban mass transit. Thus, minorities were trapped in neighborhoods where urban renewal was beginning to tear down slums without relocating families or replacing low cost housing. The politics and graft in urban schools increased, while urban school infrastructures were in declining, sometimes deplorable, conditions. Teacher’s unions began to complain about “difficult students,” and qualified teachers became more difficult to find for urban areas (Anyon, p. 91).

As America continued into the decade of the 1960s, white flight from predominantly black urban schools and neighborhoods intensified. The NAACP in Newark, according to Anyon (1997), complained that minority schools were overcrowded and suffered from lagging achievement. In contrast, the level of education in nearby White middle-class areas was excellent, according to news accounts at that time. Anyon characterizes the 1960s as the decade in which “perhaps more blatantly than before, the confluence of social class and race determined the resources made available for a child’s schooling” (Anyon, p. 99). Over half of the families living in urban areas earned less than \$5,000 per year. The War on Poverty created a lasting dependence of

cities on federal funds. Issues of busing and affirmative action impacted national policies and polarized the public.

Also during the 1960s, Anyon (1997) notes that “the segregation of American schools and the bleak record of education for ghetto children came to national attention” (Anyon, p. 113). One of the outcomes of this attention was Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA). As a mechanism to improve schools with high numbers of children living in poverty, Title I was an early and long lasting attempt at school reform. Other researchers credit factors besides poverty for increasing national attention toward educational research and educational change. Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins (1998) cite researchers such as Miles, Dalin, Smith, Gross, Stenhouse, and Sarason as being pioneers in the study of school reform and bringing more attention to it. Lieberman (1998) credits the GI bill, with its resultant growth in higher education and the construction of public colleges over many years after the war, as an impetus for change in public education. If returning soldiers could go to college, public schools needed to be producing high school graduates who were prepared to do so. Further adding to the national demand for increased educational innovation was the “space race.” The launching of Sputnik instigated fears that while World War II had been won by superior technology, the Cold War might be lost to the Soviet Union, due to America’s declining math and science achievement (McDougall, 1985).

Segregation increased and urban achievement continued to decline throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as *A Nation at Risk* documented. Partly as a result of these reports and other media coverage, the public became more aware of the educational decline in American urban schools, and public education felt more pressure to fix its schools. There

was no shortage of research and ideas on how to do this. One major influence of that time period was the Effective Schools Research. Ronald Edmonds (1979) at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Lawrence Lezotte, and others produced extensive empirical research during the 1970s and 1980s that demonstrated that, indeed, all children could learn (Rutter, 1979; Taylor, 2002). According to this research, which was developed partly in response to the claims of the Coleman Report (1966) that socio-economic status was the major factor in learning, effective schools share certain fundamental beliefs:

- That schools have the capacity to provide a quality education for all children, regardless of family background and social context
- That schools with successful records of educating children from all backgrounds, especially disadvantaged ones, share certain essential characteristics . . . relating to leadership, school climate, high expectations, instructional emphasis, educational assessment, and community involvement
- That any school can improve the quality of teaching and learning by making a concerted, building-wide effort to embody these essential characteristics. (Becker, 1992, pp. 3-4)

Others contend that while research has identified what it takes to educate all children “whose education is of interest to us” (Edmonds, 1979), schools are patently unwilling to reform themselves without external accountability. Consider these bold opinions by Finn & Manno (2001):

The problem . . . is that the people who courageously addressed this issue in 1983 [following *A Nation at Risk*] basically took for granted that the public school system as we knew it was the proper vehicle for making those changes and that its familiar machinery could produce better products if it were tuned up, adequately fueled, and properly directed. . . . [Rather], the present school enterprise is not just doing poorly; it's incapable of doing much better because it is intellectually misguided, ideologically wrong-headed, and organizationally dysfunctional. (Finn & Manno, p. 1-2)

In a comprehensive review of current urban school reform efforts, Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi (2001) contend that today's schools are suffering from the mistake of taking the community out of education and relying on internal change. "Successful educational reform ultimately requires a broad and sustainable coalition of support [and] implies the implementation and institutionalization of policies, not just a public endorsement of the desirability of change" (Stone et al., p. 1). Stone et al. go on to state that citizen complacency alone is not the problem, nor are proven leaders and innovations the sole answer. Rather, they believe the answer lies in developing civic capacity, which they define as "various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem" (Stone et al., p. 4). Studies on educational reform even as far away as in India support this belief. In the community of Kerala, where politics is a commonly discussed community topic and political activism in the form of demonstrations and marches is common, literacy rates are also high (Padavil, 1990). The researchers attribute this to the fact that a politically conscious public at all socioeconomic levels

reads daily newspapers in order to stay informed. Moreover, one of the important issues of concern debated in the public sphere has been the quality and availability of good public schools. The authors conclude, “Because the people of Kerala have a very high rate of literacy and because political activism is a normal feature of life in Kerala, it is hardly surprising that reforms take place through political action” (Padavil, p. 8).

Stone et al. (2001) studied urban education reform efforts in eleven major cities across the United States, all of which were racially and ethnically diverse with a high degree of poverty, like the target city in this study. They characterized Atlanta’s recent efforts at school reform as an example of the failure of civic capacity. According to the researchers, the school board was corrupt, the many superintendents were not interested in business or community involvement, and while there was interest among several organizations and community groups in reforming schools, separate agendas divided the efforts. The authors conclude that, “Today, the striking feature of the Atlanta scene is the scarcity of people either seeking to enlist elites to come together on the education issue or to overcome the distrust among the masses” (Stone et al., p. 15).

As a contrast to the Atlanta example, Stone et al. (2001) review Chicago school reform, generally hailed as a success story. The authors are cautiously optimistic that there is truly some change taking place in Chicago. To the extent that it is successful, the authors credit active mayors (both Mayor Washington and later Mayor Daley) and significant, though uneven, efforts by parents and community-based groups that culminated in a fluctuating but progressively building civic capacity. Nakagawa (2003) has a more tepid view of Chicago’s progress. Calling the results “mixed,” she notes that the goal of the Chicago reforms was not merely to increase parental involvement, or as



she differentiates, to move parents from “enablement” to “empowerment.” She reminds the reader that, while parental empowerment was achieved, this empowerment was intended “to be an instrument for higher student achievement” [p. 217]. On this measure, the Chicago model has been disappointing. Miller, Allensworth, and Kochanek (2002) have recently found that in Chicago “overall, student performance was still very poor. Fewer than half of all students graduated [and] barely half were on track after their freshman year . . .” (Miller et al., p. 1).

The results of Stone et al.’s (2001) comprehensive study overall found *no cities* engaging in truly comprehensive school reform efforts, noting:

Instead of the systemic reform that many educators talk about, we found a variety of pilot projects, demonstration schools, and innovative practices, but in sum total a pattern of partial and fragmented efforts. Action fell far short of rhetoric, especially short of the rhetoric of *comprehensive* change. (Stone et al., p. 29)

They conclude that “civic capacity involves mobilization by a broader array of community interests to remove policy-making from subperforming policy subsystems” (Stone et al., p. 7). However, they caution that the goal is not to simply cause disruption of the subperforming system; the goal is to create an “institutional legacy” (p. 7). “Fundamental reform . . . calls for more than bringing short-term pressure to bear on an existing arrangement; instead it calls for altering relationships” (p. 7). In order for this to happen, the authors contend that civic mobilization is critical, because the “subsystem . . . rarely reforms itself” (Stone et al., p. 8). Anyon (1997) states it more strongly:

Dire effects are produced when people in a community and school confront the workings of a class-biased, racist system without sufficient resources and without hope. (Anyon, p. 37)

Sarason (1998), reflecting on the evolution of school reform efforts, seems to blame the failure of schools today on the system's resistance to change, lamenting that,

If everything changed as a result of World War II, the governance of schools has not. By governance I do not mean how a single school should be governed, or how a board of education should function, or how a state department of education should oversee schools. What I mean is the political-legal-administration of the *system* of schooling. If anything is clear, it is that this system has been a dismal failure in at least two respects. First, it did not foresee what was happening in our schools. Second, what the system has done in regard to the recognition (finally) of the inadequacies of schools has had little effect, to indulge understatement. (Sarason, p. 34)

Moses and Cobb (2001) claim that "meaningful school reform will require the voices of students and communities demanding the quality education that too many assume they can't handle and don't want" (Moses and Cobb, p. 1). Anyon (1997) believes that in order to do this successfully, educational reformers can not be "resigned, complacent, or afraid" but rather must "summon from ourselves and others the outrage, the combativeness, and the courage that will transform . . . our inner city schools" (Anyon, p. 186). The literature is sparse on reports of community groups demonstrating "outrage, combativeness, and courage," but they are increasing in number.

### Changing Roles for the Community in School Reform

From advisor to equal partner, from passive listener to decision maker – indeed, from fundraiser to hell-raiser – the role of parents in schools is changing. (Fege, 2000, p. 39)

It would be an oversight to discuss the literature on community-driven school reform without first acknowledging the critical theoretical framework from which it arises. For citizens to “drive” school reform, for them to move from “enablement to empowerment” (Nakagawa, 2003), requires a shift in the power balance between the community and schools. Consider Feges’s (2000) comments:

The current structure of public schooling does not invite public engagement, but instead reinforces a hierarchical pattern that gives neither students nor parents an official voice. Instead of opening up and encouraging genuine parental participation, the school structure eliminates anything that might erode the power equilibrium. (Fege, p. 39)

Fege (2000) places the blame for this imbalanced “power equilibrium” directly on the schools, saying:

Educators have not viewed parents and the community as a market. As a result, parental involvement and community involvement have often played secondary roles in the framework of public education, especially in poor and disadvantaged school districts. Instead of developing a market sensitive structure, educators reinforce traditional power dynamics. They are unwilling to redistribute their prerogatives. (Fege, pp. 40-41)

Community organizing to drive school reform, therefore, according to Mediratta, Fruchter, and Lewis (2002) has been born of desperation, primarily in the last ten years, “wherever conditions have become intolerable for students, families, and communities” (Mediratta et al., p. 3). They believe that community-driven school reform has become necessary because “large bureaucracies tend to be embattled, isolated, and defensive, [and] schools and school systems often erect barriers that fuel antagonisms and prevent communication” (Mediratta et al., p. 14). Thus, community driven school reform is “not for the timid” but rather requires that communities be “brave and bold” in order to confront those institutional barriers (Mizell, 2003, p. 1). Possible benefits of such community reform groups are that they “start conversations among disparate players. They keep the focus on students. They make it possible for powerful demands for change to be heard. And they are persistent” (Mediratta et al., p. 8).

In their extensive study of 66 community activist groups who organized for school reform, Mediratta et al. (2002) found that challenging the power structure that keeps low-income children in poorly performing schools and prevents them from receiving a good education was the primary goal of the groups. These groups’ members tended to have the most at stake, in that they usually had children in the low performing schools that they were trying to change, and therefore they had the most to gain by improving public education. Most of the organizations in the study were reliant on individual memberships, focused on other community issues, as well (such as adequate housing or environmental justice), were sponsored or supported by larger organizations, had been involved in education issues for at least four years, and had budgets ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000. Mediratta et al. found the following characteristics of these

groups that organize for school reform, and who take adversarial roles with the school district:

1. They are community based organizations with histories of working to improve their communities.
2. They are intentionally building relationships, skills, and organizing power among parents, young people, and community residents to transform local conditions and create new opportunities.
3. They are independent of the school and school system, though some may have developed relationships with schools through other service or development activities. (Mediratta et al., p. 4)

A common initial step for community reform groups, after they have organized and become educated about the facts of their public schools, is to educate others. They usually begin by publicizing the “brutal facts” (Collins, 2001) about the school or district’s dismal performance and demanding that the superintendent and school board be held accountable. This step can be complicated by school administrators that become more closed to the community as they are confronted by the outsiders’ demands for information. Even the most basic data about the school may become unavailable, which leads the groups to resort to Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain what should be publicly accessible data (Mediratta et al., 2002; Mizell, 2003).

After the group has sifted through data, educated themselves, and educated others, they may take these additional steps to effectively advocate for change, outlined by Sharma (2004):

1. *identification of an issue for policy action, or setting the agenda:*  
“decide which problem to address and attempt to get the target institution to recognize that the problem needs action”
2. *solution formulation:* “propose solutions to the problem and select one that is politically, economically, and socially feasible”
3. *building the political will to act on the problem and its solution:*  
“coalition building, meeting with decision makers, awareness building and delivering effective messages”
4. *policy action:* “when a problem is recognized, its solution is accepted and there is political will to act, all at the same time . . . a short window of opportunity [exists] which advocates must seize”
5. *evaluation:* “assess the effectiveness of their past efforts and set new goals based on their experience” (Sharma, p. 11)

Risks to groups such as these that organize for school reform quickly become evident. One obstacle for these groups is that sometimes they are not seen as legitimate players in the school reform process, because “school-level educators and insider parents often object to a group that challenges the traditional parent-teacher association. School officials may dismiss as unimportant any parent who is not part of the ‘official’ parent organization” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 16). As Nakagawa (2003) says, the “official” parent organization has been restricted to an “enablement role,” but these groups are seeking and demanding “empowerment roles.” She explains that most schools want parents simply to “enable” the school, or further the school’s agenda, through

fundraising, being in the PTA, and volunteering at school, but most schools do not want parents to be truly empowered to make policy decisions and systemic changes.

Davies (2002) speculates that nine out of ten schools in America “still hold parents at arm’s length” (p. 388). Despite Wong’s (1992) contention that schools are not closed systems nor islands unto themselves, it can appear that way to those trying to get access. As one activist says, “You’re always concerned when you’re organizing low-income people with how to get a seat at the table. Once we get a seat at the table, we’re nice people to deal with” (Gehring, 2004, p. 4).

Another difficulty is being able to sustain the efforts of these organizing groups. Since the members are often from low-income families with little social capital, the daily demands of their lives may be exhausting. Salaries for paid staff are usually not available or sustainable. These same members may have great difficulty in understanding complex educational issues of testing and instruction and in translating jargon, especially if the school district is unwilling to make information both accessible and understandable, and “communities cannot support what they do not understand” (Mizell, 2003a, p. 2).

Community organizing for school reform can also lead to conflicts related to insider/outsider status (Gold & Simon, 2002; Jones & Portz, 1997). Building bridges with the school district on the one hand, while at the same time holding them accountable for student success on the other, causes groups to “grapple . . . with the contradictions inherent in the insider/outsider status” (Gold & Simon, p. 38). The authors noted, however, that regardless of their status, such groups still successfully employ strategies such as “large turnout, accountability sessions, and the power of confrontation” (Gold & Simon, p. 38).

According to Mediratta et al. (2002), serious acts of retaliation against those involved can be the largest obstacle to community based school reform efforts. Teachers who are sympathetic to the community reformers are often “singled out by district administrators as troublemakers and threatened” (Mediratta et al., p. 13). Other teachers, who disapprove of the organizers’ activities, “have used their power to make school life difficult for youth and parents involved in organizing” (Mediratta et al., p. 13). These students suffer the double jeopardy of a poorly performing school and a hostile school staff.

To counter some of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, groups often seek an early, easy “win,” such as a parent appointment to a committee, to “energize members and attract more participants” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 11). This increase in power may transition into an opportunity to tackle larger issues of more substance, such as principal appointments or policy decisions. Ferguson and Dickens (1999) write:

A well-known method of community organizing is to begin with small but winnable issues that are of everyday concern. Small victories can turn around expectations and pave the way for a more comprehensive grassroots effort to bring about change. One overview of school reform also emphasizes the importance of starting with small, manageable steps – “revolution in small bites.” (Ferguson & Dickens, 1999, p. 346, quoting Martz, 1992)

Zinn, however, pessimistically warns that such small successes can be deceiving: The occasional victory may ease some of the pain of economic injustice. They also reveal the usefulness of protest and pressure, suggest even greater possibilities for the future. And they keep you in the game, giving



you the feeling of fairness, preventing you from getting angry and upsetting the wheel. It is a system ingeniously devised for maintaining things as they are, while allowing for limited reform. (Zinn, p. 135)

School reform activists can have a powerful effect in their communities by using multiple strategies on multiple fronts; “rarely [do they] work only inside or outside schools, or employ only a confrontational or collaborative approach” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 17). In fact, community groups often find that by serving a collaborative role on occasion, such as providing grants or training to the district, they can “buy” a seat at the school’s table. These groups can also become allies to educators within the system who are trying to make systemic changes. They can benefit Superintendents, who “facing entrenched middle management, can gain leverage from the pressure applied by external groups” (Mediratta et al., p. 19).

Measuring the successes of community reform groups can be difficult. “Because most organizing groups do not control the implementation of the reforms they have negotiated, they face the continuing challenge of how to move the change process inside the school and how to sustain their focus on improved instruction over the extended time that school change requires” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 7). Thus, even the changes won by organizing groups usually require additional action and implementation on the part of the school district, which has historically been non-responsive and ineffective at reforming itself.

Despite the difficulty in measuring their success, Mediratta et al. (2002) suggest that groups such as these be evaluated on three different levels:

- Did more citizens become engaged in the business of reforming public education?
- Have there been “instructional, organizational, and cultural changes” as a result of this involvement?
- Is student achievement increasing? (Mediratta et al., p. 23)

As one activist organizer reminds us, “We’re measuring our impact by what [changes] we get committed, but ultimately, an indication of improved academic achievement in the schools is the only one that counts” (Mediratta et al., p. 13). She acknowledges that the measure of change that we hold schools accountable for – increased student success – is the same standard to which community-driven school reformers should be held. Mizell (2003a) cautions all educational reformers, “You have to chain yourselves to student results. . . . That is and must be the bottom line” (Mizell, p. 15).

Probably the most notable of these types of community activist groups is ACORN, the Association for Community Organization for Reform Now, an advocacy group for low and moderate income families which “has emerged as a major player in K-12 education issues” (Gehring, 2004, p. 1). Their tactics have been described as “. . . banging on the doors of power to demand a role in solving problems, while coming armed with policy research and lobbying acumen to bolster its in-your-face tactics” (Gehring, p. 1). Founded in Arkansas 34 years ago, ACORN is an outgrowth of the National Welfare Rights Organization and claims 150,000 members in 750 neighborhoods in 60 cities. ACORN began by addressing what have been called “dignity issues” – fixing leaky roofs and falling plaster – and they have evolved into a force for

significant, systemic change in schools. They have become “so well organized that school leaders know they ignore its members at their own peril” (Gehring, p. 2), which obviously represents a change in the power differential. Gehring cites the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University evaluation report of ACORN, which states that ACORN has “managed to walk this interesting line between having this very aggressive advocacy stance and, on a practical level, having effective working relationships” (Gehring, p. 2).

ACORN explains their agenda for better schools as having the following aims:

ACORN is campaigning to improve the quality of public schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, a goal we understand to include increasing the decision-making power of parents. ACORN is opposing privatization efforts, promoting democratic accountability, and aggressively pressuring school systems to bring schools in poor neighborhoods up to the standards of the schools in wealthy neighborhoods. This includes winning for these schools equitable funding, smaller class sizes, lower teacher vacancy rates, and higher teacher qualification levels. We are working to improve existing small schools in low-income neighborhoods, and in some cases to create new ones. (<http://acorn.org/index.php?id=43>).

ACORN reports their current projects as 1.) a 6,000 person rally in Maryland for better state funding for low-income schools, 2.) a student walk-out in California protesting high teacher turnover, 3.) a protest in Philadelphia against the private company Edison Schools being contracted to run schools, and 4.) press events, letter writing and e-

mail campaigns, and rallies to convince President Bush to increase federal funding for *No Child Left Behind* (<http://acorn.org/index.php?id=43>).

Another adversarial community reform group for school reform is the Cross City Campaign, which began in 1993, and is presently located in nine large urban cities. They describe their mission thus:

The Cross City Campaign promotes the systemic transformation of urban public schools, resulting in improved quality and equity, so that all urban youth are well-prepared for post-secondary education, work, and citizenship. (<http://www.crosscity.org/about/index.htm>)

Their belief statements are especially revealing of their approach, and their strategies evolve from those beliefs. The Cross City Campaign asserts:

- All young people, without exception, can achieve to the highest standards.
- Urban students – especially students of color and students from low income communities – deserve high quality, equitable public schools.
- Successful schools are community-based, provide expert instruction, and have the autonomy and resources to ensure that all children achieve to high standards.
- School reform that leads to fundamental improvement in public education requires bold action by all stakeholders working together.

- A national network, rooted locally and including all stakeholders, can best bring about these reforms.

(<http://www.crosscity.org/about/index.htm>)

Cross City explains their view of community organizing for school reform thus:

Many educators say that they cannot do the work of educating children alone, particularly low- and moderate-income children and children of color. Unfortunately, there are few mechanisms that allow parents and community members in low income neighborhoods to play a meaningful role in the education of their children. . . . The common viewpoint is that parents are seen as the people who drop off their kids at school, conduct fundraisers, and occasionally volunteer time in a classroom. Community organizing seeks to change that dynamic. . . . Organizing is about building power for people who are powerless and whose lives are negatively impacted by the decisions of others.

(<http://www.crosscity.org/pdfs/StrNbrhdsStrSchls.pdf>)

In different locations, Cross City workers have organized students to take an effective role in school improvement, including sitting on committees formerly inaccessible to them. They have negotiated policies with school districts that have led to better access of low income children to challenging academic programs. They have established after school programs, helped get bonds passed, and pushed for smaller schools, smaller classes, and better school climate. In a study conducted by Cross City on its own community organizing campaigns, Gold and Simon (2002) concluded that while there were additional resources being brought into schools and improvements in

school climate as a result of their efforts, “within the discourse of school reform, their accomplishments remain largely unacknowledged, while the families in these low-income communities continue to be characterized as lacking in the skills and values necessary to support their children’s education”

(<http://www.crosscity.org/pdfs/StrNbrhdsStrSchls.pdf>).

Another urban community reform group is SET, or the Southeast (Baltimore) Education Taskforce. Founded in 1995, this group set the following goals:

1. Building strong school-family-community relationships;
2. Developing school-community programs for advancement of students;
3. Organizing to ensure safe and positive learning environments; and
4. Advocating for more resources for schools.

(Gray & Wheeldreyer, 2001, p. 12-13)

The approach taken by SET differs somewhat from ACORN and Cross City in that SET has made it a priority to “build and maintain collaborative and non-confrontational relationships with school staff” (Gray & Wheeldreyer, p. 14) while voicing concerns directly to principals, administrators, and board members. In fact, if the principal does not want the group in the school, SET leaves, because they believe, “If you don’t have the principal of the school working with you, you just can’t get anything done in that school” (Gray & Wheeldreyer, p. 14). While this arrangement may not seem very empowering for the parents, SET has successfully resolved many “dignity issues” for the schools, such as overcrowding, bi-lingual education, and poor building conditions. Moreover, since the agenda for SET is the agenda determined by the school staff, the

principal is often receptive to empowering SET to fight battles for them against the school board.

In Mississippi, where de facto racial segregation is in evidence in public schools and its minority children are the poorest in the nation, a group organized for school reform in 1996, calling itself the Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG). These community organizers have as their goal to “to create a quality, first-rate public educational opportunity for African-American families in their school districts” (Lambright, 2001, p. 10). MEWG is the first such organization in Mississippi to attempt to impact state level changes. Their targets are:

1. to provide training, technical and legal assistance to grassroots organizations in support of their efforts to impact the formation of public education policy in their local school districts; and
2. to pool the resources and strength of the local organizations to impact the formation of education policy at the state level, in support of the work which the organizations are doing at the local level. (Lambright, p. 10)

Thus far, successes of the MEWG include impacting state policy on parental and community involvement, drafting legislation, and building relationships with key legislators and officials.

Community driven school reform has spanned from Massachusetts to California, touching many cities and states in between (Bilby, 2002; Cortes, 1995; Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Sexton, 1995; St. John, 1995). The variety of roles taken on by these community school reform groups was clearly delineated in Gold and Simon’s (2002)

study, into a framework which they call the “Education Organizing Indicators Framework” (Gold and Simon, p. 12). They found that such groups can be described and assessed by the degree to which they 1.) provide leadership development for parents, students, and sometimes school staff, 2.) help community members increase their power base in order to obtain resources and policy changes, 3.) increase social capital by bringing residents together with other people they might not ordinarily associate with, 4.) publicly hold school officials accountable for student achievement, 5.) increase resources and access for all children to achieve equity, 6.) insist on a strengthened school/community connection, 7.) demand high expectations and high quality instruction for their children, and 8.) create a positive school climate, staffed with caring teachers and smaller classes in safe neighborhoods.

Mediratta et al. (2002) speculate that without community driven school reform groups, school reform would be even more dilatory, because, “Mostly . . . those committed to a good education for all students are organizing from outside the system” (Mediratta et al., p. 1). Fege (2000) warns that, while schools in the past have generally refused to allow parents an equal partnership in school reform, that must change:

School leaders can no longer view parents as appendages to schooling or meddlers in their work. They can no longer ignore parents or treat them with disdain. Without community support, education reform will not survive and the future of civic responsibility toward education is in danger. (Mediratta et al., p. 39)

Mizell (2003) concurs, saying, “Without broad based support by the community as a whole, school reform will either be short-lived or have limited effect” (Mizell, p. 2).



Bryan (1997) warns school administrators that they need to be thinking of engagement differently. In a presentation to school administrators, he admonished them:

You cannot, you must not, think of “engaging the public” as a new and better way of selling your ideas – of enlisting support. The central thought that drives public engagement is not more power, but less; not gaining control, but giving it up. (Bryan, p. 2)

Mizell (2003) also warns that it is not just educators who need to rethink their roles and responsibilities for school reform. He challenges the community members themselves, saying, “No community will prosper if its civic action is immobilized by the narrow self-interests of citizens whose commitment to education ends at their front doors” (Mizell, p. 2). Some critical theorists even argue that fixing schools and fixing communities are inseparable and dependent on one another (Anyon, 1997; Jones & Portz, 1997). The Cross City Campaign puts it most simply: “Schools cannot, will not, and *should not* be transformed without involving communities” (<http://www.crosscity.org/about/index.htm>).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Eulouise Williams (2000) laments in her University of Georgia doctoral dissertation that methodology for historical case studies is scarce. In her search for models to use, she contacted historian and UGA professor Dr. Ronald Butchart, Chair of the Educational and Social Foundations Department, for advice about this “non-traditional” format. He responded to her, in part:

Historians tend to spend far less time worrying about methodologies than other social sciences. Instead, they get out, dig around in the sources, and report back! That’s the methodology. One reads historical case studies and then draws her or his own conclusions. (Butchart’s personal correspondence to Williams, October 13, 1999, as cited in Williams, p. 60)

Having said that, and having a realization that just saying “I got out, I dug around, and I am reporting back” would not be sufficient, this methods chapter includes several parts: 1.) a statement of purpose of the study and research questions, 2.) data sources, 3.) data analysis, 4.) personal subjectivities, and 5.) unique challenges leading to possible limitations of the study.

#### Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to examine the efforts of the Charleston Educational Network (CEN) to leverage school reform in failing schools in Charleston, South Carolina.

*Research Questions:*

1. What are the historical and personal origins of CEN and its reform agenda?
2. What are the characteristics of CEN or its members that might cause this organization to function differently than do most community school reform groups?
3. What evidence is there that CEN is or is not achieving its mission of “accountability to achieve excellence in public education”?
4. What can other citizen’s action groups and school districts learn from CEN’s educational activist strategies?

*Data Sources:*

There were three primary sources of data used in this study: 1.) interviews, 2.) documents, and 3.) observations.

*Interviews*

I conducted formal interviews with 10 participants, who are named and described in Appendix A. They included the Executive Director of CEN, the two current CEN Board co-chairpersons, the past CEN Board chairperson, another CEN member, the School Board President, and two other School Board members. I also interviewed the Mayor of Charleston and the head of the Clean Slate informal political action committee that was born of CEN and greatly impacted the recent school board elections. All interviews were approximately one hour in length, with the exception of approximately 12 hours of formal interview with the Executive Director. A “Cast of Characters” table found in Appendix B clarifies the roles of these and other individuals named in the findings. Numerous informal interviews and discussions were also conducted in the

process of field observations with attendees at CEN and CCSD meetings and with the Executive Director.

### *Documents*

Documents which I reviewed and analyzed included newspaper accounts of CEN and other related education activities (e.g. *The Post and Courier*, *The State*), minutes of CEN and CCSD board meetings, CEN generated documents (e.g., “Fast Facts” data analysis, newsletters), State Department of Education publications (e.g., Education Oversight report, Annual School Report Cards, PACT test score data, website postings of news releases), Charleston County School District documents (e.g., Superintendent’s Plan for Excellence, School Report Cards, CCSD website postings of mission and goals), and personal correspondences (letters and e-mails, some addressed to me and some addressed to and shared by others).

### *Observations*

I attended three CEN functions, including two quarterly Board meetings and a presentation sponsored by them, and three School Board functions, including two monthly business meetings and a special presentation by the Superintendent. I visited one school in CCSD, Stono Park Elementary, which is an atypical school for CCSD in that it is a high performing school in a high poverty, minority area. I also observed the CEN Executive Director at work in his office and in several other community settings.

### *Interview Protocols*

I designed and used two separate protocols for semi-structured interviews, and they are reproduced below. Probes and follow-up questions were asked as appropriate,

and questions were not necessarily asked in the order given. All formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### *I. Interview Questions for CEN Personnel*

1. Tell me about how you personally got interested in school reform.
2. Tell me how CEN got started.
3. Talk about the make-up of your board.
4. Talk about the relationship CEN has with the school district staff.
5. Talk about the relationship CEN has with the elected school board.
6. How will you know that CEN is finished with its mission?
7. What evidence of success do you have to date?
8. Tell me about the demographics of Charleston County Schools.
9. Explain the significance of the piece of legislation CEN initiated that was introduced in the SC legislature.

(additional questions asked only of the Executive Director)

1. Explain why you think the Archimedes principle is an analogy for school reform.\*
2. You have another analogy about the wings on an airplane.\* Explain that.
3. React to this statement:

“...educational reformers can not be “resigned, complacent, or afraid” but rather must “summon from ourselves and others the outrage, the combativeness, and the courage that will transform...our inner city schools” (Anyon, 1997, p. 186)

(\* The Executive Director has written or spoken about these two analogies in questions 1 and 2 in several contexts previously.)

### *II. Interview Questions for Current Members of the CCSD Board of Trustees*

1. Is there a need for an organization like CEN?
2. What do you see as the major purpose or mission of CEN?

3. What strategies does CEN use that you feel are successful or welcome?

Unsuccessful or unwelcome?

4. Talk about the relationship CEN has with the school district staff.

5. Talk about the relationship CEN has with the elected school board.

7. Do you have any evidence of the impact of CEN to date?

8. Tell me about the demographics of Charleston County Schools.

9. Explain the significance of the piece of legislation CEN initiated that was introduced in the SC legislature.

#### *Methodology used for interviewing*

I adopted a method of interviewing recommended by Mishler (1986), who regards interviewing as a form of discourse that yields “a joint product of what interviewees and interviewers talk about together and how they talk with each other” (Mishler, p. vii).

Mishler bases his method on four foundational “propositions:”

1. Interviews are speech events.
  2. The discourse of interviews is constructed jointly by interviewers and respondents.
  3. Analysis and interpretation are based on a theory of discourse and meaning.
  4. The meanings of questions and answers are contextually grounded.
- (Mishler, p. ix).

The goal of Mishler’s (1986) alternative approach is to resolve the “gap between research interviewing and naturally occurring conversation” (Mishler, p. 6), and “to understand what respondents mean by what they say in response to our queries and

thereby to arrive at a description of respondents' worlds of meaning that is adequate to the tasks of systematic analysis and theoretical interpretation" (Mishler, p. 7). These are the types of questions that I used as I constructed my interview protocols and in my probes that followed.

### Data Analysis

As Patton (2000) says, "Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation" (p. 432). Patton also acknowledges that data collection and data analysis in qualitative research are hardly distinct entities. One has "analytic insights" (p. 436) again and again throughout the study. Thus, describing data analysis becomes a matter of being aware of one's metacognitions and attempting to describe those meaningfully for the reader. I will attempt that here.

My qualitative data analysis began with extensive review of all data collected, and that occurred at several points throughout the study. I wanted to get a sense of the whole story, but I was also looking for patterns and for deviations or ambiguities. I began by first transcribing the interviews I had completed in the early fall of 2003 (which amounted to about half of the final number), rereading them, and looking for common categories. All interviews had been tape recorded and transcribed. Additional conversations held with the Executive Director, either in the field or on the phone, were recorded by handwritten notes and later transcribed. At this same time, I had written field notes of CCSD and CEN activities and process notes of my activities. Documents were reviewed for supportive documentation of participant interview statements and to develop new areas of inquiry.

After reviewing this initial data, I decided that I wanted to interview additional CEN members to establish saturation (meaning no significantly different responses were being generated), and I wanted to interview the Mayor in order to verify information I had been given about his role. This proved to be difficult to arrange, as Mayor Riley was in the midst of a re-election campaign, but was eventually accomplished. I still wanted to interview the past Superintendent, so I continued in my ultimately unsuccessful efforts to get him to respond to my phone, e-mail, and letter requests. I observed a CEN Board meeting to determine which additional members I might want to interview, and I wrote to the Mayor. This activity led to a second round of interviews, observations, and document review in December 2003 and January 2004.

Next, I looked for ways to reduce my data to common and divergent themes. Following the steps described by Miles and Huberman (1984), first I reduced the data by deciding which pieces of the massive amounts of data I wanted to include. I did this by taking notice of patterns, and I began to label in the margins of my transcriptions or documents terms that might later become a code. For example, one area that leapt off the page at me as I read was the frequent use of analogies, particularly of a military or business nature, to explain education and school reform. While the Executive Director did this most often, other interviewees also used this type of rich, descriptive narrative storytelling to a lesser extent. These analogies were not short, one sentence statements; they might go on for several paragraphs, or even later be threaded back into a discussion. Thus, I felt that this was an area that would be interesting to study further, so I read through all my transcripts marking these analogies. I used this same process for finding other areas, such as the seminal moment when each participant got interested in school



reform, or how the Executive Director's strong personality plays a major role in the choice of strategies used by CEN.

At this point, it became clear to me that the huge volume of data would benefit from a qualitative software organization program, or some method of what Miles and Huberman (1984) call data display. Upon recommendation from ERSH staff, I learned to use N6 (2002), the sixth and latest version of NUD\*IST. This program allowed me to code passages into 61 different nodes that I had developed while examining my data. N6 proved invaluable to me in organizing and managing my data so that I could explore and analyze it in an efficient manner. Once the results were constructed and reported in a chronological fashion, as befits a history, I reread them for over-arching themes of the entire study, and engaged in Miles and Huberman's third step, conclusion drawing. Finally, throughout the study, I utilized several techniques of qualitative inquiry to ensure the integrity of the study.

These qualitative techniques to ensure integrity in the field of qualitative research broadly fall under the term "triangulation" (Patton, 2002), or what Miles and Huberman (1984) call "verification." Triangulation is essentially using multiple methods or data to address the awareness that every method has its limitations. Other researchers label this reliability (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Silverman, 1993), but they do not mean "replicability" in the statistical sense, but rather consistency between the results and the data, and consistency among different observers (deMarrais, forthcoming).

Denzin (1978) delineated triangulation as coming from four different sources: multiple data sources, multiple researchers, multiple theories, and multiple methods. Patton (2002) points out that the goal is not to use multiple strategies to prove that the

data is consistent, but rather to “*test* for such consistency” (p. 248), as inconsistencies offer “opportunities for further insight” (p. 248). Validity is also an important construct in qualitative inquiry, and here validity means essentially the same as it does in quantitative research: Do the data reflect the reality of the phenomenon being studied? (deMarrais, forthcoming). Strategies to ensure validity include not only triangulation of methods and data, but also rich, detailed reporting (“thick descriptions”), multiple observations in a setting, checking the accuracy of data with the participants (“member checks”), and extensive use of the speaker’s voice in direct quotations (Patton, 2000).

In this study, I used multiple sources of data and multiple methods to collect data – triangulation. I attempted to verify the “truth” through multiple observations, thick descriptions, use of direct quotes, and frequent member checks. Finally, in considering my results, I discuss them from multiple theoretical perspectives, from educational theory to group dynamics to critical theory.

Patton (2000) says the “ideal” qualitative methodology includes qualitative data, naturalistic inquiry, and case analysis. This study includes all three components.

#### Personal Subjectivities

In thinking about how my personal experiences influenced this work, and how to enhance accuracy, validity, and credibility of my findings, I was particularly drawn to the work of Paget (1982, 1983), as described by Mishler (1986), as having parallels with my study. Mishler says that:

Paget’s view of interviews as jointly produced discourses in which the interviewer is “always implicated in the construction of the phenomena analyzed” (p. 78) informs all aspects of her work: her mode of

interviewing, her relationship to her respondents, her method of transcription, and her analysis and interpretation. (Mishler, p. 98)

Mishler (1986) also notes that Paget reflects that at times her questions simply emerge from her “own wonderings” (Mishler, p. 98). I believe that my interviews were conducted as “jointly produced discourses” for several reasons. As noted previously, I was discoursing about a general topic that I had personally experienced. On the one hand, these experiences in the work setting can make objectivity in the research setting elusive. On the other, it can make eliciting the voices of respondents easier. I was familiar with and sensitive to my participants’ trials as reformers; jointly constructed meanings were not difficult to achieve. My “own wonderings” extended the flow of the conversations. Mishler’s citation of Oakley (1981, p. 58) seems applicable here:

. . . personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (Mishler, p. 31)

I was also attracted to Paget’s (1982, 1983) work because she seems to approach her studies as a critical theorist; that is, she seeks to endow her respondents with power that society might not have afforded. Her desire to identify the artists she studied, so that they might take credit for their work and their views, resonated with me. In proposing my study, I wanted to give my respondents the option of being identified by name. Unlike Paget’s 1983 request to her Human Subjects Committee which was denied, the Institutional Review Board at the University of Georgia approved my “no confidentiality” option readily. All but one of my participants, a school board member, chose that option, preferring to be identified with their work.

Mishler (1986) talks about the role of being a research collaborator, with which I can especially identify in this study. One very obvious reason for this is that I have been a professional colleague of the Executive Director of the Charleston Education Network for over 15 years. While we are not currently collaborating on any educational endeavors, nor have we for over five years, our equal status as colleagues in the past prohibited any imbalance of power in our researcher/participant relationship. Furthermore, by our association and by his endorsement of my study, others on his Board participated willingly, as did school board members and the Mayor. “Collaborator” also implies an equal status. All of the respondents in my study are accomplished, well-established, well-educated, and well-positioned citizens in the community. Perhaps, in this case, it is I, the student interviewer, and not the interviewees, who could have felt disadvantaged by any imbalance of power.

Finally, since my personal theoretical perspective is that of critical theorist, I must address the role that Mishler (1986) calls advocate. In this research, I did not directly study an oppressed group, as my direct respondents certainly are not oppressed, though perhaps they are thwarted at some turns. However, the oppressed group in this scenario is made up of the students in Charleston County Schools, most of whom are minority, living in poverty, or both. They are the indirect objects of this study, since the work of the Charleston Education Network impacts their educational fate directly. Thus, this is a study about an organization that operates from a critical theoretical framework, even though they do not identify it as such. However, my commitment to critical theory results in my passion in conducting this study and my commitment to advocate for these students through this work.

My concerns going into this process were not about whether or not I would have to struggle to elicit the open and heartfelt responses of the respondents. Nor did I doubt that I would have little difficulty in understanding their meanings and establishing jointly constructing meaning. I did consider, however – because I so readily empathize with the respondents’ role and function, and I am able to contribute meaningfully to the discourse – whether or not I would retain enough objectivity to evaluate my findings validly. I did not want to be “caught red-handed at the end of my own pen” with my subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17), so I frequently attempted to stand back from my subjects and my subjectivities and to use the techniques described in the previous section on Data Analysis to preserve the study’s integrity.

#### Specific Limitations in This Study

There were two conditions that made the results of this study more difficult than more “distant” historical studies to analyze and especially to write: “real time” and “real people.” Real time was a problem because, while I intended and planned for my data collection to be complete in December 2003, there have been significant activities taking place, of which I was aware and which affected my results, even up to the present moment as I write this. For example, the Superintendent of Schools was sought last summer, hired in August, arrived in October, and delivered her major “turn-around plan” in February – all in the last eight months. CEN as an organization had input, interests, and opinions about all of these events. Information and concerns that applied under the Superintendent in office when I began the study were no longer applicable. There are also more unknowns under the new Superintendent due to her short tenure, thus possibly impacting the strategies CEN will choose to use now and in the near future.

The school governance legislation endorsed and supported by CEN is another example of a real time event. When I began collecting data, the legislature was not in session and the bill had simply been drafted last spring. In fall, 2003, activity again began surrounding the bill. New players entered the picture, such as the League of Women Voters, who took the visible lead in garnering support. However, concessions and changes needed to be made with both the legislation and what that would yield as eventual impact on the Charleston County School District. At this writing, there is concern by some in CEN that the bill might get “gutted” to the point of being ineffective, but as drafted today it would be acceptable.

Another real time factor surrounding this legislation is that, as late as March 6, 2004, the governor is supporting a bill in the South Carolina Legislature which allows up to \$4600 in tax rebates for school vouchers (Adcox, 2004). While vouchers are vigorously opposed by CEN, Rep. Hagood, who is sponsoring the bill CEN wants passed, is supporting the voucher bill, as well. This is creating a conflict for CEN and may significantly impact their legislation. I decided to deal with these real time events by including only as much data as I could collect by February 13, 2004, even though I might become aware of additional information as I approached my defense date.

The “real people” issue is more of a plus than a minus, but certainly some of each. The plusses include the vitality of reading about real folks, such as successful and prominent businessmen and women, well-to-do citizens of Charleston, school board members, and the Mayor, all of whom had a real story to tell. The individuals in the study, except for one school board member, wanted their identities known so that they

could be identified with their statements and opinions. The CEN members, especially, believe that their efforts are positive and perhaps a model to encourage others.

However, there were some risks in identifying my participants by name. Because much of the adversarial nature of CEN is a reaction to conflicting values and sometimes personalities, it became an ethical issue for me to decide which information I should include and which I should exclude. This was particularly so in regards to a series of letters that I excerpt in Chapter 4. I did not interview the letter writers in some cases, or the recipients of the letters in others, but they were integral to documenting the story of CEN. (All letters were given to me by either the writer or a recipient.) Thus, I struggled with quoting such passionate passages and, thus, perhaps fanning flames that had long since gone out. I also wonder if I got a complete picture of the opinions of the school board members about CEN. The three school board members who talked with me were very positive about CEN, but many of the current members who might have been less positive did not agree to be interviewed.

Another concern about identifying my participants was that I knew and know information that I could not write about. This was in part because extensive conversations with the Executive Director over the past several months have allowed me unique access into the daily functioning of CEN. In an organization that deals with (and sometimes causes) conflict, and is fueled by personalities and public figures, passions held one day might cool by the next. There would be no benefit to writing about a moment of anger or frustration that was quickly resolved. Further, because the relationship between CEN and CCSD is dynamic in nature, it does not benefit their future

working relationship to discuss speculations about the hoped-for alliances and accomplishments of the new superintendent.

One additional concern in considering the findings of this study is that certain key players were either unavailable or unwilling to be interviewed. I had particular difficulty getting permission to interview people who were *not* supportive or appreciative of CEN's efforts. For example, I wanted to interview all of the school board members, but only three consented. One declined, and the others did not respond to letters mailed to their homes or district office, or to e-mails. The three who consented were, at least in their interviews, very positive about the work of CEN. However, some other school board members have been critical of CEN, now and in the past, both publicly and privately. I especially wanted to meet with them, but again, none of these responded. In one case, one of the school board members I did interview asked me if I had talked to one of the members who opposed CEN. I told him of my dilemma in getting consent, and he said he would personally attempt to persuade this colleague to participate, but again, even this did not yield any response.

I was also most interested in interviewing former Superintendent McWhirt. I sent letters to his home, to the CCSD offices, and to his new office as adjunct professor of Educational Leadership at The Citadel. I called and left voice mail messages at his home and at The Citadel. I sent an e-mail to The Citadel. He did not respond to any of these messages. I also wanted to interview someone from the NAACP regarding the accusations of racism against some CEN members. I did interview one member, Bishop Rembert, but, of course, he is also a member of CEN, although his excellent standing in the African American community and his personal knowledge of not only the accusers



(Rev. Darby, Rev. Lewis, Addison) but also the accused (Butzon) provided a unique and important perspective on that issue. I also wrote a letter to Rev. Joseph Darby, who is an official in the NAACP, asking for his participation, since according to my information, he was the most vocal opponent of CEN, but he did not respond. Hillery Douglas, an African American who is a current member of the school board and was also a member of the board at the time of the accusations of racism, and who attended the critical meeting in the Mayor's office to address these accusations, did not respond to two letters and an e-mail requesting an interview either. Thus, information that these key players might have provided to this study is missing.

These limitations should be borne in mind by the reader, as did I when analyzing my data and writing my results. However, I believe the authenticity and the dynamism that result from studying real people in real time balance these limitations.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This chapter will focus on five areas of findings, which are:

1.) The chronological *history of CEN*, from 1996 to the present, which will address in part my first research question of “What are the historical and personal origins of CEN and its reform agenda?”

2.) A description of CEN’s *charismatic leader*, which addresses my second research question of “What are the characteristics of CEN or its members that might cause this organization to function differently than do most community school reform groups?”

3.) Dispelling misunderstandings about *perceived “hidden agendas”* of CEN.

4.) Clarifying *CEN’s true educational agenda*, which addresses in part both research questions one and two.

5.) CEN’s major *strategy, initiatives and results*, which addresses the third research question, “What evidence is there that CEN is or is not achieving its mission of ‘accountability to achieve excellence in public education’?”

Research question four, which is “What can other citizen’s action groups and school districts learn from CEN’s educational activist strategies?” will be discussed in the Chapter 5.

## History of CEN

The history of the Charleston Education Network begins in the fall of 1996, and the beginning of the story will be presented from the viewpoint of Neil Robinson, an attorney and one of the founding members of CEN. Robinson describes having an epiphany while protesting the school board's proposal to locate a school in his former, exclusive neighborhood. His sole mission in getting involved initially was to protect his former neighborhood from overcrowding by a poorly located facility, because:

I, like so many people in our business community, really hadn't thought much about public education in Charleston County. We knew it was abysmal – that it had been pretty much written off the past thirty years and I, at the time, had a child who was in private school,<sup>3</sup> and that's pretty much what happens around here. If you have any means at all, you start planning what private school you are going to send your child to about the day they are born. But as it turns out, the school district had a proposal . . . to take an old abandoned school that was downtown right near the Coast Guard Station, south of Broad Street in a high, single-family residential neighborhood, and . . . reopen it and convert it as a high school. . . .

I, as someone who had lived in that neighborhood, was concerned that they were going to put it in a place that was just wrong. It was wrong for the students, it was wrong for the neighborhood, and it appeared to be an effort by the city to keep a high school facility on the peninsula [downtown] just for the sake of saying, "We have a high school facility

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<sup>3</sup> Robinson presently has a child attending a public elementary school in Charleston County.

here,” when it really should have been put in a place where it had a bigger campus.

So, I went to the public hearing on this which was . . . held at the Burke High School auditorium, which was in poor shape, [a] very, very dilapidated building. . . . And Mayor Riley was there and they [school board] were proposing what a great thing this would be to keep this school downtown and use this facility that has been sitting dormant. . . . My backyard backed up to it at one time, and I lost that home in Hurricane Hugo in 1989, so I had not been a neighbor of this property for eight or nine years, but I knew the condition of the community, and I knew putting a school there was not the right thing.

At that meeting, Robinson ran into a personal friend of his, Hal Ravenel, who, at that time was president of the downtown homeowners’ group and was there for the same reason. Robinson and Ravenel’s protests prevailed, and the decision was made not to locate the school in their neighborhood. However, Robinson and Ravenel left there with a different concern. Robinson continued:

Well, after that meeting, Hal and I, we saw some of the parents of minority students who were attending that meeting, and they were upset that their school was going to be abandoned, and Burke High School was just going to be left to its own devices, and this new school or renovated school south of Broad Street implemented, but yet, they wouldn’t stand up and really speak. They were there to listen, but they didn’t know how to express their concerns, and so nobody was listening to them. And Hal and

I remarked standing on the sidewalk outside after the meeting how sad it was to see people who are not represented, who have a real stake in this education process. And we had pretty much ignored it, and the only reason we were there was because of the physical intrusion more than any educational purpose. And we decided . . . we had a new superintendent, Chip Zullinger, and we thought – he had just been on the job a month or two and we said, “Well, let’s go see him and see if there is anything we can do to try to help bring more light and more focus in the business community to paying attention to what is going on” because we realized that the school board needed help. They really didn’t seem to be making good decisions, and the decisions they made were only after long drawn out processes . . . sort of like the highway department, you know, they finally decide to widen a road after twenty years, and when they get it completed they realize they didn’t widen it enough (chuckles).

So, we went and met with Chip Zullinger, who was quite a creative, innovative, visionary fellow, and unfortunately, for him, he was too visionary for his time for Charleston County. People were taking shots at him right and left because his idea was to stir the pot and make things happen, and he trimmed back the administrative staff tremendously – maybe too much. . . . Well, people resist change, and they resisted Chip’s efforts tremendously because he was viewed as a threat to an ingrained system where education in Charleston County was about jobs, it

wasn't about children, [it was about] keeping jobs and employing friends and neighbors and family.

Robinson and Ravenel asked Dr. Zullinger if he had any studies or data that would tell them what exactly was needed to fix Charleston County Schools. He said no, which was disconcerting to Robinson and Ravenel; as successful businessmen, they knew that there were significant issues just relating to facilities and maintenance alone, yet there did not seem to be any systemic plan to address them. Robinson continues the story:

I mean, they were really just trying to cobble things together and put Band-Aids on and keep things going. If you go to the Charleston County school budget back then, and look under deferred maintenance at how much was being budgeted, you would see a zero, *a zero*, for 77 schools and 45,000 students, and there was no money in the budget for long-term deferred maintenance. So, you know, air conditioners were breaking down, plaster was falling from the ceilings, doors were off of the stalls in the restrooms. I mean, it was chaotic. It was really custodial – minimally custodial is what the school system was providing.

The Superintendent saw Robinson's and Ravenel's interest as an opportunity to involve the community and perhaps solve some of these overwhelming problems, so he asked them if they would be interested in becoming his "Kitchen Cabinet." Dr. Zullinger explained that in his previous district in Wyoming, he had a group of business and community members who would meet with him regularly and provide feedback, and that

he found that “invigorating.” Robinson told me that he and Ravenel responded, “Well, let’s do that!”

Robinson and Ravenel began to amass an influential group of citizens in Charleston: business executives from the power company (South Carolina Electric and Gas) and the telephone company (Bell South), some bankers, retired generals, the former principal of Burke High School, and the presidents of the College of Charleston, The Citadel, Charleston Southern University, and Trident Technical College. There were about a dozen people in this original group, and they were informally called the Tuesday Morning Group because they would meet on Tuesday mornings in Superintendent Zullinger’s conference room. In the three years that this group met, they only missed four Tuesday meetings, and three of those Tuesdays fell in the holidays between Christmas and New Year’s Day. By all accounts, it was a dedicated and committed group of volunteers.

About three months after the group first assembled, in January 1997, the person who was to become the Executive Director of the Charleston Education Network, Jonathan Butzon, entered the picture. One of the members of the Tuesday Morning Group was Jane Riley, sister of the long-time mayor of Charleston, Joe Riley. Jane Riley is also the Director of a program called Communities in Schools (CIS), which is a dropout prevention program, and Butzon was, and still is, a member of her CIS Board of Directors. At the time, Butzon was doing educational consulting and had an ongoing contract with a school district about 200 miles away in Columbus County, North Carolina. Jane Riley told Butzon about the Tuesday Morning Group, and according to Butzon, said to him, “You need to be a part of this.” After Ms. Riley mentioned this to

Hal Ravenel, Butzon received a call from Ravenel inviting him to join the group at its next meeting. Butzon began attending the meetings, and he quickly realized that there needed to be someone to keep minutes and coordinate communications. Since his consulting contract at the time allowed him some uncommitted time, he became the unofficial, volunteer administrative coordinator.

As more interested and concerned citizens found their way to the superintendent's conference table on Tuesday mornings, the group began to coalesce and find their purpose. Robinson described the goals of this group in its early stages, including their frustration that the "culture of Charleston" was an obstacle:

We weren't talking about school *board* issues. We didn't have their agenda in front of us going down and saying what we wanted to happen. We were talking about systemic problems that we felt needed to be addressed in order to make the whole system better. And we knew that was going to be a long-term project, that there is no magic bullet, there's no quick fix. . . . As Cal McMeekin, who was head of SCE&G [South Carolina Electric and Gas] said, we needed to change the culture of Charleston's thinking about public education because it had been allowed to get to the point . . . where the people who could make a difference had written it off. We complained and mumbled about the tax bills, but our legislative delegation in its wisdom thirty years ago had taken care of that by putting a ninety mil tax cap in place – that you could only tax ninety mills for education. So, here you have Charleston, the richest county in the state, with the lowest commitment to public education because it was held



in check by this artificial cap. So, we had the greatest resources and the least amount of participation. I mean, how bad is that? I mean, shame on us.

So, the change in culture is not something you do overnight. It's not like building a new road, and after a couple of weeks everybody gets used to the fact that, "Hey, I can take a left to get there faster." It didn't work that way, you know, this is not Jiffy Lube, it's just public education, and it's hard, and it's not fun. And for most people, it stops at their front door because they have their child in a place that they are satisfied with or reasonably happy. They are not worried about the children down the street or on the next street over and particularly not the ones, you know, in a different section of the community.

The group began to focus on the original question asked of Dr. Zullinger, which was how to identify the most pressing needs among all the crises in Charleston County Schools. They decided to pursue a needs assessment study, and they set about finding the best person available to do it. They called John Rivers, whose family had been in the communications business and who was president at the time of the South Carolina Educational Television Network. After a few days, Rivers called Robinson back and said, "You need to talk to Dr. Charles Willie, who is [at] the Graduate School of Education at Harvard." Robinson continued:

And so, lo and behold, about two weeks later . . . Gordon Bondurant [headmaster of private, prestigious Porter Gaud School] and Hal Ravenel and myself and Chip Zullinger, the superintendent, got on an airplane and

flew to Cambridge, and it snowed on us and it was a wonderful evening. We spent the whole day meeting with Dr. Charles Willie, who is a black man, who was very instrumental after *Brown versus Board of Education* in assisting with plans to help integrate schools. He had worked for the United States Department of Education. as well as many, many school districts around the country. . . . He had a couple of research people, professors at Brown University, others at Harvard – they had a team that had done this kind of thing in other places – and he thought Charleston was a wonderful challenge. Basically, he agreed with our premise that said, “If you can do it right in Charleston, you can do it right anywhere.” So, he agreed to take it on and we agreed that we would go out to the private business community and raise the money to pay to have the study done.

The Tuesday Morning Group took on a familiar role for community groups and raised about \$200,000 during the next few months as the study was completed. Jon Butzon, who coordinated all the contacts with Harvard in his volunteer capacity, suggested a new name for the group that would sound more official than the Tuesday Morning Group: the Charleston Planning Project for Public Education (C3PE), although this name existed more on paper than in spoken reference. The Community Foundation in Charleston, a grant-making, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life, agreed to be the fiscal agent for this effort, since neither the Tuesday Morning Group, nor the renamed C3PE, was an official non-profit organization.

Over the next nine months, Dr. Willie and his co-researchers conducted in-depth interviews with residents from the churches, the educational institutions, business and industry, schoolteachers and principals, and the public at large, making about eight or ten trips to Charleston. The study culminated in a report that was, according to Robinson, both “very instructive and very alarming,” but it also painted a road map of some of the things that needed to be done. To Robinson’s dismay, however, the study was not well received, especially by the School Board. Robinson relates:

Well, wouldn’t you know it, instead of everybody embracing this and thinking, “Boy, what a wonderful thing these folks have done,” we had people throwing rocks at us right and left, most of it coming from the school board because they felt like we were intruding on their turf. . . . But they weren’t your typical board.

Prior to *Brown versus Board of Education*, you know, the school boards in the south were your bank presidents, maybe your preacher, leading attorneys, doctors and the pillars of the community. I mean, the school board was kind of the thing to do. And after *Brown versus Board of Education*, those people kind of threw the school district out, the public school education, and so you ended up with this collection of people that in most cases had no significant business background, no history or experience in working with large sums of money or building and construction projects, much less, educational programs. And in a district where you have got a \$250 million dollar budget, I mean, that’s a pretty serious problem.

So, the study came back and told us a number of things, but it was almost trashed the day it arrived. I mean, we had a press conference to announce it, and we were getting bludgeoned on all sides. Dr. Willie was denounced as, you know, advocating busing and I mean, his whole idea was give every child a fair opportunity, and that if the school is failing, you ought to allow the kids in that school to attend the school where they could get a good education.

I asked Robinson if he was surprised at the reaction. He responded, “‘Surprise’ is probably not the right word. I was distraught over it.” Because of the fallout from the study, Board members began to attack Dr. Zullinger and his agenda, and this eventually led to his ouster. Butzon attributes the failure of the Willie Report to have a significant impact on the district to C3PE’s ignorance about what to do with the information. Butzon said, “We didn’t know how to be aggressive.”

Robinson says that there was a silver lining in this cloudy time, however. The “culture of Charleston” began to change towards being more concerned about public education:

But, that whole scenario, and that whole period of time, was an awakening of Charleston and a reengagement, if you will. The work that we had been trying to do by that time for a couple of years began to pay off. And we began to see a difference because we were getting in the paper and we were beginning to be sort of the counterpoint to what the school board was doing. . . .

We had some meetings . . . and we had a thousand people show up. I mean, we were able to gather some people together that said, “It’s time for a change.” It’s like a movie that came out years ago, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!” (laughs) That’s sorta what we wanted to do.

All the media attention to the Willie study and Dr. Zullinger’s ouster was not without some price to those who had orchestrated the study: the Tuesday Morning Group. Some in the community began to question not only their motives, but the amount of power they wielded in school board decisions. Robinson relates:

The Tuesday Morning Group had been dubbed by one of the media moguls as the “Shadow Board,” you know, that we were behind the scenes with Zullinger to try to counteract what the board was doing. And nothing could have been further from the truth. We were trying to give the board tools and some direction that would help them in their mission, not destroy them or take away from what they were trying to do. But yet being rebuffed at every turn, like we are interlopers, we are meddling in their business, it sort of led you to this point where it was a very contentious, and sometimes vocally so, situation. But that kind of “in your face” approach is really what it took to get people focused on what was going on. . . .

We started publicizing things, like Charleston County has a 40-50% drop out rate, you know, that if you make it the eighth grade, the odds are 50-50 you won’t graduate from high school. I mean, that’s

terrible, and Dr. Willie's report has all that kind of information in there and these nuggets of information – we even considered at one time doing billboards and putting up these kinds of things. And then we thought, “Well, dad gum it, why should we slight our whole community over just the failure of the school district to operate properly?” So we didn't want to throw out the baby out with bath water or have a scorched earth approach. But there comes a point where you say, “We've got to get this message out. How do we do it?” And we decided we had to formalize what we are doing and put it into a more credible perspective, because of being dubbed the “Shadow Board” and all. . . .

We had one occasion when we were sitting around a room like this, a table, discussing a program we had going in the newspaper where kids could answer science puzzles, and we would give them awards, and it was an engagement kind of process for middle-schoolers. And [the press] came barging into the room with TV cameras rolling and all – this is right after Zullinger left – and we continued to meet, and we welcomed them. “Come on in, listen to this, this is great stuff!” And we told them about the program, what we were doing and all that. Well, that night on the news, of course, instead of talking about our program, they showed us, and then the over-sound was “Shadow Board Continues to Meet Despite Zullinger's Ouster.” I mean, it was like, you know, we are still in there causing trouble.

Despite these discouragements, the group continued to meet weekly in the Superintendent's conference room even after Zullinger left in May 1999, and Dr. Ronald McWhirt was hired as his replacement in July 1999. Whereas Zullinger had met with them weekly, Dr. McWhirt never met with them once, even as they assembled in the room next to his office. Butzon said they were faced at that critical juncture with two choices: quit, or become a formal organization. They decided on the latter.

The group by this time had expanded, and it had become clear that an ad hoc group of volunteers without administrative support was very limited in what it could accomplish. As CEN co-founder Hal Ravenel told Jon Butzon, somebody “needed to *get up every day* thinking about and working on the issues of public education in Charleston County.” Butzon told me that the only person that ever expressed disagreement with that notion was former Ambassador to the Court of Saint James, Phil Lader. Mr. Lader's response to Butzon was rather that “somebody needed to be *waking up in the middle of the night*” thinking about and working on the issues of public education in Charleston County. That “somebody” was CEN.

Robinson, Butzon, and the other members of the group realized that they needed even more influence and credibility than they already possessed to overcome the negative press and lack of welcome by Superintendent McWhirt. They considered how to gain more, and Robinson related:

And so we said, “Alright, who is the most influential person in the community?” I mean, we need to get a real bell cow who could go out and help make this – take it to the next level, if you will, because there was this perception that we were, you know, meeting behind closed doors

secretively and plotting the future of the school district. So, we went to Mayor Riley. Joe Riley, who is now running for his eighth term, is just a wonderful fellow and a visionary of the highest order. He can make things happen that nobody would think is possible. . . .

I had the mayor over to my office and we had a round table discussion for about three hours and at the end of that, he said, “You know, you are exactly right. I’ve been remiss. I’ve been taking care of everything else in the city,” he says, “and I’ve left education to the county school board. I mean, it is not a city jurisdictional issue. The county has responsibility even for those schools within the city,” he said, “But you are right, some of the worst schools in the state are inside the city of Charleston, and I need to be involved in that. The city needs to have a say and a role to play.”

So Mayor Riley agreed to launch an educational advocacy group, saying he knew he could use his “bully-pulpit” to have an impact on improving education, even though schools are not in the direct jurisdiction of a mayor.<sup>4</sup> Mayor Riley reflected on that meeting:

Sometimes when a right idea comes before you, you say “yes.” And that was absolutely correct, that what we need in any community is an organization to help increase the civic engagement in education. . . . We need community leaders actively engaged. It was just so logical. And my

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<sup>4</sup> According to a fall 2003 poll commissioned by *The Post and Courier*, Charleston’s local newspaper, “more voters said education should be the top priority for the city government than any other issue,” confirming Riley’s intuition that as mayor, he should be involved in school reform (Hardin, 2003).



job as mayor is, among other things, to help make the right things happen and get behind them.

Riley initially appointed a board of about 15 members and called them the Charleston Education Network. After its formation, CEN later became a member of the Public Education Network. In the months just prior to the Mayor's appointments, Butzon had heard Wendy Puriefoy of the Public Education Network speak at a conference in Providence, Rhode Island, which Zullinger had invited him to attend. PEN had then sent staff members Bill Miles and Bob Saffold to Charleston at Butzon's invitation to talk about the network. The mayor, members of the Tuesday Morning Group, and other community members participated, but the school district did not, since by then Dr. McWhirt had taken the reins of the district. Butzon said, "Our best hope was that McWhirt would be neutral towards CEN, but on many days he was an adversary."

Some of the CEN charter members were members of the Tuesday Morning Group, but not all. There was concern that if the group mirrored the Tuesday Morning Group, the same criticisms would emerge. As Robinson said, "We didn't want to get branded with 'the same thing, different packaging.'" The Mayor set a high standard for these CEN board members, telling Robinson, "I'm going to ask anybody who serves that if this can't be one of their top three priorities, then don't serve because you have to have it at a level where we have a roll-up-your-sleeve, active board of people who can make things happen in this community." Mayor Riley appointed Neil Robinson as the first Chairman of CEN, and the first CEN board meeting was held in May 2000.

The press coverage during this time led other interested citizens to join the group. Ginny Deerin's route to CEN began one morning while reading the daily newspaper, *The*

*Post and Courier*. She became aware of and outraged at the failings of the school board, and entered school reform by way of leadership reform. Deerin, who is the Founder and Executive Director of an after-school program called Wings, later left CEN to form an informal political action committee called Clean Slate, which in the fall of 2002 successfully unseated some of the more ineffective and CEN-unfriendly school board members. Deerin remembers her introduction to school reform:

I woke up one morning and read that the school board was going to fire our Superintendent, who I didn't really know hardly at all. His name was Chip Zullinger. I knew we had had a whole bunch of Superintendents, and I thought, "This is nuts! We can't just fire the guy overnight in secret meetings!" And so I sort of organized what turned out to be a pretty big show of community saying, "Don't just do this." But in the end they did it anyway, but at least they did it in the sunlight. So anyway, at that point I just decided that the leadership on the school board – it really got my attention how important that was, particularly as it related to them making a decision about hiring the next Superintendent.

Two other significant players in the CEN story entered at about this point in the spring of 2002: the current Co-Chairmen, John Barter and Bishop Rembert. John Barter told of coming to the effort based on an intellectual analysis of the costs of not reforming schools, as well as a sense of moral justice:

It's something we owe to every child. I think it is a matter of social justice. I think it's an obligation as a society we have to every child to give them a good education. If you don't want to go down that somewhat,

you know, philosophical and moral route of travel, you can say as a society, it's the smartest economic thing we do, because we take these wonderful young people who are ready to learn and we make two choices: we choose to not let them get an education, and if they are getting a poor education, they probably will end up being a dropout, in which case they are an economic drain on society in addition to all the misery of their lives. But that's kind of the moral philosophical argument. But they are a drain on society. On the other hand, we can educate them, we can let them live productive lives, and they end up contributing economically to society. So, it doesn't matter to me whether you want to choose the moral, philosophical route or you want to choose the economic route, they both lead you to the same place and that is, we ought to give our children a great education. . . .

I'd like to think we are all called by a higher goal. I'd like to think that most people are influenced by wanting to do the right thing, as opposed to wanting to do the economically beneficial thing. But I recognize that not all people are, and therefore I think it is important that we make both arguments . . . and let people buy into the one that sounds, you know, resonates with them.

Barter also reflected on how his role as a parent to his own children sparked his interest in helping all children:

I put it very simplistically: I don't think any child is born wanting to be a failure. You know, when you watch your own child or another baby in the

crib, they are just full of opportunity. Their eyes are looking around, they are searching for everything by age one or two, they're fitting it into a conceptual framework, things are starting to make sense to them. I mean, I think that's what life is all about, and once you've been through that as a parent, you realize that it can be that way for every child and should be that way for every child. Somehow they are born wanting to learn, and we let that flame go out in them.

After Barter came on board, he then recruited his friend and former associate Ted Halkyard to join CEN. Ted Halkyard describes himself as a "Johnny-come-lately" to CEN, since he was not part of the original Tuesday Morning Group. He knew Barter from when Barter was Chief Financial Officer and Halkyard was head of Human Resources at Allied Signal Corporation. Halkyard was skeptical about getting involved at first, saying:

My first reaction was "Well, you know, why would I want to get involved in this? We don't have kids in the school system. We're retired." But the more he [Barter] described the effort and the more that I began to think about it, . . . the importance of public education expands beyond the current interest of parents. I mean, it goes to the community, it goes to the quality of life, it goes to social issues, it goes to economic issues, and the more I began to understand the role of CEN was playing, the more I liked it.

About this same time, as the group was organizing, Bishop Rembert got involved in CEN as an outgrowth of his pastoring for 39 years and serving as Bishop for 36 years.

His motivation came from a desire to help his congregation raise themselves above the inevitable call of the streets, which is one price he sees of not having a good education.

Rembert was also attracted by the integrity of the group. He told me:

I became very concerned that many of the parishioners in my church were good middle class, but many of the children and their educational level seems to have been down. . . . And of course, it's not just limited to people of low income, but when you get into a community where the majority of the community's education starts to decline, the problem of crime starts going up and drugs start. You know, we began to get so much of the drug distributors in our community and near our schools, and it just got sickening. I just was hoping that somehow, you know, this could stop, and I had made some appeal to the superintendent and especially the deputy superintendent and some of the area superintendents that we really need to do something about this. Mayor Riley . . . started bringing in some different people, and they asked me to join the group and I did . . . And I really liked the people, and I liked their philosophy and what they wanted to accomplish, you know? So, I really wanted to be a part of it. . .

See, I saw if we could get people properly educated, you'll lift a whole person, and if you lift a person you are lifting a community, you're lifting your city, you're lifting your state. And I saw that they were interested and . . . first of all, it seemed to be people that . . . ordinarily didn't have any reason for being in this group. They had no children that I know of and if they did, they didn't have to send them to public school.

They could send them any place they wanted to. But when I saw people like that, who were really concerned with the people, the citizens of this city. . . I said, "I really want to be a part of that."

Jon Butzon's role eventually evolved from volunteer administrative coordinator to paid executive director, though initially funds for his salary were hit or miss. The importance of the selection of Butzon to head this effort cannot be overstated. Several people both inside and outside of CEN have told me that Jon Butzon and CEN are indistinguishable, for all practical purposes. Butzon's agenda is CEN's agenda; Butzon's passion fans the flames of CEN's passion; Butzon's style becomes CEN's style. Thus, understanding him, his passion, his personality, and his agenda are critical to understanding CEN and the directions that the group would go next. While as acknowledged earlier, I have known Jon Butzon since 1985, I decided to attempt a more objective assessment of him by interviewing his colleagues and by observing him at work in his third floor office at The Citadel.

#### The Charismatic Leader

The Executive Director of CEN is at work on January 26, 2004. Leaning back in his squeaky, rolling office chair, he is answering two phones. On the land line is state Representative Ben Hagood, conferring with Butzon about the status and chances of a Hagood-sponsored, CEN-endorsed bill which is designed to dramatically change the school governance structure in Charleston County Schools. On his cell phone, alternately, Butzon receives calls from a school board member asking for information that is apparently unattainable from the central office administration, and from his own son, asking if he will be home for dinner. Sitting at another rolling chair in his office

waiting to confer with him is a community member concerned about actions of the School Board and seeking his advice. There is no secretary to answer either phone or greet his visitor or find files or type a response. He responds to his son's inquiry, saying, "I don't think so."

Butzon's office is untidy. His large desk is covered with a scattering of seemingly unorganized and unrecoverable papers, letters, notebooks, and pens. They include reports on school system progress, newspaper articles, books about leadership and school reform, printouts of test scores and budgets, publications from CEN and PEN and government agencies: the "tools of his trade." ("Knowledge is power," Butzon told me.) There are pictures leaning up on the credenzas waiting to be hung. There is an overflowing satchel on the floor, a half-full industrial size garbage bag, a bookcase filled with books and stacks of papers, some full and some empty boxes, and three tea mugs scattered about the work surfaces. He is sheepishly apologetic about the clutter. "See that garbage bag over there? I filled two of those already and carried them out of here!"

On the paneled wall, beside two large windows with a view of the white Moorish buildings of The Citadel, are posted a dozen or so 8 ½ by 11 inch sheets of white paper with quotes on them meaningful to Butzon. He sees me copying them down.

"I've got more," he offers helpfully.

"Can you find them?" I ask.

"Probably not," he sighs.

Some of the quotes are:

School systems, just like most large organizations, don't change because they see the light. They change because they feel the heat.

- John Murphy, NC School Superintendent

Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and annoys the pig.

- Robert Heinlein

Crisis changes people and turns ordinary people into wiser and more responsible ones.

- Wilma Mankiller, Cherokee Chief

There is nothing more powerful in education reform than a parent who has information and alternatives.

- Rod Paige, US Secretary of Education

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.

- H. G. Wells

Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance.

- Samuel Johnson

Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them. They make the impossible happen.

- Dr. Robert Jarvik, pioneering heart surgeon



South Carolina must unite, with a sense of urgency, to build an educational environment that fosters academic excellence and provides the children of our state with a world class education.

- SC Education Oversight Committee

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who propose to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean's majestic waves without the awful roar of the waters.

- Frederick Douglass

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

- Ronald Edmonds, *Effective Schools*

While these quotes may reveal what is important to Butzon, they give no hint as to how he came to this point in his varied (or as he jokingly calls it, “checkered”) career. I wanted to find out how this Georgia born, career Naval officer, owner of two successful consulting businesses, with a graduate degree in counseling, became so passionate about school reform. Butzon responds to my questions as a story-teller. Often to make a point, he will tell a lengthy anecdote that begins with, “When I was in the Navy . . .” or “When my brothers and I were growing up . . .” or “When I used to consult with the guys at

Robert Bosch . . . ” or “It’s like the old joke about . . . ” At the conclusion of the story, his point has been made with vivid images. If it is not a story to make his point, it will be an analogy. In his first interview with me, he used 23 extended analogies in an hour and a half. He answers my first question about how he got involved in school reform this way:

A bunch of years ago, I used to know something about alcohol and drug abuse, and its prevention, intervention, and treatment. And I wound up doing some consulting work for the US Department of Education with school systems, and helped them do some planning around what their prevention and education programs were going to be. And part of that was when I got into it, I realized I didn’t know enough about how really public education worked, and some of the issues that would get in the way of doing that kind of programming . . . , so I just started getting smarter about that, so that I could be a little more effective in doing the other. . . . And the more I learned the less I wish I knew (laughs).

But I could see that public education was – initially I thought it was really struggling. I have since revised that assessment to say that public education is just in dire, dire straits. And, at the same time, or about the same time, when I was doing some other work that had me involved on a preeminent level with business and industry, a lot of these folks were getting into the quality movement – Deming and Jurand and TQI and TQM, CQI,<sup>5</sup> and those models. And it dawned on me one day that there was a lot of that, in fact most of that, that business and industry

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<sup>5</sup> TQI (Teamwork Quality and Innovation at Work), TQM (Total Quality Management), and CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement) were popular business management models in the 1980s.

were learning in terms of improving the way they did business and working toward the bottom line that would work in schools.

I made an effort to try to sell that idea from a money making standpoint, a consulting standpoint, and the further I got into that, the more that I realized that public education was so badly broken, that, you know, the public couldn't even see potential solutions, so what they were faced with was this deep hole. All they knew to do was use a shovel. And the law of holes and shovels is: if you are in a hole, put down the shovel. They wouldn't do that, and they still aren't, to a great degree. We still keep doing what we've always done. So, that's sort of a thumbnail of how I got interested in it.

In a later interview, I asked Butzon, "I want you to tell me why you personally do this." His response took on a decidedly spiritual tone:

That's easy. I am called to do it. (pauses) I am called to do it. I believe that everybody has a calling in their life, and sometimes we get distracted from that calling by occupation and other things. And this is what I am called to do at this point in my life. . . . Even if you are not a religious person in a formal sort of way, I think almost everybody realizes that we are called to do things, to look out or to help look out for the interests of people who don't have what we have. The Bible talks about it, I think it's in Matthew<sup>6</sup> they talk about, on the big day of Judgment, we're going to separate people into sheep and goats. And the sheep ask, "Gee, how do we get to be sheep?" "Well, I was hungry and you fed me, I was naked

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25: 32-46.

and you clothed me, I was in prison, and you visited me,” and all the rest of that. “Well, gee, when did we ever do that?” “Well, when you did it for the least of mine.”

The kids that we shortchange the most in our system of public education are the “least.” And, if you subscribe to the idea that education is the ladder out of the hole of poverty, if you believe that part of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is you gotta have the ability to pursue them. I mean, it’s one thing to talk about pursuit, but it’s something else to actually go get it. And you have to have some tools to do that. I mean you gotta have legs, for example, to go pursue that. And those “legs” look like having knowledge and skill to go get a job and to participate in the democratic process. It’s not just the economic benefit, it’s not just the jobs thing.

In previous conversations, I noticed that Butzon quickly shifts from talking about himself to talking about kids, which he demonstrates here. So I probed further to refocus him on his personal preparedness, asking, “What in your life has prepared you to accept this calling?” He responded thoughtfully, after a long pause:

I’ll answer directly on part of the question, and then I’m gonna straddle the fence on the other part. And I’m gonna straddle the fence first. I think one of the things that comes with a calling is that you sort of take it on faith. And when I say a calling, I mean in a very specific way. I believe that God has called me to do this. OK? And I also believe that God doesn’t call you to do things that you and He can’t do together. So I think

part of that deal is, “If you respond to the call, I’ll help you.” So I don’t know that you accept calls based on a certainty that you can do the job as much as on faith that if you don’t know how to do the job, and you can’t figure – or you don’t know if you can figure it out – you have the faith that you are going to get the help that you are going to need to make it happen. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be called to do it.

Now, having said that, I think there are experiences in hindsight – you don’t know what they are on the front end – and you can’t say, “Oh, this is happening now to prepare me to do that.” I think in hindsight there are experiences, there are philosophies, there are relationships, there are a whole host of things that occur in a person’s life that in hindsight, say “Well, I can see where that pays off for me.” For example, my father raised me and my two brothers, it was sort of a basic thing, that you looked out for people that were smaller than you. Now that wasn’t done in a context of Matthew and the Bible; it was just what you did. People that were bigger looked out for people that were smaller, and I’ve always been big. And it’s gotten me into trouble a time or two. . . .

I’m thinking about a situation when I was in high school and a kid was getting picked on and he was getting beat up, and I got in a fight. You know enough about how schools operate. You corral the kids in the fight, everybody gets kicked out. Don’t care how righteous, don’t care who started it, don’t care who’s right and who’s wrong – you are going home, too. Just sometimes if you find yourself standing up for a particular

person who's smaller, you get a label hung on you at different times. I mean, that's hurtful sometimes. Somebody might call you a racist. Or other things, you know? But if you always just do what's easy, you know? And I think one of the – somebody would label it as sort of a shortcoming in my life, I have tended, sometimes stupidly to avoid doing – trying to accomplish something in an easy way in favor of doing it in a hard way. (chuckles) Maybe because I thought it would be a more important thing that I had accomplished. . . .

There are a whole lot of easier things I could be doing at this stage of my life than wrestling with public education. I mean, I could be making more money. I could have a much easier, simpler life. But I don't think it would be as rewarding. In most of the ways that count. So there's a certain selfishness about this, selfish in the sense that I feel good doing this. I feel like I am doing the right thing doing this.

Since Butzon serves in the primary leadership role with CEN, I was interested in knowing how he perceives his own leadership style. He replied without hesitation, as if he had thought about this or described it before:

I would describe it as a combination of inspirational, by example, on the one hand, and the rarely reluctant use of the stick on the other. I never have asked people to do something that I'm not willing to do myself. In a military kind of environment you can't be successful *sending* people to fight and die, you gotta *lead* them to do that. Somebody has to lead them. It may be the President that sits in Washington and sends them, but at

some point somebody has to say, “OK, guys, come on.” I think leadership is built on a huge block of loyalty. I think one of the things that we tend to forget is that we expect people to be loyal *up*, but we forget that whatever it is – the organization, the leader – has to be loyal *down*. My experience is that being loyal to the people that worked for me has always paid huge, huge dividends. People will literally walk through the Gates of Hell if they know you are going to fight for them. And sometimes you gotta fight those fights knowing you are going to lose on the front end.

I’m an impatient leader. The biggest problem I have around the educational reform agenda is that I’m impatient about it. It’s taking too long. There are too many people dragging their feet. There’s no good reason for it; there are a lot of bad reasons for it, but there’s no good reason why it is. Just because we don’t have the collective will to do it.

This is going to sound really egotistical. (pauses) I’m tired of the excuses, and I’m tired of the people that resort to the excuses. I’m also tired of taking the same old tired stuff and repackaging it like it’s a great new idea, when it didn’t work the first time, it didn’t work the second time, didn’t work the third time. Why the hell do we want to try it the fourth time? I know, I *know* what it takes. I am confident. It’s not a cocky or an egotistical thing. I just know what it takes. And we’re not doing that. And so my frustration is, I think the people that are doing the other are just wasting their time.

I did not ask either CEN Board members or CCSD Board members what they specifically thought of the Executive Director or his work. However, it was area frequently brought up by all the participants, in part because, as one CEN member said to me, “It is hard to separate CEN from Jon Butzon.”

John Barter, the current Co-Chairman of CEN, offered the following:

There was an article in the paper yesterday that referred to our Executive Director as an activist, and I don’t know whether they intended that to be a pejorative or not, but I said “thank you” because we certainly don’t want him to be a “passivist” about education (laughs). [The reporter] called him “activist Jon Butzon.” And our role *is* to be an activist. . . .

Jon Butzon is one of the most quoted people in the newspaper because he is on top of his game. I mean, they know when they come, they will get a quote, but it will be a fact-based quote and a knowledge-based quote. And so, if there is an issue, he’s right there on it. And when PACT [state test] data and other data come out, he goes through it, he analyzes it, and he puts out information to the public on that kind of data.

You know, one of my biggest concerns for the group – there are a couple, one, if Jon left he’d be very hard to replace. I mean, he is CEN. And we would go try to replace him (pause) but, you know, this is, for him, a calling. And he works at it very, very hard and very productively. He generates a lot of work, and so if we lost him tomorrow, you know, we’d go try to find a replacement, but that would be a real change because we are not going to find another Jon Butzon. . . .



The other current Co-Chairman of CEN, Bishop Rembert, also talked at length about Jon Butzon, emphasizing his unshakeable values, which are obviously important to this retired pastor and bishop:

I was very happy when we decided to make Jon our Executive Director . . . because I thought he had a good basic, firm knowledge of what he thought and what he thinks and what he really believes that all children can become. . . . And what I thought he thought is that . . . the system itself didn't lend itself to the promotion and enhancement and full development of the children, and what we needed was CEN to be that agency . . . we'd be the "bulldog" agency to see that those in authority would do what they are supposed to do.

And I thought Jon's background, his training in the Navy, I think, was positive enough – maybe sometimes a little too positive (chuckles) – positive enough that people will know, "Here is somebody that is saying and speaking for us, and he is going to speak that today, tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." Some people in position, they say something to one group, and then they go to another group and say something else. Jon just impressed me and others that he wasn't that type of person. He believed, and this is what he believed, and this is what he would give a life to see that we accomplish – that children are developed, and that every child should be given that opportunity to develop. . . . Every child is important. Every time a child – whether he lives on the east side or west side or north side or the south side – if you lose him, you are really putting

another shell in the gun. That's a shell in the gun. Now, it may never fire, but there's always that possibility that it will. And I really love Jon for that.

See, I give credit where it is due. [CEN] would not have been without Jon. Jon appeared at committee meetings, Jon spoke to individuals. We've had several pieces in the paper, so he was right on top of it. And what they considered the hard-nosed approach, really became the effective approach. Now, that's what I think . . . he's really done a good job. I really love Jon, I really do.

Bishop Rembert acknowledged that while "the mayor, legislators, and influential leaders in the community" respected Butzon, there was at least one person he knew who did not view his "bulldog" approach in this positive manner. A minister of a large congregation in Charleston is opposed to CEN mainly on the basis of his dislike for Butzon. But Rembert attributed this feeling to jealousy, saying, "[the minister] is going to be against anybody whose star is going to shine brighter than his."

Bishop, himself, while he does not agree with his pastoral colleague, seems to wish that the bulldog strategy was not always necessary:

Now, I also will say that now if we can get the same thing with – let me see, what is the word? A little less direct approach. That may not be saying it too well, but you understand. I don't want him to change his philosophy. I don't want him to change what he wants to see done. I would like if he could say it without – (pause). Well, I'm an old Testament Biblical scholar – say it with a more compassionate appeal. I

don't think the compassionate appeal would have worked months ago, a year, I really don't. I think the only thing that would have really worked is what he did. That's when people really – there's something about people – people like to know that their leader is strong, is determined, uncompromising, and loving. Now, what I'd like to see is strong, uncompromising, loving. In fact, I'd like to see loving split the difference (laughs). Then we could get the same things done without compromising. And he's done an excellent job.

Gregg Meyers, Chairman of the Charleston County School District Board of Trustees at the time of his interview in October 2003, told me this about Butzon:

It's been pretty helpful having [CEN] out there, because Jon Butzon will analyze information, kind of create a perspective that's just totally independent. And, you know, I may agree with him or disagree with him or find it useful or find it not useful, but at least it's something else intelligent to read and think about. . . . I think the [rest of the] board would be wildly disparate in their reactions. . . . I'm projecting, too, because I personally appreciate what they are doing, but I think some people resent it. I think some people resist it and, you know, it's sort of differences of opinion on what should drive stuff.

One of the board members wrote to the newspaper and was concerned about a comment that Jon made because he was using the word “we” in terms of hiring the superintendent . . . but I've been on the board since '96 and I mean, there's been this kind of resistance of (pauses). This

goes back to who's in charge. "I'm in charge, I'm on the board" instead of embracing a bigger view of it and being glad the community is taking some ownership of and responsibility for the schools. I think the resistance derives from "Wait a minute, I'm the one who got elected, and I'm in charge along with these other eight people, and I want that to be clear." And I just don't think we need to be defensive about that because that's the reality. We are the ones that make the decisions, but having community support is a good thing, to me. So, I don't mind it at all. I mean, if there were ten groups like CEN, each with their own issues and agenda, I might regard it as a headache, but I wouldn't regard it as a bad thing. I would regard it as a *good* headache. . . . It's another voice, you know, it's another voice saying, "No, this makes sense, and here's the reason why."

You know, Jon has been pretty exercised about occasional strategies that the district wants to use because they don't make sense to him. Well, that's totally fair and I mean, if a school administrator comes to me and says, "Look, I want to try this," I'm going to be inclined to let him try it. But I want to understand what they want to produce as a result. I mean, Jon may say, "I don't agree with the mechanism, and you're making a mistake, and here are the reasons why" and that's fair. I mean, it's all available for public comment. So, you know, occasionally, his voice will run the other way because he's not just trying to be oppositional, he's trying to get us to a place that he thinks we all agree we

are trying to get to, but the mechanics of what technique gets picked is where there is sometimes a disagreement. And I just think that's completely fair.

Another school board member, Hugh Cannon, was actually a member of CEN before running for the school board. He commented:

I've known Jon Butzon a long time, and I understand Jon, I think, very well. I think some of the school board members think that he pushes pretty hard. He does push hard though, but that's what his job is. And he will send us emails that are saying, you know, "We're at the bottom ten percent in the nation" or "In South Carolina, we are in the bottom tenth place," and I think some of the school board members think that he stays on our case almost too much. It doesn't bother me at all. I like Jon. I had breakfast with him last week, and we get along great. . . .

It's a very frustrating job to be on the school board to start with. And in this last administration [Superintendent McWhirt], it was very frustrating because you would try to find out things or get things done, and nothing would happen or you couldn't get the information, or things were going wrong, and nobody would do anything about it. And then to have somebody come up and tell you that all that is going wrong (laughs), I think some people just didn't want to hear the bad news. And Jon does stay on the bad news. I've heard the comment, "Well, why didn't he tell us what a good job we are doing?" Well, that's not what he is about. . . . I think the administration pretty well tells you the good things that are

happening. . . . You know at the very beginning [of a school board meeting] they have the recognition of teachers or students or schools.

That happens at every board meeting, and in this last one, we must have had twenty minutes of recognition. I mean, it is well deserved and everybody liked it, but my point is, I think the good things *are* pointed out.

The administration really doesn't want to get up and say, "We are doing a sorry job at X, Y, & Z schools."

I asked Mr. Cannon if Jon Butzon's comments give these positive administrative reports some balance. He replied, with a laugh, "Some people will see it as a tilt almost. But you have to understand, I was on the CEN, I know Jon, and I know where he is coming from, and he's a good friend." When I asked Mr. Cannon how Butzon was perceived by the central office administration, he mentioned by name the former Deputy Superintendent, saying, "Well, I'm sure [she] didn't like him because he stayed on her case all the time. She didn't like me either."

Later, Mr. Cannon was talking about Rivers Middle School, which is a high minority, high poverty downtown school that has been on the Title 1 corrective action list since 1996:

It's a failing school. It's been failing for years. That's one of those where you say, "Why didn't somebody pay attention to this?" and that's why . . .

I'd rather have Jon Butzon overstate it than understate it. . . . I mean, if we could have gotten more attention on say, Rivers, seven years ago, it would have been a different picture, I think.

The school board member whom Mr. Cannon referenced and former Superintendent McWhirt were both invited and encouraged several times to be interviewed for this study, but both failed to respond. (See “Specific limitations in this study” on page 88.)

One of my favorite comments about the Executive Director’s personality was a spontaneous quip from John Barter that occurred at a CEN Board meeting I attended in September 2003. Mr. Butzon was reporting on his participation in the first meeting of the South Carolina Education Policy Fellows Program in Columbia the previous day. His wry comment about that meeting was, “It’s going to teach me some patience.” John Barter immediately replied, “Impossible. You’ve already flunked that; you’re going to have to ace another part of the course.” This was gleefully received by the rest of the board, because Butzon is definitely known for his impatience at the “speed” of educational reform, and also because he is usually the first one out with a clever quip.

Finally, perhaps Ted Halkyard, somewhat of a latecomer to CEN, most succinctly summarized Jon Butzon’s contributions to CEN:

I think if Jon, for example, were to up and say tomorrow, “I’m going to become a monk,” or whatever (chuckles) . . . it would be tough because you don’t replace him very easily . . . It’s literal big shoes . . . and because you don’t just hire a “professional” to say, “This is what we want you to do.” It comes from inside Jon, and he is not, he is *not* easy to replace. And so I think to a certain extent that the future of this effort is highly fragile for that reason. And as a matter of fact, it would be difficult to forecast. Let’s say he up and did something different, you know, what

would we do? That would be very difficult. Don't tell him I said that.

(laughs). You know, you kind of combine his passion with his understanding and his ability to work for not a whole lot of money. It's an unusual combination.

### Perceived "Hidden Agendas"

Perhaps because of the strong personality of Jon Butzon, or CEN's bold and public stances on educational reform, a couple of my professors and several fellow students at UGA who have heard me talk about CEN have suggested to me that CEN must have a hidden agenda, perhaps a conservative, political one, or even a more sinister agenda. I have been asked if the members are all Republicans. I have been cautioned to "follow the money." I have been asked about the racial and social demographics of the group, in others words, "Are they all white men?" In order to address these concerns, I deliberately investigated the possibility of "hidden agendas" of racism and partisan politics that have actually been lodged against the group by some members of the public, and by a former Chairman of the School Board.

I also examined the "edginess" that makes CEN a lightening rod for this kind of criticism from educators and certain members of the community, their self-appointed position as "watchdog," and their sometimes adversarial, "in your face" techniques. The Executive Director, who as noted earlier is for most people indistinguishable from CEN, often speaks vehemently at School Board meetings, challenging the members face to face to make reasoned decisions focused on the bottom line of student achievement. In quotes to the press, in e-mails to state educators and national colleagues, in letters to school board members, and in meetings both public and private, he communicates forcefully,



some might even say rudely, without particularly attempting to soften his message.

Butzon asserts the necessity of this strategy, saying that he should write a book about school reform entitled “The Bar Fighters Guide to No Nonsense Education Reform.” He explains why:

Because that is what is going to take. As long as everybody is nice about it, it ain’t gonna work. There’s no power in that. There’s no leverage in that, and there is no outrage, combativeness or courage in that. You know, it’s the Marquis of Queensbury, “Let’s go to Sunday afternoon tea” approach.

Let’s look more in depth as some of these accusations.

On February 12, 2002, school board member Reverend Theodore Lewis, who is African American, wrote a letter to selected members of CEN’s board, including the Mayor, but not to Executive Director Butzon. The letter was also copied to Reverend Joseph Darby, who is first vice-president in the local NAACP chapter. Rev. Lewis expressed concerns about statements Butzon had been making to encourage parents to transfer their children from schools rated “low performing.” to schools rated “good” or “excellent.” (A more complete explanation of this CEN initiative, *A Chance for Every Child*, appears on pages 180-182). In part, Rev. Lewis wrote:

I am writing to you to protest the tactics being used by the Executive Director, Jonathan H. Butzon, and to ask if you, as a [CEN] Board Member, sanction such actions and statements. . . . Mr. Butzon, while stating that he wants to improve the schools in Charleston County, has repeatedly degraded and intentionally taken every opportunity to criticize

the schools, teachers, district and the Board. . . . Mr. Butzon's call for parents to transfer their children from "low-performing" schools . . . to higher performing schools is not economically or educationally feasible for the district or its children. . . . If the goal of the Charleston Education Network is to assist the district in its efforts to raise the educational level of ALL children, Mr. Butzon is going about the task in a questionable manner.

An unsolicited response to this letter came from CEN-friendly school board member Gregg Meyers, on February 18, 2002. He sent his response to the same addressees as Lewis' letter, and also copied it to fellow school board members Lewis and Darby, and to Butzon himself. Attorney Meyers, who has never been a CEN member but did make a one time donation to it, defended CEN's stance and laid out a reasoned argument for honoring the requested transfers of children out of low-performing schools. Meyers expressed his understanding that the school administration wants more time to fix the problems in schools, but also challenged them, saying:

Viewed instead from the family's need, the problem seems more urgent.

The district recently committed itself to educating every child, a task to which it had never previously set itself, and viewed from the perspective of an individual student's family, providing time for the home school to improve seems to come at a terrible cost because it is the education of one's child that is affected. The State requires every family to send its children to school. The State, acting through the School District, tells that family where to attend school. If the State, again acting through the

School District, fails to provide a certain quality and thus makes that educational experience ineffective, on what basis should we block a family who takes seriously the State's own measuring stick [school ratings], from seeking a better educational setting for his or her child?

If we are serious about accountability then it seems to me we should make various avenues available to families to find an appropriate educational setting for their child. Perhaps we aren't serious about accountability. Finding the appropriate setting for each of my children is the way I think about this question as a parent. On behalf of Charleston County, why would I apply a lesser standard to someone else's child?

A second and stronger response to Rev. Lewis came from Butzon himself. On March 15, 2002, he wrote, in part, the words below, which would later be labeled racist:

If anybody on the School Board should understand and be the champion of social justice, it should be you. There is no justice in requiring children to attend a school that has shown repeatedly that it is incapable of providing a good education to all of its charges.

If anybody should understand the role that the church historically has played in championing the causes of the downtrodden, it should be you. If somebody should be the "conscience" of the school board for right and righteousness, it should be you.

That you would allow any of your sheep – and these children are ALL your sheep – to languish even for a single day in failed schools and

to be left behind and lost is inexplicable to me. That you would alibi it is unconscionable. . . .

Neither CEN as an organization nor I as an individual have condemned anyone in this [school transfer] campaign, but most especially not children. We have condemned inadequate education and ineffective education. We have condemned the practices and policies that knowingly imprison children in failed schools. We have condemned the lack of bold leadership and of swift, effective, decisive action to ensure that every child gets a good education in a good school. But we have condemned no person, especially not children.

The children of Charleston County deserve a trustee that will fight for them – every one of them – not hide behind them. In view of your expressed feelings, it is clear that you should not continue as a member of the Board of Trustees. You might best serve our children by devoting 100% of your time praying for the success of your replacement.

At about the same time, another letter of protest against CEN surfaced. Oliver Addison, then chairman of the CCSD Board of Trustees, wrote a letter dated March 8, 2002, to then CEN Chairman Neil Robinson complaining about actions of CEN. He clearly calls into question the agenda of CEN, saying that they are exploiting children. I quote from Addison's letter:

Based on the actions of the last several months, we believe that your organization, the Charleston Education Network, has not come to the table to work for positive change. Instead of joining with us to improve

education in Charleston County, the Network's position is consistently in opposition to what we do and how we do it. Your organization has committed to initiates [sic] without consulting the District, requests from the District are ignored, and communication is either non-existent or takes the form of criticism.

Although the staff and Board are frustrated, both have worked hard to ignore these behaviors. However, it appears that when the Network does not obtain its desired results, there is always a new and often more visible effort to go to any extent to achieve your objectives. Often it is to find an issue that is identified with groups or individuals who have personal or limited concerns. Those individuals appear to collaborate creating confusion, frustration, and conflict.

Finally, since this approach has not been successful, the Network has begun to use the media as a platform for espousing positions that negatively impact our students. This has to end. We can no longer stand by and allow the Network to exploit our students and parents by promising things that cannot be supported legally or financially, as you are doing with the student transfer initiative. . . .

Perhaps we have been patient too long. Several of our board members and staff have expressed concerns to individual members of your Board and have been assured that you understood what we were saying and primarily about whom we were speaking. There have been promises that things would change. We can no longer remain silent. We need to

know if you are willing to be part of the District's commitment to work collaboratively; or, if your organization is going to continue to work as an "independent body" whose mission is to identify our faults and publicly criticize us through the media. . . .

Addison stated in his letter that he was authorized by the board to write and share these "board concerns," though that statement was later disputed by some other CCSD board members, including in Gregg Meyers' March 13, 2002 letter to CEN Chairman Neil Robinson. After stating that "either the letter is incorrect in its statement that the Board authorized it or the Board has again used the meeting-before-the-meeting approach in violation of our obligation to conduct business in public," Meyers again had words of chastisement for the Board and encouragement for CEN, writing:

The Board itself should be the most dissatisfied customer in this system which has so many weaknesses and produces such weak results for so many. The Education Network should have to stand in line – behind Board members – to point out our weaknesses. The strengths of the district are not to be ignored, but the weaknesses, and the historical weaknesses, remain glaring, and if the Board believes it does not need the entire community to help change those results, then we are making an enormous mistake.

Addison had copied the letter he wrote to the CEN Board, the school board, the constituent boards, and all management staff of the school district, including all school principals. At the next school board meeting on March 25, 2002, Mr. Addison stopped Jon Butzon from addressing the board in public session during the time allotted for

community comment by pounding his gavel repeatedly and speaking over him.

According to *The Post and Courier's* (Bruce, 2002) reporting the next day:

When Jon Butzon, executive director of the Charleston Education Network, tried to talk about setting a timeline for improving failing schools, he was stopped by board Chairman Oliver Addison. Addison told Butzon he could not speak again because he had talked to the board before about the network's initiative to transfer students out of failing schools.

"That's convenient for you sir, isn't it?" Butzon asked.

Board policy states that speakers cannot address the board on the same topic more than once in a six month period. Butzon argued that the timeline for improvement was a different topic than transferring students, but Addison said the topic was failing schools and would not let him continue. (Bruce, 2002)

A third letter that arrived at CEN shortly after this school board meeting increased the acrimony level even more. In a letter dated March 25, 2002 (the same day as the meeting), former South Carolina legislator Herbert Fielding, who is African American, wrote to Mayor Joe Riley, accusing Jon Butzon of being a racist:

As you will recall, on last evening I spoke to you briefly about the Charleston Education Network. I understand that you were instrumental in creating that group, and placing most if not all of the members on the Board. Incidentally, I have a list of members of the Network, and I personally know and admire practically all of them, including the ex-officio members. However, as I said to you, one member, Mr. Butzon,

causes me serious concern as to his racial attitude. Specifically, I refer to a copy of a letter by him to Father Ted Lewis which clearly indicates to me racial insensitivity, and smacks of the kind of negative attitude toward the school board that was espoused by John Graham Altman for too many years.

If you read between the lines in his (Butzon's) letter, you clearly hear the words of the strong proponents of "take the money and put it into VOUCHERS," and let those 'inadequate,' as he calls them, schools fend for themselves. . . . Now, Mr. Mayor, you know me and know that I am not one to lightly toss around the word racism, but after reading Mr. Butzon's letter . . . I have to wonder if Mr. Butzon's actions are not somehow tied to the fact that the majority of the School Board is now black.

To get down to the bottom line . . . I simply want to say to you that I do not feel that it is in the best interest of the community to have someone on that group [CEN] who demonstrates racial insensitivity.

A few days later, on April 3, 2002, CEN Chairman Neil Robinson wrote a letter to school board chairman Oliver Addison, addressing all three letters: Addison's, Lewis', and Fielding's. It is excerpted at length here for three reasons. First, it addresses the multiple and serious accusations from CEN's perspective. Second, its tone captures the frustration felt by CEN members about these repeated, and to them unfounded, accusations. Third, it clearly is characterized by



the same edginess that is displayed in Butzon's letter, and that in some ways, defines CEN. Robinson wrote to Mr. Addison:

Your letter to me of March 8, 2002, is extraordinary. I don't know precisely who prepared it for you, but I must concede that I would not have thought it possible to put so many untruths and misstatements of fact in a single self-serving letter. Clearly your intention is to discredit the Charleston Education Network (CEN) by whatever means you can, as evidenced by the distribution of your letter to all principals, superintendents and members of the various District School Boards. (Even money says that blind copies went to many others, as well.) Your letter is also extraordinary as a single document that clearly demonstrates why the district needs new strong and competent leadership.

The timing of your letter was interesting. I received it about an hour before the [School] Board meeting on March 11, [2002], at which time CEN presented your Board with copies of over 500 petitions for transfers from parents of children currently enrolled in sub-standard District schools. You knew we were coming – and I suppose you thought your letter might soften our presentation. Your fears of our efforts were again expressed when you embarrassed yourself, the Board, and everyone in attendance at the meeting by reading a statement prior to the visitor's comment period, essentially damning our presentation as reckless and untrue before we uttered a word. . . . Well, what we presented to your

Board was the truth. What you demonstrated was that you can't handle the truth. . . .

Addressing the specifics of your letter seriatim, you start out saying “. . . we are certain that your concern for educating all the children in Charleston County is the same as ours.” In fact, it is not the same. Our concerns are immediate – no child should have to spend one day in a sub-standard school. You say it is easy for groups who don't have a commitment similar to yours to criticize. You bet it is!

. . . I find it nothing short of incredible that you go to great lengths to tell me how committed you are to accountability. . . . We will not applaud your lip service to accountability. We demand that you practice it!

. . . . Your accusations that CEN “has not come to the table to work for positive change” falls on deaf ears. In our view, the things that need to happen for positive change are not happening around your table. . . . You accuse CEN of committing to “initiates” (initiatives?) without consulting the District. Have you forgotten the 2 hour meeting in Superintendent McWhirt's office with me, Bishop Rembert, and Jon Butzon . . . ? Do you recall that we convened that meeting to request that the District adopt a policy that would make it possible for a child to request a transfer out of a sub-standard school? I am sure you will recall that no answer has been received by CEN to this request. And you accuse us of ignoring requests?! What requests are you speaking of? That we fold up our tent

and go away? That we sit at your table and blindly applaud the baby steps that leave many of our schools among the worst in the State and Nation? The truth is that CEN and its Board Members have been trying to work with your Board to improve the schools of the district for years. Recall the Board Referendum that was finally passed only after the business community threw its weight behind the effort? Who brought the lawsuit against the County auditor that resulted in the Supreme Court throwing out the 90 mil tax cap? I personally drafted and signed the Complaint, and the District subsequently joined the suit. I found it most ironic that on the evening of March 11 the Board recognized Parents for Public Schools as heroes of the District for its role in the tax cap suit.<sup>7</sup> It was only minutes later that you slammed the CEN board members (who were responsible for bringing the suit) for presenting transfer requests from hundreds of students seeking to escape sub-standard schools. . . .

Our Executive Director, Jon Butzon, has been the focus of your displeasure, as evidenced by a flurry of strident letters from your selected messengers: Rufus Dilligard,<sup>8</sup> Rev. Joe Darby, Rev. Ted Lewis, and most recently Herbert Fielding. Fielding's letter calling Mr. Butzon a "racist" is laughable. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the assertion simply shows how desperate you are to avoid the issues raised by CEN. You should understand that Mr. Butzon is simply fulfilling the wishes of the CEN Board of Directors. He is not a lone wolf or renegade on a

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<sup>7</sup> CEN needed a group "with standing as parents" to serve as the nominal plaintiff. After much discussion, Parents for Public Schools agreed to lend their name to the lawsuit.

<sup>8</sup> Rufus Dilligard is the husband of then Deputy Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Barbara Dilligard.

personal mission, although he believes strongly in our initiatives and works untiringly to see that they are successful.

I trust this letter puts to rest your stated need for clarification of the intent, the approach, and the philosophy of CEN. We will continue to work as an independent body, but we do not have as our primary goal the identification of your faults. We believe they are self-evident. You and all the other Board Members are simply passing through. The problems have been with us for decades. . . . You cannot leave children in sub-standard schools and not set a time frame for fixing those schools. If you set about doing the right thing, you will find that CEN will be your biggest supporter. If you do not, we will be there to ask why. You say you embrace accountability – put your money where your mouth is – and quit whining when the public (CEN) seeks to hold you accountable. As our late President Harry Truman espoused, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!”

At this point in the exchange of letters, Mayor Riley entered the fray. In response to Feilding’s letter, Mayor Riley called a meeting with Fielding, school board members Hillery Douglas and Ted Lewis, and CEN members Butzon and Coleman Glaze on April 5, 2002. Butzon later told me that, “I apologized to Reverend Lewis if anything I said could have been construed as being prejudiced against him because of his race.” However, it is still unclear which lines of Butzon’s letter, while passionate and accusatory of Lewis’ failings as a school board member, are reflective of racist feelings.

According to an April 11, 2002, letter from Lewis to board chairman Oliver Addison, the outcome of the meeting was as follows:

Following a half hour meeting, it was decided to ask three Charleston County School Board Members to meet informally with Charleston Education Network Board Members and at their regular meetings to seek ideas and solutions where we can work jointly to farther [sic] the education of our students in Charleston County Schools. . . . It would be my recommendation to . . . have Mr. Douglas to contact Mr. Butzon to set up the first meeting.

According to Butzon, that call from Douglas never came, and no meetings were ever set up between the members of the two boards. That fall, Lewis and Addison failed to win re-election due to the efforts of Clean Slate, the informal political action committee started by former CEN board member Ginny Deerin, and the accusations ceased. Ironically, Butzon had encouraged people to vote for Addison and Lewis in an earlier election because he said he felt strongly that a majority of African Americans on the school board would improve educational outcomes for the disenfranchised students in Charleston County. It is further ironic that CEN was accused of having a racist agenda, because, on a surface level at least, it would seem that CEN's agenda is exactly the opposite. CEN is fighting on behalf on kids who often are children of color. Bishop Rembert strongly disputed these racist allegations, and in fact, attributed the motivation of those making them to personality and ego, but others who might have had a different

opinion did not consent to be interviewed. (See “Limitations of this study” on page 88.)

I asked Jon Butzon why this accusation had been made by at least these three members of the African American community in Charleston. His response is laden with the frustration he feels over these kinds of inflammatory accusations:

I think it’s another way of saying “We can’t believe that this group of folks” (pause) I mean, somebody characterized my board the other day as “a bunch of wealthy, white people.” I have some wealthy white people on my board. I also have a couple of wealthy black people on my board, and I also have some middle class blacks and whites on my board. I don’t have anybody that lives in public housing, and at some point I think that needs to be corrected, for example. . . .

I called the lady [who said this] the next day, and said, “Let’s talk about this a little bit.” And the other thing I said to her was – the other criticism is – because this isn’t a group of parents of public school children, that we’re too far removed from it. It’s almost like, not only is somebody suspicious that you are doing this, but it’s also like, “You don’t have a right to do this! You should stay home! You don’t have a right to do this.”

And of course, one of the big problems in public education in Charleston County is that more than 20% of school aged kids are in private schools. The children of the most affluent, the best politically connected, the people with clout in that community are not in public

schools. The people that could make the biggest difference the fastest aren't connected to public schools. So anything that anybody did to get those people to the table ought to be a good thing. But it also makes me wonder about the real agenda of the people that are criticizing us. For example, somebody that would spend a lot of time saying, "Follow the money. Find the hidden political agenda." Wait a minute. Are we more interested in the suspicion, or the fantasy of the conspiracy? Or are we more interested in fixing schools?

Bishop Rembert, a long-time member of the NAACP himself and a well respected leader of the predominantly African American Reformed Episcopal Church in Charleston, discounts the NAACP criticisms of CEN as being inconsequential and motivated by a desire for attention. He used an analogy of a squeaky wheel to explain how the NAACP sometimes is not satisfied with compromise or solutions, saying that once the wheel (and whatever problem the wheel represents) has been greased, one should say, "Oh, it's good that we got to stop you' and then push your cart on." Instead, Rembert says, the NAACP gets that squeaking wheel stopped and then tries to make it squeak again. Rembert continues, "You're saying 'let's stop the squealing wheel' but then when you think you got it stopped, you go and wipe the grease off of it so it will squeal some more." He disapproves of this technique of deliberately looking for problems or exacerbating non-existent problems, which is how he would characterize these accusations of racism against CEN.

Butzon believes that at least some of those making the accusations are actually potentially racist, or elitist, themselves, since keeping the public schools at the status quo

in fact ensures an underclass that some may wrongfully believe to be necessary for the economic well-being of the area. Butzon explains:

Maybe there are some people that don't want us to do anything with public schools. I think that's true. I think there are people in this community that would stand up and say, "Oh, yeah, we gotta do something about public education" that are [actually] just fine with [the way it is]. Because at the end of the day in Charleston, South Carolina, on a very pragmatic level, there are still a few folks that believe you don't need to have a good education to carry suitcases, make beds in a hotel, wash dishes in the restaurants, you know, be that service level, and to support an economy that's largely built on tourism. South Carolina has always, and even at the moment – our attraction to business and industry has always been that it's a cheap place to do business. You can come here to South Carolina and hire a work force cheaply. Guess what? The world has changed. The kind of thing that's making money is not the kind of thing you can support with cheap labor, or poorly educated labor. South Carolina used to be a great place for the textile industry. We had textile mills, and clothing manufacturers all over the state. There aren't any left. Where are they? They're in Mexico. They're in Honduras. They're in Guatemala. They're in India. All those jobs have gone off-shore. . . .

But the issue of being a racist. You have to look at, or at least you have to ask yourself, "What is the agenda in doing that?" Because in South Carolina, anything that improves public education will benefit first



racial minorities, and then the socio-economic disadvantaged, which unfortunately there's almost a one-to-one correlation. Not every poor person in South Carolina is black, but (pause) OK? So, it makes me wonder about what that is about. And it's also about that business that we [really] don't want every kid to succeed.

After dispelling the specter of racist "hidden agendas," Butzon addressed questions about CEN's political associations, discussing the political affiliations of CEN members, the sources of CEN's donations, and the politicized issue of school vouchers. First, regarding CEN members' political party affiliations, Butzon offered evidence that indeed there is a broad spectrum of political support and party affiliation, and a non-partisan political agenda. After initially joking that "We're a front organization for the Communist Party. The secret is out," Butzon explained:

Probably one of the two or three most significant people in the founding of the Charleston Education Network was the Mayor of the City of Charleston, who was just re-elected to his 8th term, who is "Mr. Democrat" in South Carolina. Having said that, I've got some board members who are rabid Republicans, I've got some Board members who are very moderate Republicans, I've got some other board members that are Democrats. So I couldn't get a partisan agenda going in the Charleston Education Network even if I thought it was the only possible way to get anything done. There is no way in the world to make that happen.

Butzon tells the story of one CEN member who he thought was Republican because that person was a strong fiscal conservative. Later, he found out that the CEN member in question voted Democratic, leading to this observation:

We [tend to] use being conservative as good and being liberal as bad.

OK? I think being fiscally conservative is a great thing, [but] I don't think that has anything to do with being a Republican or a Democrat. I think it has to do with being a good steward with other people's money.

Butzon also explained "the money" – how much, where it comes from, and that it does not come from any political party. The money amounts to an annual budget of approximately \$100,000. It is raised entirely by CEN members and all comes from private donors in amounts ranging from \$100 to \$10,000. About \$65,000 of the budget is consumed by the Executive Director's salary. Other costs are benefits, office supplies, telephone and mailing costs, and dues to the Public Education Network, of which CEN is a local affiliate, along with more than 80 other organizations nationally. There are no other paid staff members, and the office is supplied rent-free by The Citadel. As to the specific sources of donations, Butzon said:

I've gotten some money from some Republicans and some money from some Democrats. I get a lot of support, non-financial but in lots of other ways, from a Libertarian. The uniting factor here is not politics. The uniting factor here is educating children. That's about as hidden and sinister as it gets. This community does and has done for years, an awful job of educating children.

Butzon stated his position on school vouchers, often touted as a “hidden” conservative Republican hidden agenda of *No Child Left Behind*. He is opposed to vouchers, in contrast to Fielding’s charge in his letter to the Mayor, and, in his trademark communication style of an analogy, Butzon explained why: they cannot save enough children.

[Vouchers] fail the Titanic lifeboat test, meaning it will save some of the kids, but most of them are gonna drown. The Titanic got the first class passengers – many of them – off, [with] some other women and children, but the lion’s share of the passengers on the Titanic drowned because there weren’t enough lifeboats. And that’s the problem with vouchers and charter schools and that kind of thing.

Butzon cited another problem with vouchers: they cannot provide the necessary competition to public schools that might be a successful strategy to force public school improvement.

Because the number of kids [using vouchers] is low – I mean we read about how they do it in Cleveland and Florida and all the rest of that. It’s really a very, very, teeny, tiny number of children. And course part of the deal around vouchers and charter schools is, if those children leave the system – leave the public school system – the public schools will . . . experience some anxiety in the loss of the population that they are serving, because at some point that translates into a loss of money and all the rest of that. And will then respond with a competitive pressure that that creates. “OK, we gotta go out and compete with those guys. Private

schools are eating our lunch. Because they are taking our kids.” Well, the number of children is so small that there is no competitive impact to that.

I mean, it’s like, if you got a school that . . . has demonstrated repeatedly that it is not cutting the mustard – not that it can’t, but it isn’t – So you gotta let that child out. And of course, what they are looking for is, that somebody says, “Holy, Mackerel, we can’t let that happen! We gotta jump right in there and get this school working so we can keep all those kids.” Well, there is no “Holy, Mackerel!” because there’s – you know, “Just the fact that we got a bunch of kids going to another school is no skin off my back. I still have a job, still get a paycheck.”

As frequently as Jon Butzon is quoted in the newspaper, as readily as he answers these politically sensitive questions, and as often as he makes public statements, it seems somewhat contradictory that CEN has been accused of being a secretive organization with a hidden or racist agenda. He explained why he thinks this is the case.

I think there are a couple of answers to that. One of them is – it makes it easier to discount what we are doing. “Oh, you can’t pay attention to them” or “They’re no good, because they’ve got this secret agenda – this hidden agenda – that’s about furthering the cause of vouchers or destroying public education” and all the rest of that. So it’s a way to sort of demonize the organization, the effort. I think it’s a function of ignorance, as well. People just don’t know, and they make it up. But I think there’s an even – I don’t know – a sadder explanation to that. That we’ve gotten so jaded anymore that it’s hard to imagine that a group of

people could get together to do the right thing just because it's the right thing. And particularly when that group of people doesn't have the obvious "dog in the fight."

Because most of the people on my board don't have kids in school, and when they did, they weren't in public school. I do have members of my board that had children in public school, but they are in the minority of the board in terms of numbers. Course, my children were educated in public school, but they are out now for years. So, I mean, I don't have a grandchild in public school or anything like that, so why in the world would somebody who, for example, educated their children in private school, or whose children are a decade out of public school, who has no quote unquote "dog in that fight," why would they tackle the unbelievable problem that is public education – a quality public education for every child – unless there is some hidden secret thing going? So the notion that they could do the right thing just because it is the right thing, is unfortunately a foreign idea anymore. That's a commentary on our society and on our nation, and it says a lot about just how jaded and cynical and all of that that we have gotten as a society.

*"Edginess"*

CEN members have recently engaged in considerable internal discussion and reflection regarding their "watchdog" approach. This appears to be happening for two reasons. First, some CEN members believe that there should be an extended "honeymoon" with new superintendent Dr. Maria Goodloe, in order to allow her

leadership style to emerge and coalesce. Others, including the Executive Director, privately question, “How long do we wait?” Second, the expectation that, no matter what the issue, “everybody should be nice about it” is amplified in the polite city of Charleston, and some board members are more concerned than others about whether CEN is perceived negatively as a result. John Barter estimates that four or five CEN board members have left the board due to being uncomfortable with these “edgy” strategies, or because their employers were uncomfortable with their association with CEN, though that was not the stated reason. He refers to this as “the process of natural selection.”

One of these lengthy, intense internal discussions at a fall 2003 CEN board meeting involved whether to narrowly or broadly target CEN fundraising efforts, and the benefits and risks of each method. The term “edginess” was brought up by member Ted Halkyard to label and describe the quality of CEN that many find objectionable. He describes being edgy as a “nipping at their heels” strategy that is born out of urgency:

I think in dealing with any massive organization and bureaucracy, whether it is a business organization or government or school boards or whatever, I think that there is a strong tendency to . . . become subject to inertia, particularly when you look at a school board, for example, that meets, once a month, [and] gets paid twenty-five bucks a meeting to determine the future education of our kids. You know, there is a built-in tendency not to move rapidly, and I’m not talking about moving imprudently rapidly, but just simply to get things done.

And you look at the vested interest of the supporting organizations, that typically are averse to change, and there needs to be something there that says “enough already.” I mean, you know what the right thing is to do, let’s get on with it and let’s not analyze it for the next five years because in the next five years we are going to be graduating kids or having kids drop out where they are going to be a tremendous burden to themselves and the rest of the community, so while we are analyzing it, it probably continues to go on. So, I think there is a role for a group like ours to continuously nip at the heels of the folks to get them action-oriented and recognize that we can’t look at five- and ten- and fifteen-year time horizons. It’s too important.

I asked Halkyard to describe what this “nipping at the heels” looks like. He replied:

If it becomes obvious to us that things are not moving along rapidly or well, not to sit back patiently and say, “Well, okay.” I mean, we are going to fire back at them, and it is going to make us unpopular on some things, but we think that our cause is just. And as long as we can behave in such a way that we are able to say, “Hold on, why do you think we are acting this way? Tell us why we are acting this way.” The answer always has to be, “For the kids.” And as long as we operate from that perspective, and it is unassailable, we can afford to be a pain (laughs) because it’s for a good cause. . . . But there is always a temptation, you know, once you become kind of successful, to say “Well, let’s expand our world,” and often in

those cases, you tend to forget what made you good and useful and relevant in the first place. So, you know . . . my voice will probably be drowned out on this, but I really think there is a strong case for a small, restrained, effective, willing-to-be-confrontational [group]. . . .

Obviously, our overall objective is to be effective, and we believe that our effectiveness is or flows in large measure from our willingness to take on unpopular stands. Now, if you get to the point where, my word, “edginess” begins to make you ineffective, then you have to kind of revisit it, and then you say, “Okay, our overall objective is to be effective.” If we are crossing the line to the point where we are seen as not being relevant to the issues, or the people that we are trying to help look upon us as a real pain and therefore [are] rejecting us, then we have to kind of throttle back and make sure that our efforts continue to be on the edge. But not to the point where they began to render us ineffective, and that’s a balancing act.

The Mayor of Charleston, Joe Riley, also supports the edgy quality of CEN, and also finds it necessary. He told me:

I think it is very important. I have used the analogy that this city which is nationally renowned in preservation . . . this city is more beautiful and more well preserved because we had preservation organizations that were never *antagonistic* by nature with the city, but they were *edgy*. They kept pushing. It makes you better, so I think it is important.

One school board member interviewed seemed to have ambivalent feelings about the role CEN has and should play. This board member acknowledges that the edgy



strategy has been necessary, even sees the importance of having “someone who is needling the district,” but acknowledges that such strategies are not always welcome. This board member also asserts that the community will pay a larger price if CEN does not continue in its “watchdog” role, but then wishes for more collaboration and less confrontation. This board member said:

I think that the strategy of . . . publicly, you know, at school board meetings or in the paper, pointing out negative points about the district is not well received, which is understandable. People don’t like to be criticized. I think that from a strategy point of view that the issue comes up that it seems to be part of the strategy at CEN to repetitively point out negative aspects to the extent that they don’t point out things that are working. . . . My strategy would be very different.

I think it’s really important to have somebody out in the community who is turning over the stones. I think it’s incredibly valuable, especially in an area such as Charleston where the status quo is valued above anything else. I do think that in order to move or to make improvements on what you find under the rock, there needs to be some finesse. And so, I guess it just depends on what role CEN wants to play. If they just want to be the group that turns over rocks, or if they want to play a role in improving education once they find an issue. . . . If CEN chooses to only turn over rocks and never point out that people are working on solutions to what was found under the last rock, then they may not have as close a relationship [to the school district] as they could have

otherwise. But that may not be what CEN wants. CEN may not want to have that close relationship. They may want to continue to choose to be the rock turner-over. And if that's the case, then I think they will have a respectful relationship, but I don't think it will be as collaborative. It's just my guess.

Jon Butzon doesn't expect to change his style or CEN's edgy strategies any time soon, even though he acknowledges the personal toll it takes. He also makes one final prediction about the price of his edgy style:

It can't be done any other way. And I will tell you this, it is very hard work because there are very, very few people – I mean, the human animal is not built this way, I don't believe, where you can honestly say, "I don't care what people think" and you can consistently, constantly be cross-threaded with the system. I know I can't. And, if I had to predict, I would predict at some point I will cross the line and won't get fired, [but] I'll just be reined in, and then I'll quit. And then the Charleston Education Network will die, because we already have an organization to do programming in Marquis of Queensbury style.

#### What is CEN's Agenda?

If there is no "hidden agenda," what is CEN's public agenda? Their agenda for school reform in Charleston County is probably best represented by their mission statement: "to be a staunch advocate for children, a dynamic catalyst for change, and an unrelenting force for accountability to achieve excellence in public education." Their purpose is to be laser-focused on improving student achievement, as measured by standardized tests, which is seen as the educator's responsibility. CEN has taken on the

role of aggressively insisting that educators do their jobs of teaching all students, and they believe that educators, not students or parents, are the ones we should look to first when a child is under-achieving.

A recent description of CEN submitted by Butzon for posting on the Community Foundation website reads as follows:

The Charleston Education Network (CEN) is a new “brand” of education foundation that has adopted a theory of action using strategy, leverage, policy, and advocacy – sharply focused on high levels of achievement for all children – to cause marked improvement in public education.

Our reasoning is simple. Systems are notoriously resistant to change, especially fundamental, foundational change. For that kind of change to occur, there must be some mechanism that insists on significant improvement and real accountability that is closer to local schools than the state house or the White House. It also must mobilize the public to create the imperative for improved public education. The public schools, after all, are the public’s schools.

Somebody must oppose the status quo; otherwise, the status quo wins by default. Archimedes claimed that given a lever long enough and a place to stand, he could move the world. The role of the Charleston Education Network is to forge that lever and to provide the place to stand.

Jon Butzon has been asked on occasion what specifically he would do to fix public schools if he were in charge. While he insists that specific strategies are not the focus of CEN, he obviously has studied opinions on this, and his responses to the

question tend to fall into three categories. I am including discussion of them here with a reminder from Butzon that, while his opinions are considered and based in research, it is not CEN's position to prescribe specific educational strategy. Thus, on most days, Butzon answers the question of how to fix schools by simply responding that the educators are the experts, and that there is plenty of evidence that all children can be taught to a high standard, given good teachers and adequate resources. If some educators can't figure out how to do it, they should get out of the way and let someone else who does; CEN is interested in only the bottom line of results.

A second response, an expansion on the first, that I have heard from Butzon is, "I don't care how they do it, as long as it is legal, moral, and ethical. It's about the results, Stupid. It's about whether or not Johnny can read. It's not about motion, it's not about activity. It's about action and results. And if at the end of the day, Johnny can't read, at the end of the school year, Johnny can't read, I don't care what you did, it was not sufficient, effective, productive."

Butzon's third type of response is a more thoughtful, research-based discussion of what works in education reform. He is unrelenting on the need for good building-based leadership: "First and foremost, it takes leadership on the inside. No nonsense, laser focused, courageous, no excuses, 'take no prisoners' leadership." He begins by speculating about what he would do if he were suddenly named Superintendent of Schools in Charleston County:

The first thing I would do is I would figure out some way to get 80% new principals, because 80% of the principals in the schools in Charleston can't get the job done – nice people, can't get the job done. . . . And I

would be looking in unlikely places for new principals, [such as] the classroom . . . and in the community. I could think of about ten people right now that know nothing about education, but they'd make great principals for the first couple of years, because they know how to run an organization, they know how to pull [out] what the talent in the building can do. They know to focus on the bottom line. They don't know the jargon, they don't know Praxis from Lexus, but they can produce results.

As part of good leadership, Butzon would see that educators are not only expected to produce results, but that there would be consequences if they did not. In the schools to which he is specifically referring here, test scores are abominable, among the lowest in the state, and these schools have been failing for years. As a result, everyone with means or social capital has moved their children to private schools or transferred to other public schools in higher performing areas. Butzon explains:

In downtown Charleston in the last year, they have seen a decline in enrollment of about 500 students. You know how many teachers have lost their jobs as a result of that? None. How many principals? None. How many Area Superintendents? None. How many Superintendents? None. Nobody. So, what's the big deal? "I still get a paycheck. I don't have to be competitive, my system doesn't have to be competitive, the school doesn't have to be competitive, the classroom doesn't have to be competitive, 'cause I still get paid." I wish I had figured this out on my own, but somebody explained it to me a few years ago, in fact a former

Superintendent in Charleston County: Public education is, in effect, an entitlement program for educators. It's like welfare.

Butzon also has concerns about the way that central school board administrations are run, particularly in that their singular goal is not to support what goes on in schools.

His second action would be this:

I [would] take the central office out of being a cost center and turn it into being a profit center, because if you're a cost center, you can sit around and ask for reports and input and data, answer questions, and all that sort of stuff. If you're a profit center, if you have to produce the income that pays your salary, you ain't got time for that nonsense. You're out hustling . . . the principals that want to hire your professional development function to do the professional development for their staff as opposed to Joe Doakes Inc., or Kaplan, or whoever. If you're a profit center, you're out there – and if you can't completely be a profit center, in the truest sense of the word, and you have to demonstrate your value to the organization in another way – then you're out there hustling to do whatever you can for the principal. Because at the end of the day when the superintendent says, “Well, listen, we've got to know why we want to keep you, and you know what? I'm going to ask these people over here who you are supposed to support, ‘Does Linda support you? Do you get the services that you need? Tell me how what she has done has contributed to kids' reading, writing and doing arithmetic in your school?’ (pause) ‘Oh, she doesn't do that?’ Darn, Linda, so much for the value of your function. You're a nice lady

and all the rest of that, but you need to think about selling real estate for a change.” And, of course, that’s heresy around public education.

Absolute, pure heresy.

CEN member Ted Halkyard also commented on the need for drastic changes in leadership, and he predicts that the changes necessary for effective school reform will not come easily. Speaking figuratively and vividly, he says what needs to happen at CCSD central office is:

. . . probably going to involve a little bit of blood running in the streets. . . .

Nobody would think that the magic is in just dropping heads, but the magic is in understanding what makes an organization effective and what makes an organization ineffective and surgically dealing with those situations.

CEN Co-Chairman Bishop Rembert makes a similar, more wide sweeping recommendation, though perhaps in softer terms, “If it were left to me, I’d take everybody out of central office and get a whole new group.”

Butzon has strong feelings about the importance of good quality teachers, too, because the research tells him this is of primary importance. First, he wants teachers to stop making excuses and “blaming the victim” when children don’t perform well. He cites and then reacts to what he sees as a typical teacher’s response when questioned about low achievement of her students, a response he calls focusing on the process (activity) and not the product (learning):

“I followed the lesson plan, I did the time on task, I’m at the point where they say I’m supposed to be at this time of the school year, we did the

project, we wrote the book report, I've got the bulletin board, I've done all of these things. It obviously can't have anything to do with me. If Junior and Baby Sister can't read, it can't have anything to do with the instruction. Or the curriculum. It has to be Junior and Baby Sister. . . ."

We've been kinda looking at poverty, and we say, "Oh, we got all these kids coming out of public housing. You know, their families really don't do what they should, in fact they don't even live here, they live with their grandmother or an aunt," and then we say, "This kid's hard to teach. This kid is at risk." And we have translated that into, (whispers) "Don't tell anybody, that kid's really impossible to teach. Just between us girls." We never say that out in front of the public. We say, "Every child can learn." But we "know" that kids that live in public housing, or on public assistance . . . "You just can't teach those kids. The kids don't have an interested parent," and all of that. I mean, that has gone beyond the level of excuse to absolute gospel fact.

One recommendation to fix the problem of poor teachers is to improve their preparation for the classroom. Butzon comments, using again a patented analogy, how many teachers have a poorly equipped toolbox, and points the finger at Colleges of Education:

You know, if you are a professional – a doctor, if you are a lawyer, if you are any of those professions – it's not that you are successful with the easy ones. You know, the white, upper-middle-class kid who showed up on the first day of kindergarten already knowing his numbers and colors and



shapes and being able to read “cat,” “rat,” “hat.” It’s the child that shows up way behind, ain’t gonna get any help at home, you are going to carry all that load – that’s a professional. Doesn’t complain. Just does it. Has a tool box full of tools, not just a hammer. But we have too many classroom teachers that you open their toolbox and there’s a hammer. So they drive a nail. That’s all they know how to do. So they drive a nail. Well, guess what? Most poor kids don’t respond to nails. They don’t need a nail. They need other things. And some of them need pretty sophisticated stuff. Now, to keep that from sounding like it’s just about teachers, we also have a system that doesn’t recognize that and doesn’t support that. So we take a teacher with two tools in her toolbox, we give her 20 kids that need the soup to nuts range of stuff, and say, “Teach those kids. And you know how much help we’re going to give you? None.”

The teacher training institutions in this country, by and large, 98% of them, number one, have no clue how to build a classroom school teacher to work in a public school, particularly in an inner-city, or a low income public school, in the year 2003-2004. No clue. And therefore, they don’t do it very well . . . and at some point [new teachers] figure out pretty clearly they don’t know what they’re doing, and so half of them say, “Adios.”

. . . Now that's not to say we don't have some good teachers, OK? I mean, we got some great teachers in public education. But having great teachers – number one, we don’t have enough, not near enough. Number

two, that we have any is a function of luck, not intent and design . . . And we continue to perpetuate – I mean, you stop and you think, on average, a public school teacher comes out of the bottom quartile of her college class.<sup>9</sup> Or his college class. Sounds to me like we’re trying to win the World Series with AA baseball players.

Butzon makes a bold recommendation for teacher training colleges and universities: Don’t accept students who are unprepared for college work. This would not only ensure a better talent pool for future teachers, he says it would create a crisis for all public schools that send students to matriculate:

The other thing – and I know who might read this so I say this unadvisedly – another reason that higher education is a major culprit in this – bears huge responsibility – I don’t know what the number is, but I know that this year when the freshman class showed up over there at the University of Georgia, or at the University of South Carolina, or Clemson, or University of Alabama or Tennessee or wherever it was, that a significant percentage of those kids were about as ready to do college work as I am to do brain surgery. And you know what? . . . It’s not the University’s fault that they showed up that way. It’s the university’s fault that we accepted them and we kept them. Took their money and then enrolled them in Freshman Studies and all that to give them the basics in English, Language Arts, and Math that they didn’t get in high school. If the presidents of America’s colleges and universities would take a stand and say tomorrow, “Starting

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<sup>9</sup> According to Goldhaber (2002), “As measured by standardized test scores (mainly the SAT and the ACT), students choosing to major in education tend to be drawn from the lower end of the ability distribution.”

next year, next August or September when the freshman class shows up, we're not taking kids that can't do the work." If they'd just do that thing. Take the financial hit, take all the booing and hissing that goes on when the Legislature stands up and says to the president of the University of South Carolina, "Why, Sir, you're a publicly funded state university! You should be taking *all* of South Carolina's children!" You should say, "We will. We'll take all of them that have a good high school education to come in here and do college, but if they can't, we're going to send them back to get what they should have gotten in the first place." If they did that, all by itself, the impact on the quality of public education would be huge and would be meteoric. You talk about generating rapid change. That one thing would do it. But, they'd have to have some backbone to do that.

Butzon continues this strategy, and bases the need for it on the results of the just released work of the American Diploma Project:<sup>10</sup>

Imagine the power for basic fundamental change in K-12 education, but especially in 6-12 public education, that would come from America's colleges and universities refusing to accept (or continue to enroll) the students who could not do college-level work. What if the letter read, "Dear So and So: We regret that the level of scholastic ability that you have attained in your high school is inadequate to prepare you for work at

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<sup>10</sup> The America Diploma Project (2004) found that "more than 70 percent of [high school] graduates enter two- and four-year colleges, but at least 28 percent of those students immediately take remedial English or math courses." (p. 2)

the college level. Therefore, we will not accept you for enrollment at XYZ University. We urge you to return to your high school and demand that they provide the instruction you should have received in the first place. When you have completed that remedial instruction, let us know and we will be happy to re-evaluate you for possible admission.” This would be financially painful for a time for colleges, but a positive change would occur *post haste*.

Another recommendation of Butzon’s would be to adjust teacher pay according to productivity, as measured not by where students end up at the end of the year, but how far they have come over the course of that year. This is a method of teacher pay proposed by Sanders (1998, Topping & Sanders, 2000) at the University of Tennessee, called “value-added:”

I would suggest that a teacher that takes a bunch of 9-year-olds, performing on the second grade level, they’re two years behind, and at the end of fourth grade she’s got them doing 4<sup>th</sup> grade work, or at least beginning 4<sup>th</sup> grade work, they may not be quite ready to do 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but she’s brought them well along, and we compare that teacher with the teacher that started out with a bunch of 9-year-olds in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, where Dad’s a lawyer, Mom’s a doctor, they got all the advantages, and that teacher only gets them from where they were at the start of beginning 4<sup>th</sup> grade skills to the beginning 5<sup>th</sup> grade skills, that teacher hasn’t done anything. That’s no big task. Now, if she has taken those kids from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to halfway through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, really advanced them, OK, we’ve done

something. So, I'd give this teacher over here a \$25,000 bonus, because of the great thing she did. Put two of those in a row – guess what? The kid is right back where he is supposed to be. Give him three in a row, that kid is ahead of where he is supposed to be. I don't care how poor, or black, or language-challenged he is.

Butzon does recognize that the business of teaching kids in schools that are predominantly made up of high-risk students requires a different approach than in schools made up of, as he calls them, “Wally and the Beav.” He recommends:

But what we come down to when we have a ghetto school . . . you have to have one thing certain. You have to have a red-hot, top-drawer, first-rate, bottom line focused, journeyman principal that knows what to do and how to do it and takes no prisoners in doing it. And that principal has to assemble a faculty of the same ilk. When you have that, you could have every child in there destitute. If you don't have all of that, and you have some of that, you can again be pretty successful if you are prepared to spend a ton of bucks. So that you can have class sizes of one to ten.

Things like that. Where you can mitigate the effects of the poverty and the lack of what he doesn't have at home. After that, you can't get there.

Butzon elaborates on how to determine effective class size for high risk students:

Is it fair to ask a teacher who teaches a class of 20 children who live in poverty, who don't have a college graduate in the parents, among the 20 of them, is it fair to ask that teacher of that class to do the same thing we ask the teacher of a class of 20 kids, 25 kids, where Dad's a doctor, Mom's a

lawyer? The answer is, “Well, no, that’s not fair.” But that’s not what we oughta be asking people to do. For starters, we oughta be asking this teacher, to teach a class of 25 kids where Dad’s a doctor, Mom’s a lawyer. And we oughta be asking this other teacher to teach a class of 10 kids, where there isn’t a college education among the parents of any of those kids. You know, let’s make the task doable, for starters.

CEN Co-Chairman John Barter (a retired corporate Chief Financial Officer) agrees that, when we know children have higher needs, the district should respond by allocating money and other resources accordingly:

When children enter school less prepared to learn because they don’t come from the most advantageous home environment for education, we just have to put extra resources there and help those kids catch up, like you do in business. You know, if you need your good teachers, instead of being in the best schools, to be in other schools, the more challenged schools, then we need to incentivize those teachers to be there. We need to give them leaders in those schools that they are going to want to work for, we need to pay them more if we need to, we need to do whatever it takes to make that situation work.

Butzon does not necessarily think that the solution for public education’s woes is more money, perhaps just better utilized money. Acknowledging that others disagree, he said:

I think some [might say] “Money, money! It’s gonna take some resources.” I am not sure of that. I’m not sure it isn’t. My gut tells me

that we might need a *little* more money, but I don't think it's a *lot*. And I don't know that. There's a real good likelihood that there's enough resources out there if we got – if we became very focused and strategic about it and stopped doing some of the stuff that we do that has absolutely no benefit.

To continue this line of argument, in a February 19, 2004, e-mail to the PEN network, Butzon again addressed money issues, particularly the responsibility that school boards have as trustees of the public's money. He wrote:

You may recall my discussion with Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education at the PEN Conference concerning the oft-made claim that there is inadequate funding to support NCLB. I agreed then that NCLB is probably UNDER-funded, but certainly not UN-funded, as some claim.

The point I was trying to make at the time, however, was that being unable to cite just how much more money was required raised serious questions of just how committed states are to achieving the goals of NCLB. "We need more money" seems to be more and more the default answer to everything new in public education. I know states are beginning to get the answer to the question of how much is enough, but frankly, I am as skeptical on that score as I have ever been. . . . The idea that while South Carolina, for example, is crying about not having adequate funding, they let almost \$400,000 slip through their fingers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Butzon is referring to the Heath (2004) article on [www.wrightslaw.org](http://www.wrightslaw.org): *States sit on 5.7 billion in federal education funds*, retrieved February 28, 2004.

And this, my friends, is where I think public education will increasingly run afoul of the American public: when money is tight in your house or my house, we do without the frills and make every dime count for the necessities. But in the public arena, we seem to be able with straight face and emotion-laden voice to reconcile “po’ mouth” with waste. It’s about credibility and trust, or the lack thereof.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, Butzon insists that every child’s education is as important as any other child’s, and he insists that others do so, as well. He paraphrases the Ronald Edmond’s quote stuck to his office wall:

“We know everything we need to know to educate those children whose education is of importance to us.” Underline that phrase four times with a thick red pencil: “those children’s education that is of importance to us.”

And right now, there are lots of kids whose education is not important to us. So, part of what the Education Network does in Charleston is to make it impossible for people to ignore those kids. You do so at your own peril.

“Your own peril” being your own embarrassment, your own reputation.

And Butzon has no patience for those who will not do all these things quickly and all at once. He says that isolated strategies cannot be tried one at a time, in small scale pilot projects, because the task is too large and too urgent. Butzon insists that public education reform requires multiple strategies on multiple fronts simultaneously, with a rapid timeline:

The thing that you hear so much – I hear it all of the time, “We didn’t get into this mess over night, we are not going out of it overnight.” Bullshit.



Number one, we don't know that we can't get out of this mess overnight because we've never tried. In order to get out of this mess overnight, we have got to break a sweat. We haven't broken a sweat.

Butzon believes that CEN as a reform organization also must have multiple strategies on multiple fronts, as is demonstrated next.

### CEN Strategy, Initiatives, and Results

In order to answer my third research question about evidence that CEN is or is not achieving its stated mission, I will address four areas. First, I will discuss the primary strategy that CEN uses to precipitate change, which is orchestrating crisis. Second, I will describe four major initiatives in which CEN has been involved over the last four years. Next, I will discuss and evaluate the changes that have occurred as a result of these efforts. Finally, I will look to the future role of CEN, as predicted by participants in this study.

#### *Strategy of "Orchestrating Crisis"*

Butzon believes the most efficient and effective way to precipitate the necessary changes in a reluctant, recalcitrant system like public education is to orchestrate crisis from the outside. He uses the analogy of Archimedes' law of levers to explain why this pressure must come from outside and not inside of public education.

Archimedes said that given a lever long enough and a place to stand, you could move the world. The key to that – there are sort of two keys – one has to do with the lever, and creating the leverage to, in fact, move the planet. And, of course, the big wrinkle in that is there is no place to stand. I mean, it's not like you can stand on Mars and put a stick under the Earth

and lift it up. I think what he was doing was sort of bragging on the power of leverage. Of course, he was looking at it from a physical standpoint. It has occurred to me, repeatedly, that one of the problems with education trying to fix itself has always been that it has pretty much happened from the inside. That education has led the effort to reform itself. It has been singularly unsuccessful in that. And so I started thinking about why that could be, and it occurs to me that one of the reasons is that public education doesn't have a place to stand.

It is kind of like us sitting here in this chair and just grabbing the seat of the chair and pulling up and then saying, "Gee, we can't pick ourselves up off the floor." And you can't with your hands, you have to get outside of yourself effectively and use your feet on the floor to get the leverage and the lift to get up. So, it dawned on me to expect public education to fix itself, although it should, and it could if it would let go of a lot of the familiar and get outside itself – find a place to stand. In the absence of that, to expect public education to fix itself is like expecting to pick up the world. Because there is no place to stand to do it. And that was a lot of the reason for the formation of the Charleston Education Network. And that's the key – a key piece – of the kind of work that we do. You know the strategies that work well are looking for leverage – ways to create leverage, ways to get leverage, to in some cases force the system kicking and screaming to be better.

Butzon sees the process of “forc[ing] the system kicking and screaming” as a necessary part of getting them to take action when they have not already. Using two analogies this time, Butzon explained:

If you stop and you think a little bit about how significant change comes about, it’s almost always tied to a crisis. And the crisis either comes along, I don’t want to say happenstance, I mean, it’s a logical progression. You know, you never go to the dentist. One day you’re gonna have a toothache, and they’re gonna have to pull your tooth. There’s a crisis. There’s pain, we gotta do something. Maybe that’s what gets you to brush your teeth everyday. If you never change the oil in your car, one day the engine seizes, and leaves you on the side of the road. \$2500 or \$3000 later, a new engine. You say, “Yeah, you know, maybe I oughta stop off every month or two and get my oil changed. Or at least check the level.” You know, it’s typically a crisis that produces a behavior change on a fundamental level. And without it, it doesn’t happen.

And the question is whether you just wait for the crisis to occur, or whether you have the kind of leadership, either internally or externally, that takes the crisis and forces it to create the same kind of thing. “Oh, my golly, we gotta do something.” And of course, the advantage to picking your crisis is you have an opportunity to have some control of the timing, you have some control of the magnitude, you also have some control of what the crisis is about, so you can do a little bit more directing. Not

absolute control. I mean that's the nature of crisis. But you've got some of that.

He also uses systems theory to explain why, in fact, the use of crisis is necessary for change: because the system will not create its own crisis.

The system is not designed to upset its own apple cart. It doesn't like the idea of upsetting its own apple cart. So it does everything that it needs to do to keep that from happening, both honest and dishonest. It's the business about setting equilibrium in the system. It's basic systems theory. Every system – school system, your congregation in your church, your family, all of that – the system is designed to maintain homeostasis, equilibrium. You can just watch it happen over and over again. So if the system is going to change, you have to upset that homeostasis, you have to upset that equilibrium.

Butzon offered an example of how crisis could be created on a large scale: if the President of the United States would enforce the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation with jail time for school superintendents who were not following the law. He said:

[The President] could call the Attorney General at the White House and say, "Find me the five most egregious, blatant violations of the letter and the spirit of the law, send a U.S. Marshall, and arrest the superintendent and chairman of the school board and put them in jail. Keep them in jail for the maximum amount of time before you have to produce them in front of the Federal Magistrate for a bail hearing, and put it all over every

newspaper, every newscast, all the rest of it, and say, ‘Not only are you not going to break the law, you are not going to leave a child behind.’” If you just did that, we would have a crisis that would produce great education just like that. Now, is that overly dramatic? Yeah, by a factor of about five percent, it’s overly dramatic. But that isn’t going to happen, and I know that it isn’t going to happen, because educating all of our children well still isn’t that important that we would go to those lengths.

Butzon justifies the use of leveraged crisis because of the sense of urgency he feels. He puts the question personally to every parent, and educator, and board member: “How much of *your* child’s education – days, weeks, months, years – are you willing to forfeit while you wait for your child’s school to get good?” He recalls that the use of creating crisis has an honorable and successful history in the Civil Rights movement.

How was the public engaged in the Civil Rights movement? . . . It wasn’t letters to the editor, was it? It was half a million people standing out in front of the Lincoln Memorial listening to Martin Luther King talk about having a dream. It was people in the streets of Selma, Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama. It was sit-ins and walk-outs, and all of that kind of stuff to force the issue. And the level we’re still on is that the idea of public engagement is where we need to be able to generate 500 letters to the editor. Or we need to get people to the polls to vote. Or 50,000 folks turn out for a rally at the ballpark, so we don’t lose 600 teachers. . . . And it’s going to take a masterful piece of leadership to get people to transition

to the level of marches and sit-ins and civil disobedience. And that is what it is going to take.

Ted Halkyard also mentioned at a recent CEN meeting, both jokingly but with a hint of seriousness, that protests reminiscent of the 1960s would be an effective strategy for gaining attention to the cause of education reform. He told me about what happened at the meeting where he made this suggestion:

I said, “Hey, guys, all you need is to get six people with signs and tell them the cameras will be there, and it’s wonderful stuff on the evening news. And all you do is you have an articulate spokesman, a mother . . . and immediately, it’s a microphone, saying ‘Why are you here? Tell your story.’”

And I said, “I’m not a sixties bomb thrower. I’m just telling you what will work, and if you want to get electronic media space and even in the newspapers, that’s how you do it.” (chuckles) It was greeted with thunderous silence. And I told them, “Hey, I’m really not kidding” because a lot of causes get their message out just that way, and ours is no less – no less right.

Butzon is aware of a potential risk to creating crisis through leverage from the outside, which is that the object being moved might be destroyed in the process. He paints a visual image of this, using again an analogy:

I was watching one day – they were moving an old house in downtown Charleston, and of course, you know, house movers know how to do this. They jack it up, and they put these huge timbers under it, and they keep

picking it up and picking it up, and at some point they back up a low boy under it that can carry tons and tons and tons, and they set it down on that low boy and move it. . . . The house was really decrepit. They were really just saving it because of some perceived historic value. I know they had done some things to try to brace it and all the rest of that. But in the process of picking it up they broke it, because it was just in such bad shape. So the question is going to be, is public education in such bad shape now, that trying to pick it up to create that leverage is just going to cause it to fall apart?

Now, let us consider some of the ways that CEN has attempted to leverage change.

#### *CEN initiatives*

CEN has been involved in five major initiatives since its inception. They are: 1.) overturning the tax cap in Charleston County, 2.) “A *Chance for Every Child*” transfer program, 3.) legislation to change school governance in Charleston County Schools, 4.) leadership development grants and initiatives, and 5.) ongoing data analysis. Each initiative is described below.

#### *Overturning the tax cap*

The first major effort of CEN, beginning in early 2000 when they were still called the Charleston Planning Project for Public Education, was to overturn the tax cap. A state-imposed 90 mil tax cap limited the amount of local taxes that could be raised for public education in Charleston County, and thus limited the available resources for

improving schools.<sup>12</sup> This project serves as an example of the benefits to CEN of having well connected, bold, decisive professionals on their board. Most people would be unable to mount an assault on a taxation barrier as efficiently and nearly single-handedly as did CEN Chairman and private attorney Neil Robinson. Note the “take action” attitude of this former Marine as he relates the story:

I woke up one morning at three o'clock in the morning, which this kind of thing will wake you up in the middle of the night, and I just started to focus on and fret about this ninety mil tax cap and I said, “You know, this is crazy that every time you go down and ask [the school board] to do something, the standard answer is ‘Well, we can’t afford it. It’s not in the budget and we can’t do that, we can’t raise taxes.’” Well, there was a new state law passed a couple of years ago – The Accountability Act – that says that you can not spend less on a child’s education this year than you did last year. In other words, the idea was to keep people from cutting budgets; you always had to at least stay level, or spend more. And so, I said, “You know, I’m going to sue them. I am just going to sue the auditor and say you can not impose a ninety mil tax cap if more money is needed in order to meet the Accountability Act, because we are to a point now where they needed more than ninety mil, and have for some time.”

So, I got some of my attorneys [in my law firm] to draft up a complaint, and I talked with the mayor and told him what we were going to do and, God bless him, Joe Riley said, “Well, the city would like to be a

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<sup>12</sup> A mil = 1/10 of 1% of assessed property value. In Charleston County, each mil = @ \$1.5 million in revenue.



plaintiff with you” and . . . I said, “Parents for Public Schools needs to be the plaintiff. I’ve got to have a plaintiff who has people in public schools in order to have standing and so forth,” and so they agreed to let me use their name. And then the city says, “We’re in,” and so we had Parents for Public Schools and the City of Charleston, and we brought the lawsuit against the tax auditor . . . and said, “The ninety mil tax cap is illegal. It’s unconstitutional; it’s in violation of the Accountability Act.” So on and so on.

Well, about that time the school board decides, “Well, maybe” – it is sorta like dipping their toe in the water – “maybe we should intervene and join in, too,” and so they did. So we ended up having the school board in our corner, as well, and we won the case. . . . Well, that made the legislative delegation livid. I mean, they were upset, you know, “You’re treading on our turf. We make the laws.” I said, “You know, guys, we’ve been trying to get you to change the law for several years now.”

### *A Chance for Every Child*

A second major effort undertaken by CEN, in the spring of 2002, was a project very similar to what would later become the federal *No Child Left Behind* transfer option. CEN proposed that children who were attending schools labeled “unsatisfactory” by the SC State Department of Education should be allowed to transfer to other schools in the district that were scoring “good” or “excellent.” The plan was to obtain transfer petitions from 500 parents and to deliver those applications to a school board meeting, thus creating leverage or crisis necessitating the school board to respond. Neil Robinson

describes how the project came about under his leadership as Chairman of CEN at the time:

Well, all of a sudden it occurred to me that if they are going to grade schools, and a school gets a state grade of “F,”<sup>13</sup> then the state constitution says that every child is entitled to an education, and if a school has been graded “F” by the state, that means the child can’t get an education at that school. You’ve got to let that child go to a school that is graded a passing grade, right? Well, we started getting petitions based on that, and we got over 500 petitions of people who wanted to send their child to another school because they were in schools graded “failing.”

And lo and behold, you know, [the school district] lost those petitions. They just disappeared, boxes of them. We turned them in at a school board meeting, there must have been seven, eight, nine, or ten boxes, and they got mislaid somehow. And we are still fighting with them over that, but the point is . . . the board finally agreed to adopt a policy that says that if a child is in a school that is rated “unsatisfactory,” you can transfer to another school. Now, they are not providing transportation yet, and we think that’s a vital part of it because it’s a Pyrrhic victory to say you can go to the school, but yet you’ve got no way to get there. And a lot of these kids, a lot of the failing schools are the schools in minority areas where the ability to get to and from school is difficult. And we weren’t trying to create a mass exodus. That wasn’t the point. The point was lost

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson is referring to schools labeled “unsatisfactory” on the Annual School Report Card issued by the South Carolina State Department of Education.

on a number of the school board members and a number of our legislative delegation members. The point was you can avoid this by fixing the school! You know, it's supposed to be kind of that, you know cry "Uncle! You're hurting me!"

### *School Governance Legislation*

A third major effort of CEN has been their endorsement of and assistance in the writing of a bill that would fundamentally change the governance structure of Charleston County Schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, CCSD has been hamstrung by a governance structure that was a compromise reached in the 1967 Act of Consolidation, which was passed in order to silence accusations that Charleston County had a segregated school system. Although they were officially "consolidated," the eight segregated districts were kept as constituent districts with constituent boards within the larger Charleston County district, and the constituent boards were given authority over hiring, firing, and student assignment.

The Charleston Education Network has spearheaded recent efforts to change this structure, seeing such change as necessary to making other systemic reforms possible. In January 2003, South Carolina Senator John Kuhn introduced a bill in the South Carolina Senate that would have abolished the constituent boards and empowered the Superintendent of Schools to act as the Chief Executive Officer of the school district. This would include the responsibility of hiring and assigning all of the staff. CEN assisted Senator Kuhn in drafting his bill, which passed the Senate, but it soon became clear that it would not fare as well in the House. South Carolina Representative Ben Hagood took Kuhn's bill, revised it, and introduced it in the House in May 2003 (House

Bill 4164). The House bill leaves the constituent boards in place, but charges them with decisions regarding student discipline only. All other decisions regarding the operation of the school district would fall to the Superintendent or to the Charleston County School Board. The bill would also require that the Superintendent be evaluated based upon student achievement and would require the board to conduct an ongoing and systematic process to determine cost effectiveness of instructional programs.

CEN has been a staunch supporter of these two bills all along, and while the current bill has gained support of The Chamber of Commerce and The League of Women Voters (Adcox, 2004), it faces stiff opposition from a former school board member and influential legislator Rep. John Graham Altman, according to CEN Chair John Barter, who spoke to Altman about the bill. Some who oppose the bill contend that it would invite an investigation from the Justice Department that could jeopardize the district's unitary status and thus possibly force issues of desegregation. Raising the specter of busing in this southern city with its segregationist history and struggles is an excellent way to paralyze decision-makers into inaction. To counter this claim, which they thought was spurious, CEN obtained a legal opinion from Hogan and Hartson, noted Washington desegregation attorneys, who concluded that unless the bill was created with a "discriminatory intent" that resulted in segregated schools, there was no reason to believe the Justice Department would take any action. Rep. Hagood's bill will be taken from committee and addressed during the 2004 term of the legislature.

#### *Leadership Improvement*

Another major focus of CEN has been to strengthen the leadership of CCSD. CEN insisted that CCSD needed to find an outstanding leader ("the best school

superintendent in America,” according to Butzon) to replace retiring Superintendent Ronald McWhirt. When the Board began to consider how to find this person in the spring of 2003, Jon Butzon had considerable input into the process. Conferring with then School Board Chairman Gregg Meyers, Butzon lobbied both for the formation of a community-based search committee and for the appointment of certain members to that committee who he thought would be insightful, innovative, and successful in their task. Of the final 13 search committee members, nine were suggested by Butzon, and that number included CEN members John Barter and Ted Halkyard. However, it was more than just the presence of this mass of CEN-endorsed committee members that had an impact on the outcome. CEN member Halkyard had a vital role in bringing the committee together at a divisive time early on in their work. Halkyard describes the critical compromise, and his role in it:

[The Search Committee] got off to a rocky start from my perspective in that it – talk about patience – it was just too plodding. And it just turned out that I played kind of an activist role in some of this, and we were able to get things stoked up. We kind of got bogged down in . . . a conflict within the committee on who we should select as a search firm. And we had the chore of coming up with the best national search firm to make the recommendation, which I did. I did my due diligence, went out on the Internet, talked to about twenty of these firms and narrowed it down to five and kind of came up with my notion of who should do it.

At the same time, other members were making a strong proposal for the South Carolina School Board Association to do the search. And

some of us had some problems with that, with the argument in favor of that group doing the search was “you had to know South Carolina,” you know, “you had to know the cultural background, you had to know the political situation” . . . Others of us kind of said, “Look, we want to get the best search firm that we can get. The best.” And that’s who we wanted to go out there and look. I won’t go into the details, but the outcome was what came to be known as the great compromise, where we effectively got both firms to conduct the search, with the national firm recruiting the candidates and the School Board Association doing a lot of the locally based inputs and procedure items and so on, which had the effect of resolving the split within the committee and also resulted in a working group, which functioned quite well and produced what we are confident is a very successful outcome.

CEN also had an important, if indirect, relationship with Clean Slate, an informal political action committee that significantly impacted the 2002 school board election. Ginny Deerin was a CEN Board member who left the CEN Board to form Clean Slate because non-profit organizations such as CEN cannot be involved in electioneering and candidate endorsement. Remember that Deerin had been outraged at Chip Zullinger’s firing and the lack of leadership on the school board. CEN was not directly involved in Clean Slate, but the Executive Director of CEN offered every school board candidate help in understanding and analyzing data and issues during the election. All of the Clean Slate candidates, along with some other candidates, accepted, which forced the campaign to focus on issues and specifics in which CEN had interest. There were also CEN Board

members who, independent of CEN, liked the Clean Slate idea and gave money to the group.

Three of the four Clean Slate candidates were elected, but not without causing some discontent on the school board. One of the Clean Slate members defeated former Chairman Oliver Addison who had lodged the letter of complaint against CEN in March 2002. The racial makeup of the school board shifted, as well. The school board went from being a majority African American board, to having only one African American member. However, the fourth Clean Slate candidate, who was not elected, was Theron Snype, an African American. The one school board member elected who was not a Clean Slate member (Sandra Engelman) has been critical in the past of CEN and Clean Slate. Board member Hugh Cannon was upset over the involvement of Clean Slate, as well, even though he was not directly affected in that he was not up for re-election. Cannon filed an ethics complaint against them, saying the Clean Slate candidates accepted financial support in exchange for an agreement to elect Gregg Meyers as board chairman. This complaint was later dismissed in December 2003 by the South Carolina Ethics Commission, and Cannon seems to have cooled in his opposition. Deerin talked about the unexpected fallout of Clean Slate:

There is a real love/hate relationship between a number of board members and CEN . . . . It's weird, they think that the [Charleston] Education Network is trying to control, just like they think the Clean Slaters are trying to control. . . . I mean, the Clean Slate is just a bunch of regular citizens out there. It is totally grassroots. There is the sense that everybody is trying to control as opposed to just participate, so the people

. . . who can't accept that people are just trying to participate – I guess they have nowhere else to put it other than somebody is trying to take over. They don't understand that it's not "you're in charge," or "I'm in charge." They don't understand the concept that "we are all in charge."

### *Data analysis*

While analyzing data may not seem to be a major "project," it indeed is a function that consumes a large part of Jon Butzon's time. Butzon analyses a wide range of data, such as PACT, SAT, Annual School Report Cards, and Annual Yearly Progress ratings, and he probably is more aware of what test scores and other measures of student success have to say about CCSD than any other individual in the district. This is again evidenced by the fact that school board members regularly call him for data and interpretation of data, and he talks with a majority of the school board members on a regular basis. Often he provides information, and an interpretation of that information, that school board members, the public, and the press would not even think to ask for, thereby awakening a new concern. A good example of this is the problem of how the highest performing students in CCSD score. All would have assumed these students were doing quite well, when in fact even the best students that CCSD produces were lagging behind their peers in other districts and the nation, as Butzon pointed out. Butzon is also the "resident expert" on *No Child Left Behind*, curriculum standards in South Carolina, and research in education reform.

It is unusual for this type of data analysis to come from a community-based group. One would think that the best source of information about how a school district is performing would be the district itself. However, as all three of the school board



members I interviewed told me, getting information from the school district itself has been extremely difficult. Either no one knows the information, or they are unable to produce it when needed, even when requested by school board members.

### *Results*

At first glance, it may seem to be a bit of an irony that, in evaluating the success or failure of CEN, it is easier to measure the process rather than the product. This, of course, is a frequent criticism CEN makes of the school district; CCSD talks about the number of teachers trained, the number of tutoring sessions given, the number of parent conferences held, for example, without connecting these processes to any change in student achievement. However, it is important to remember CEN's mission statement here, which does not say that CEN will impact student achievement. Rather, it states that CEN will be an "advocate for children," a "catalyst for change," and a "force for accountability." Butzon explained why CEN's success should not, or cannot, be measured in terms of student achievement:

Something that nobody in the [community-based] education reform business has is control. I have no money; the school district has a \$264 million operating budget, I got \$48,000 in the bank. I don't have any employees; they have 5,000 plus. I can't say where kids got to school, or when they come to school, or what they study, or any of that. Everything that we do has to be done through influence, number one, and with the understanding that we don't have control. So what do you use if you don't have control? If you can't say, "OK, dammit, we are gonna make sure that every child reads by the end of third grade." What do you

do? You pressure them, you whisper in their ear, every place that you can, you insert that kind of stuff, and then you talk to them on an ongoing basis.

However, despite being what Butzon calls a “leader without authority” (Heifetz, 1999) when it comes to schools, and despite being unable to tie CEN’s processes directly to student outcomes, there are observable outcomes, and in some cases measurable outcomes, that have resulted from CEN’s initiatives. CEN’s actions have resulted in significant increases in resources for the district, dramatic changes in the district leadership, and a growing focus on results which one could reasonably see as promising intermediate steps towards the bottom line of increasing student achievement.

*Increased resources for the district*

The efforts of CEN have produced a number of resources for the district that would not have existed without CEN’s involvement. For example, overturning the tax cap alone generated an additional \$22.65 million in funds for CCSO this year. This increase is due to the difference between taxes being collected at the new rate of 105.1 mils compared to the old cap of 90 mils, and this increase brings the district’s total operating budget to \$263.8 million.

CEN also successfully wrote and obtained a grant from Harvard University that was selected for the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP). CEN submitted this grant as a response to the realization that, according to Butzon, “CCSO did not have enough of the leadership and managerial skills necessary to manage the fundamental changes needed to reform the school district.” PELP is a cooperative project between the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Not only does this project give the school district a connection to two of the country’s premier graduate

schools, it also gives them a connection to the Partners of 63, a foundation whose partners are all members of the Harvard Business School Class of 1963. At least three members of the HBS Class of '63 live in the Charleston area and were instrumental in Charleston's successful application to the project. The purpose of the project is to "address those components of leadership and management that heretofore have mitigated against educational improvement at scale. These components include successfully leading and sustaining organizational change; aligning the strategy, structures, and systems of the district around its core mission of improved educational outcomes for students; and ensuring consistent, quality teaching within and across schools" (Butzon, personal communication).

Finally, CEN raised \$10,000 to help bring Dr. John Carver, the developer of the Policy Governance Model, to Charleston in February 2003 to educate not only the school board, but also members of the community, in the value and functioning of the model. Policy Governance is a model of board operation that will help the CCSD School Board focus more on policy and results and not on the day-to-day management (or micro-management) of the school district, as has traditionally been the case. Importantly, new Superintendent Dr. Maria Goodloe has an interest in Policy Governance, making the groundwork already laid through CEN's efforts a solid foundation upon which she can build with the School Board. This effort has already evolved somewhat into a reform governance model, a model designed by former Houston School Board Chairman and school board operations consultant Don McAdams that is based on the Carver Policy Governance Model.

*Change in district leadership*

District leadership has been impacted in three ways by CEN. First, there was the spawning of the Clean Slate informal political action committee that effectively changed the composition of the current school board to one more sympathetic to the educational concerns expressed by CEN. The second major impact of CEN is a change of district leadership in the selection of the new superintendent. All CEN members are optimistic about what Charleston County Schools will accomplish under Dr. Goodloe's leadership and are eager to see changes implemented. CEN Co-Chairman John Barter gave an impression of Dr. Goodloe which was typical of the responses of all:

I think she was a wonderful choice. I think she is a very, very accomplished person. I think she is passionate about education, and passionate about education for every child, but she has all that passion under control, too. I mean, she is thoughtful about what she says and how she is going to say it, which is important for somebody leading a large institution. . . .

There are a lot of people that really feel like Charleston is at a turning point. We've got a good school board, I think we've got a school board whose policy governance is saying that they want to operate differently, who by approving a larger budget, and you know how difficult that is in these times, is saying it wants to operate differently. So, I think we've a good school board that is ready to work with a first-rate school superintendent, and I think we have a chance, and that's more than any of us have felt in a while.

The third impact that CEN may have on the district leadership is through the implementation of the Harvard PELP project and the John Carver Policy Governance Model, as described above. However, since neither project has been fully implemented yet, their impact on the district other than as potential resources cannot be ascertained.

*Increased focus on results*

A change in focus or belief by those in charge of CCSD is difficult to assess in the context of this study. However, in my observations of school board meetings, articles in the local *Post and Courier*, and minutes of Board decisions and discussions, it seems that board members are focusing more and more on the bottom line of student performance, which is a mantra repeated by CEN. One reason for this increasing focus on student performance by the school board was a seemingly inconsequential suggestion by Butzon to the Board Chair. In response to the Gregg Meyer's frustration at how easily the school board's attention was distracted from the business of education to other matters, Butzon suggested that Meyers designate a member of the Board to keep track of how much time the Board spent on discussion of education and student achievement versus other matters. "It makes the Board focus and be more intentional about how they spend their time," Butzon said.

CEN also proposed, through discussion with school board members, that the lowest performing schools be given extra funding in the budget targeting what the schools said they needed to improve outcomes. In a year when state funding was being cut, the Board had tried unsuccessfully to cause the administration to shift money away from central staff and into schools. The idea was to take hits in support areas, but to protect the "core business" of teaching and learning. The administration resisted that.

Butzon provided the Board with a rationale and a process for making the additional allocations that resulted in approximately \$3.2 million in additional funding for the 40 lowest performing schools.

Butzon also brought to light the reduction of Title I funds to schools over the previous year even though the district had received an increase in Title I funding. After CEN lobbied the school board and the new Superintendent, Title I funding was restored to previous levels.

As one school board member told me:

I think (CEN is) very responsible for the Title 1 schools getting more money and holding the district accountable for getting more money into the classrooms – essentially following through with what the Board said they wanted to happen. . . . If CEN hadn't come in and said, "wait a minute," and done the analysis – I know that would not have happened if it hadn't been for CEN. The Title 1 schools all have more money – all have more money and more resources – because of CEN. It's a great thing.

#### Future of CEN

I asked both school board members and CEN board members to predict how CEN might change or evolve in the future. Nearly every respondent sees the role of CEN expanding, but without losing its signature edge. First, the responses of school board members.

*CCSD Board members predictions of the future role of CEN*

Gregg Meyers told me he thought CEN did not need to change their strategy:

I think it ought to be the same kind of collaborative relationship that they seem to be aspiring to, they being CEN, and that is “we are a source of information, we are a source of opinion, and if you work with us, we will support you, and if you don’t work with us, we will be critical. So, we are trying to get into the tent, and we are trying to achieve what we hear is the same result you want, so why shouldn’t we work together?” So, you know, they ought to be heard, they ought to have access, they ought to have information. If someone is willing to put their oar in the water, I am glad they have it. That’s my approach.

Hugh Cannon agreed that CEN would not change, or need to change:

I don’t think it will change, no, I don’t believe, because . . . their objectives are the same. I mean, their concerns are the same. I think that they are going to be much happier with this superintendent [Goodloe]. Because I know how unhappy they were with the last administration.

The third board member interviewed was more ambivalent about the future role of CEN:

My guess is that . . . they have the opportunity to work very well together [with Dr. Goodloe]. Again, I do believe that if CEN chooses to only turn over rocks and never point out that people are working on solutions to what was found under the last rock, that they may not have as close a relationship as they could have otherwise. But that may not be what CEN

wants. CEN may not want to have that close relationship. They may want to continue to choose to be the rock turner-over. And if that's the case, then I think they will have a respectful relationship, but I don't think it will be as collaborative. It's just my guess.

*CEN Board members predictions of the future role of CEN*

Like two of the CCSD board members interviewed, John Barter predicts that the relationship CEN has with the school board and with Superintendent Goodloe will be improved from past relationships. He told me:

It may well be that when [Dr. Goodloe] arrives, you know, the next issue that occurs is one of those on which we would want to take a challenging role but, you know, if so, we ought not do that. If that issue is important, we ought to find a different way to pursue that issue, because I think it is so important that any of us who have any kind of leadership role in the community . . . that all our first signals [show] that we are behind Dr. Goodloe.

I asked Barter if there is consensus within CEN about that strategy. He replied: I think there will be. I think we've got good, experienced people on the CEN board. I think they will understand the point. I don't think there will be any issue with the philosophy of the approach. The issue will be making sure that we think before we speak and that we really follow the approach.

Ginny Deerin predicts CEN will simultaneously gain respect, while not losing their "edge:"



I think over time, [CEN] will be viewed with respect. People are going to have to have to pay attention to CEN because I think it will be established as a very effective, responsible organization. But I think if it is going to be good it probably will always have an edge to it . . . Because, I don't think you can – it's like a watchdog – you know, it's watching. And things are never going to be perfect. There's always going to be room to make it better. And CEN will always be there, hopefully, pushing on that piece. And, it's done respectfully, but it's just done. (pauses) It's just done. And people who describe it as real in-your-face, they describe it as in-your-face because they don't want to hear it.

Ted Halkyard warns that trying to please too many people could weaken CEN's resolve to maintain their edgy approach. He specifically warns against becoming too broad based in support at the price of losing edginess. He explains:

When you begin to get business organizations who serve large customer bases to support your effort, that has the threat – doesn't assure it, but it has the threat – of effectively kind of homogenizing your views because they have a customer base, and it is the entire community. And no matter what we do, we could offend some people, and we can satisfy other people. And businesses don't support typically . . . confrontational or controversial causes, they just don't do it. . . . I think that the more broad based we become, we begin to be limited in kind of . . . the willingness to be unpopular.

Mayor Riley told me that, while he was optimistic for the future role of CEN and of school improvement in Charleston, “There isn’t a magic wand. We’ve got to do a lot of things, and we’ve got to do them well.” Executive Director Butzon describes the future for CEN that he would like to see:

I have said to different people, including to members of the school board, “My fondest wish is that some day in the not too distant future, we can get enough accomplished and get the ball rolling in the right direction fast enough to where I can be your best friend, the school district’s best friend. I can be your biggest defender. I can be your biggest advocate. I can honestly stand up in front of the public and say, ‘Listen, these folks are doing a good job, and they are doing it well, and they are making good progress. We are making quantum leaps forward. We need to stand in there and help them.’” You see, I can’t do that now with a good conscience, number one. And number two, doing it doesn’t further the cause at this point. But that’s what I’d like to be able to do.

Finally, Bishop Rembert, in wishing for a more visible future role for CEN, reminded me once again of the position CEN has assumed of being a watchdog, with tendencies towards being a bulldog:

I would like somehow to see the day when CEN becomes like a household word. See, the greater part of the community sees what is going on, but they don’t know why, and they don’t know who. I would like for them to know who and why . . . I think we are moving in the right direction. What

would I like? I would like to see CEN be sort of a bulldog. But you can't bite everybody! That's life.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

After considering the story of CEN in total, in this final chapter I will return to the research questions. First, in making meaning of the personal and organizational origins of CEN, I investigate several emergent themes and consider how they relate to the literature on community school reform groups. I consider what makes CEN and their strategies similar to and different from other such groups. I introduce some additional literature that helps makes sense of the meanings inherent in my findings. I then conclude this chapter by addressing the fourth and final research question, which is, after looking at CEN's history, membership, strategies, strengths, and weaknesses, what can other citizens' action groups and school districts learn from CEN's educational activist strategies?

CEN differs in important ways from most of the community reform groups in Mediratta et al.'s (2002) study. Most of the groups they studied were reliant on individual memberships; CEN is not, but rather consists of an invited board. The groups in the study had histories of focusing on multiple issues, such as environmental justice or housing and welfare issues; CEN is solely concerned with school reform. Meriratta et al.'s 66 groups had been in existence for at least five years and had budgets ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000; CEN has been in existence only four years and is at the low end of the continuum, with only a \$100,000 annual budget. Thus, some differences do exist between CEN and these groups just based on these descriptors.

Mediratta et al. (2002) also considered how these groups function, and in this aspect, CEN is closer to the norm. For example, the groups in the study desired to transform local conditions that they found intolerable. The members of CEN, too, focus on changing the deplorable condition of education for all children in their community, and they seem to have a commitment that the district has historically lacked. Hilliard (1991) questions whether “we have the will to educate all children” (p. 31). Stein (2003) writes, “Education reform is another Vietnam. We’re fighting a war that we have neither the will nor the willingness to win” (p. 1). But CEN members seem to have not only the will and the willingness, they also demonstrate a sincere interest in other people’s children. It is a paradox of CEN that few members either have now or have in the past had children in public school. There is no immediate personal payoff for CEN members to see that every child in Charleston County is educated. As Butzon says, his board members “have no obvious dog in the fight.” There are certainly future payoffs in terms of a greater contributing workforce and less crime, but everyone in society benefits from this as much as do CEN members. Ironically, this seeming lack of self-interest leads some to question the motives and sincerity of these CEN members.

As mentioned earlier, Butzon blames societal jadedness in general for the fact that others may question CEN’s motives:

The notion that [CEN] could do the right thing just because it is the right thing, is unfortunately a foreign idea anymore. That’s a commentary on our society and on our nation, and it says a lot about just how jaded and cynical . . . we have gotten as a society.

Yet, the language of CEN members is peppered with references to “doing the right thing.” Barter said a good education is “something we owe to every child . . . it is a matter of social justice.” Halkyard said the defensible answer for why any particular action is taken by CEN “always has to be ‘For the kids.’” Rembert reminded us, “Every child is important – whether he lives on the east side or west side or north side or the south side . . .” Butzon said we must “help look out for the interests of people who don’t have what we have” just because “it the right thing to do.” And he finds unacceptable any plan that “fails the Titanic lifeboat test . . . meaning it will save some of the kids, but most of them are gonna drown.”

Mediratta et al. (2002) also found that grassroots activist groups intentionally build relationships with community leaders to expand their power. While CEN certainly wants to expand their power, at least enough to accomplish their mission, they have less distance to go than most grassroots groups. CEN members came to the table with far greater social and political capital than did the members of the typical groups in Mediratta et al.’s study. Among CEN’s members are CEO’s, powerful attorneys, successful businessmen, university presidents, and the Mayor.

CEN also use edginess and confrontation as a deliberate strategy to orchestrate crisis, as do the grassroots community reform groups in the Mediratta et al. (2002) study. However, the manner in which edginess is used is a definitive and unique characteristic of CEN, when compared to most other community based school reform efforts. Most activist community reform groups organize large numbers of people in protest marches, or employ massive letter writing campaigns, or stage walkouts or sit-ins to create pressure. Their power is in numbers. CEN, on the contrary, is a small group of around

25 people that strategically induce crisis at politically sensitive pressure points, which are known and available to them due to their political savvy. They can do this without recruiting the disenfranchised community members who stand to benefit from their efforts.

All of this takes a somewhat different type of vision and leadership, which is found in the person of CEN's Executive Director. Leadership has been defined as "the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 20). While this definition seems simple enough, the art of mobilizing others, especially to do "adaptive work" (Heifetz, p. 22), requires uncommon skill and courage. Ronald Heifetz, who is co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, defines adaptive work as:

The learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior.

The exposure and orchestration of conflict – internal contradictions – within individuals and constituencies provide the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways. (Heifetz, p. 22)

Adaptive work is certainly the work of CEN. There is a great disparity between the values which the school system states in its mission ("... to ensure that all students receive a high quality education that prepares them to succeed in a complex and competitive world") and the "brutal realities" (Collins, 2001) of the district's performance (being one of the poorest performing districts in a state perennially ranked

near the bottom nationally.) Heifetz (1994) says that, “The leadership of adaptive work usually requires the orchestration of conflict, often multiparty conflict” (p. 117).

The reason that conflict is unavoidable for transformational change, and thus requires the strategy of orchestrating crisis, can be explained by basic systems theory. Systems theory says that any system, living or social, prefers equilibrium (Heifetz, 1994). Moreover, when the system is challenged, it will respond in a manner that tries to restore equilibrium. This is the “Catch 22” or paradox of using crisis as a tool to move the school district to change. As long as the school district feels content with its progress, no matter how inaccurate that perception may be, it will be comfortably in balance, and children will still be left behind. When CEN creates crisis for the district in an attempt to move the district forward, the district may instead resist and work even harder to restore that balance. The intention of CEN, of course, is that the district work harder for kids, not for system equilibrium.

In a recent e-mail, Butzon describes how this aspect of systems theory is applicable to school reform work, saying:

Knowing that the natural, automatic response of the system is first to maintain its equilibrium, and then, failing that, to restore equilibrium after as brief a period in disequilibrium as possible, the challenge becomes one of finding ways to upset the balance sufficiently such that when equilibrium is reestablished it is a new equilibrium. The process then is one of repeatedly upsetting the balance so that at each reestablishment of equilibrium, the organization is moved closer to effective performance.



The belief that “upsetting the balance” is a necessary ingredient for change is recognized in other fields, as well. A colleague of mine, noted national school psychologist of the year Dr. Fred J. Krieg, told me many times, “Anger and resistance are the meat of group [therapy].” If there is no discomfort, there is no need to change. Conflict is also the underlying principle of “interventions” in substance abuse treatment. Stacey (1992) concurs, saying, “Organizational systems succeed . . . [and] are innovative or creative . . . when they are sustained far from equilibrium in states of bounded instability” (Stacey, p. 12, cited by Brown and Moffett, 1999, p. 1) Brown and Moffett add their own conclusion, saying, “. . . breakthroughs in learning frequently occur when we are at the edge of chaos” (Brown and Moffett, p. 2).

CEN members’ sense of the intractability on the part of the school district leads to more frustration fueled by the sense of urgency so evident in CEN members’ speech. Butzon says, “I am an impatient leader.” One of his most repeated mantras is, “How much of *your* child’s education – days, weeks, months, years – are you willing to forfeit while you wait for your child’s school to get good?” Robinson answered this question of how much time in the letter he wrote to a school board member, “Our concerns are immediate – no child should have to spend one day in a sub-standard school.” Halkyard takes that urgency to a new level, saying CEN must not “sit back patiently and say, ‘Well, okay.’ I mean, we are going to fire back at them,” noting that change born of urgency and crisis is “probably going to involve a little bit of blood running in the streets.” And Robinson summed up his feelings of urgency by quoting the movie line, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

Another characteristic common to both the 66 groups in Mediratta et al. (2002) and CEN is that they are independent of the school system, though they have all developed some fluctuating insider/outsider relationships with some elements inside the systems. Pike (1954) first used the terms “emic” and “etic” to label the perspective of being either on the inside or outside of an organization or group. He defines “etic” as “standing far enough away from or outside of a particular culture to see its separate events, primarily in relation to their similarities and their differences, as compared to events in other cultures” (Pike, 1954, p. 10, cited by Patton, 2002, p. 268). “Emic,” according to Patton, is “an insider’s view of what is happening . . . [one] not only sees what is happening but feels what it is like to be a part of the setting or program” (Patton, p. 268). While Pike was writing about researchers, one could extrapolate this concept to the participants in this study.

There are significant insider/outsider dynamics at work in CEN, and they are in constant flux. As Crowe, Allan, and Summers (2001) note, “The boundaries that delimit insider and outsider statuses are neither simple nor fixed” (p. 30). For example, CEN has a historically fluctuating insider/outsider dynamic with the Charleston County School District. At first, while Dr. Zullinger was superintendent, CEN was on the inside as an informed adjunct of the superintendent’s office. When Dr. McWhirt replaced Zullinger, CEN was immediately pushed outside of the superintendent’s office and the school board. However, during Dr. McWhirt’s tenure, CEN cultivated good working relationships with certain members the school board, and at the same time spawned the Clean Slate informal political action committee that effectively replaced most of the members unfriendly to CEN – a shift to insider status again. Due to these relationships,

CEN had significant impact on the selection committee and the process of hiring Dr. Goodloe. It is not yet known whether CEN will move further back toward an insider role with the new Superintendent, though conditions are certainly more favorable than they have been for four years. Thus, these relationships constantly are shifting. As a member of the school reform activist group ACORN lamented, “You’re always concerned . . . with how to get a seat at the table” (Gehring, p. 4).

Butzon has been cast in an “outsider” position by certain members of the NAACP, and as a white male, he is certainly an outsider to the African American community. However, he is also endorsed and supported by African American members of CEN, including Co-Chairman and respected leader in the African American church community, Bishop Remebert, who is also in an NAACP member. Furthermore, Butzon’s (and therefore CEN’s) passion is the education of children in failing schools, and in Charleston, South Carolina, that means primarily African American children living in poverty. CEN members as a group, however, are both insider and outsider to the community. As people who live and work in Charleston County, they are certainly insiders to the larger community, though some of them are more recent transplants to Charleston. Perhaps more significantly, all of them are outsiders to the community of people whose children are most under-served by the district and who stand to gain the most if CEN is successful in accomplishing its mission. None of the CEN board members are poor or lacking in social and political capital. Few have children in public school, and none have children in failing public schools.

CEN and its members are likewise outsiders to the field of education, at least in terms of formal training or degrees, but that, too, has shifted as Butzon especially has

become increasingly well educated about school issues. Meriratta et al. (2002) found that community reform groups often begin with becoming educated about the “brutal facts” (Collins, 2001) of the school district, followed by publicizing those facts while demanding accountability, and experiencing difficulty in getting the information they need from the school district. CEN took the same path, and, in fact, most school board members now see Butzon as a better source of information about the district than are CCSD’s own employees. This is likely both a credit to Butzon and an indictment of the central office staff. Thus, Butzon certainly has cultivated a current insider relationship with school board members, which was, ironically, born of school board members feeling that they were treated as outsiders by their own employees.

A unique quality of CEN that was *not* noted by Mediratta et al. (2002) in the groups they studied is the vital personal experiences of the military and the world of business that significantly impact the manner in which CEN members view the problems and solutions of Charleston County Schools. Two of the most central figures in CEN, founding Chairman Neil Robinson and Executive Director Jon Butzon, both have past military experience. Robinson was a Marine, and Butzon was a career Naval officer. Butzon, you recall, wants to write “The Barfighter’s Guide to No-Nonsense School Reform” as a model for how the “battle” should be waged. He sees this is in direct contrast to how he views most school reform battles being fought, which is that done by what he calls “the Marquis of Queensbury, ‘Let’s go to Sunday afternoon tea’ approach.” School reform, he believes, cannot be won this way, and he cites more than two decades of failure to support his position.

Near the end of this study, Butzon gave me a book called *Warfighting: The United States Marine Corps Book of Strategy* (Gray, 1989). He told me that he saw this training manual as a model for his work with CEN. In fact, he had recommended the book to the Public Education Network (PEN) as a model for their educational reform strategy, though they have not yet acted on his suggestion. One of the book's passages that exemplifies CEN's approach is, "When the decisive opportunity arrives, we must exploit it fully and aggressively" (p. 78). The *A Chance for Every Child* Project is a good example of this. Schools had just been rated by the state, on a five level ranking from "excellent" to "needs improvement," which CEN translated into grades A through F, and CEN took advantage of the multiple "D's" and "F's" in CCSD to highlight the fact that no child should have to be enrolled in those schools another day.

Another applicable passage from *Warfighting* is, "Doctrine establishes a particular way of thinking . . . a way of fighting, a philosophy for leading . . . , a mandate for professionalism, and a common language" (Gray, 1989, p. 56). CEN is consistent in its language and unwavering in its philosophy of being a staunch advocate, a catalyst for systemic change, and an unrelenting force for accountability. Those belief statements, or doctrine, guide their "way of fighting," or actions.

*Warfighting* also states that the successful prosecution of war requires "intelligent leaders with a penchant for boldness and initiative" (Gray, 1989, p. 58). Butzon certainly demonstrates this as the leader of CEN. An often heard complaint from him about leadership is its paucity – the leadership in schools is inadequate to get the job of educational reform done. Butzon also talks about the importance of schools having a "laser-like focus" on results. *Warfighting* echoes this by stating, "We must conceive our

vision of how we intend to win. The first requirement is to establish our intent; what we want to accomplish and how” (Gray, p. 85).

Another concern of Butzon is the tentative nature of the decision-making and the slow pace of change in education. *Warfighting* decries such pusillanimity as well, stating that leaders must “make tough decisions in the face of uncertainty – and accept full responsibility for those decisions – when the natural inclination would be to postpone the decision pending more complete information” (Gray, 1989, p. 89-90). Butzon would wholeheartedly agree with *Warfighting*’s admonition to leaders who are thus immobilized by concerns about making the wrong decision, “As a basis for action, any decision is generally better than no decision” (Gray, p. 88).

Moral courage, the courage to do the right thing for the right reasons even in the face of risk, is another hallmark of CEN. About this willingness, *Warfighting* says:

We must have the moral courage to make bold decisions and accept the necessary degree of risk when the natural inclination is to choose a less ambitious tack, for “in audacity and obstinacy will be found safety.”

(Gray, 1989, Quoting Napoleon Bonaparte, p. 90)

Finally, those who engage in “warfighting,” or in this case school reform, must not delude themselves about the potential of danger. Remember that Halkyard said it was going to take “a little bit of blood running in the streets.” At a school board meeting in February 2004, school board member Brian Moody said the changes recommended by Superintendent Maria Goodloe likely meant that “some folks are going to get their ox gored,” referring to administrators and schools that might lose favorite programs. Military strategist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in 1832:

Kind hearted people might, of course, think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed. . . . (Gray, 1989, p. 102, citing von Clausewitz., p. 75-76)

Butzon readily acknowledges that comparing reforming schools to fighting a war may seem extreme to some people. However, if you think of the enemy as ignorance, and if you consider just how hard and for how long the system has struggled against its own reform, then an “all out assault on multiple fronts” simultaneously to bring about the necessary changes seems more applicable. “If programs, clever acronyms, and platitudes were going to do the trick, they already would have,” Butzon says. I am also reminded of a recent conversation I had with Dr. Norma L. Winter, a family member and long time distinguished educator in the state of West Virginia, who told me, “It is clear that schools are not going to reform themselves.”

One might wonder if CEN also sees the enemy in more personal terms; if it is not ignorance, might it be educators? There are school board members who have accused Butzon of attacking them and district staff personally, including making racist remarks. African American school board member Reverend Ted Lewis wrote that Butzon “has repeatedly degraded and intentionally taken every opportunity to criticize the schools, teachers, district, and board.” While I found no evidence of racist thoughts, comments, or agenda on Butzon’s or CEN’s part, there is evidence that some of CEN members’ comments may go beyond edginess to bordering on personal attack. Remember that Butzon responded to Rev. Lewis’ letter by writing, “It is clear that you should not continue as a member of the Board of Trustees. You might best serve our children by

devoting 100% of your time praying for the success of your replacement.” When African American school board president Oliver Addison wrote that CEN was “exploit[ing]our students and our community,” Robinson responded to Reverend Lewis’ letter by writing, “We do not have as our primary goal the identification of your faults. We believe they are self evident.” Robinson closed with “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!” I suspect that Rev. Lewis and Mr. Addison and perhaps other district staff might have felt that they, and not ignorance, were the enemies of CEN.

With regards to another characteristic that makes CEN unique – the business backgrounds of some members – Robinson offers several observations that are reflective of his role as a successful business man. For example, one of the first problems he and co-founder of CEN, Hal Ravenel, noticed about the school district budget was “there was no money in the budget for long-term deferred maintenance.” My experiences in public education confirm that observation; maintenance and facilities are the first areas cut in a budget crisis. To businessmen, it is obviously shortsighted to not protect your capital resources. Another example of this type of thinking is when Robinson “woke up one morning at three o’clock in the morning . . . and I just started to focus on and fret about this ninety mil tax cap,” not something the typical parent, or even educator, does. Moreover, his response to this fretting was immediate and proactive, again not typical of educators’ reactions. Robinson said to himself, “You know, I’m going to sue them. I am just going to sue the auditor” and used the expertise of his own law firm to do so successfully. Finally, Robinson commented that one weakness of school board members is their lack of business experience, saying:



So you ended up with this collection of people that in most cases had no significant business background, no history or experience in working with large sums of money or building and construction projects, much less, educational programs. And in a district where you have got a \$250 million dollar budget, I mean, that's a pretty serious problem.

In the same manner, Butzon bemoans the lack of a market-like competition in education, reiterating a former superintendent's belief that education is akin to "an entitlement program for educators. It's like welfare." The end result, Butzon says, is that teachers "don't have to be competitive, [the] system doesn't have to be competitive, the school doesn't have to be competitive, the classroom doesn't have to be competitive, 'cause I still get paid."

Finally, in considering the uniqueness of CEN, and how it differs from the more typical community based reform groups in Mediaratta et al.'s (2001) study, one has to consider the uniqueness of the Charleston community. The Old Southern "veneer" of Charleston, so valued and essential to historical preservation, extends from building facades to the school system, where ugly past inequities are hidden from the public eye, but yet are preserved just beneath the thin surface. Perhaps it is this veneer that ultimately is the "enemy" of CEN. Remember that Butzon said:

I think there are people in this community that would stand up and say, "Oh, yeah, we gotta do something about public education" that are [actually] just fine with [the way it is]. Because at the end of the day in Charleston, South Carolina, on a very pragmatic level there are still a few

folks that believe you don't need to have a good education to carry suitcases, make beds in a hotel, wash dishes in the restaurants.

Ironically, not only does this attitude about education seem to preserve the lovely historical veneer of the Old South in this city which lives off of tourism, this attitude also subtly, but effectively, preserves one of the ugliest aspects of the Old South – the belief that a black man (or woman) needs a strong back more than a strong mind to contribute to society. Poor children and African American children on the whole have never done well in South Carolina's public schools, especially in comparison to their peers nationally, and in 2004 they continue to fail, or as CEN would say, the system continues to fail them. Is preserving this veneer one of the reasons that some of the citizens of Charleston seem to lack “the will to educate all children?” (Hilliard, 1991).

Critical theorists would agree that this lack of will has a lot to do with preserving the social status quo of the “haves” and the “have nots,” or the oppressors and the oppressed. Critical theorist Fossey (2003) discusses what he sees as the deliberate failings of public schools in New Orleans in this way:

A great many of the educators who staff our urban schools are incompetent, uninspired, or indifferent. (Fossey, p. 24)

Too often, urban administrators . . . simply refuse to document and address poor teaching practice. (Fossey, p. 25)

[regarding deplorable conditions observed by the author] In my mind, the fact that [this city] did not provide these things has only one explanation – indifference and a lack of respect for the human dignity of a school child. (Fossey, p. 26)

Critical theorists also address such questions as I originally posed on page 9 regarding power relationships and the use of “outrage, combativeness, and courage” (Anyon, 1997, 186). For example, my data indicate that CEN has and does indeed deliberately use power and resistance as strategies to achieve equitable schools. Orchestrating crisis is done with forethought as to how and where it will have the most impact on holding the school district accountable for improved student achievement. CEN does not, however, appear to unintentionally use the oppressed families to further CEN’s own agenda. CEN’s agenda does not seem to be a “bourgeoisie” agenda in the first place, in that it is to ensure a better education for children in these educationally oppressed families, and CEN members do not benefit directly from this. Furthermore, they go about accomplishing their agenda through power relationships that, for the most part, do not call for the direct involvement of the oppressed peoples in the process. An exception is *A Chance for Every Child*, in which parents, who were predominantly poor and minority, completed transfer forms with CEN’s assistance, and CEN then delivered 500 of them to the school district. Finally, it does not appear that for CEN, outrage and combativeness are their goals rather than the means to their goals, although there are those who might disagree with that. Some community and school board members, in letters contained herein, expressed their feelings that CEN indeed was being combative with no discernible goal other than to embarrass the school district and its staff. In my view, the data support a different conclusion, that CEN clearly has a specific target and goal in mind when being combative, and that they are combative only when they feel this is an appropriate strategy. Recalibrating their use of “edginess” is done periodically, and their outrage can be channeled into more collaborative approaches, such as networking

for the school governance legislation or obtaining grant funding, when that approach is deemed more appropriate.

Critical race theory (CRT) is a sub-division of critical theory that may also be applicable to the work of CEN. CRT was developed in the 1970s as an outgrowth of a liberal legal movement seeking to redress wrongs of America's class structure. However, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, "founding" critical race theorists, were concerned about the "slow pace of racial reform" in this movement (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 7). CRT theorists acknowledge that racism is a normal, permanent fixture in America that must be exposed and challenged, especially "the bond that exists between law and racial power" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12). They are also critical of the typical liberal's acceptance of a slow pace for social change. No doubt they would agree with Dr. Martin Luther King's warning (in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April, 1963) about the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism."

Ladson-Billing (1998) boldly asserts, "Without suffering a single act of personal racism, most African-Americans suffer the consequences of systemic and structural racism" (Ladson-Billings, p. 20). Data from Charleston County, South Carolina, would support that this is evident in public education. Ladson-Billings points out that from curriculum, to instruction, to assessment, and to funding, children of color experience marked and sustained inequity.

Joyce King (1991), in writing about racism, coined the descriptor "dysconscious" and defined it as "an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (King, 1991, p. 134). To extrapolate from this

definition of “dysconscious,” critical race theorists might say that in America we practice “dysconscious public education.” Those “given things” we tend to accept uncritically could include that minority children will underachieve, poor children will be poorly motivated, lack of parental participation explains school failure, and that all not all children can indeed learn. King (2000) later admonishes educators to make a “moral choice” to be “liberated from schooling that perpetuates America’s myths” (King, 2000, p. 1).

Thus, in the view of critical theorists and critical race theorists, CEN’s “edginess” is an appropriate response to a school district that continues to oppress children by not implementing school reform measures. CEN, also critical of the slow pace of change, asks, “How much of *your* child’s education – days, weeks, months, years – are you willing to forfeit while you wait for your child’s school to get good? Do we simply have to give the schools more time to address the problem? How long should we wait?”

Consider the following predictions from O’Day and Smith (1993):

Students from poor and minority groups face a very uncertain time in U.S. education. Their economic and social conditions are deteriorating without relief in sight, and the progressive curriculum reforms, if carried out one school at a time, will almost certainly place them at an even greater disadvantage. . . . Our gravest concern is whether there is sufficient commitment in our society to significantly and directly address the problems of educational equity through any sustained and coherent strategy. . . . (The) vision of change must be powerful enough to focus the public and all levels of the governance system on common

challenging purposes and to sustain that focus over an extended period of time (O'Day and Smith, 1993, pp. 267, 298-299).

Written more than a decade ago, O'Day and Smith's "vision for change" for poor and minority students has not been realized in Charleston, South Carolina, where the achievement gap has widened even further. CRT theorists might argue that acquiescing to "an extended period of time" is the reason. CEN agrees, having adopted crisis, born or urgency, as their means of educational activism. Their purpose is to provide that powerful and sustained crisis that delivers an effective and immediate means of pressuring school districts into what CEN calls "simply doing their jobs: providing public schools in which all children can and do learn." Perhaps this is what Martin Luther King, Jr., meant for people to do, when he wrote the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in 1963:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issues. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored. (King, 1963, cited in Rachels, 1989, p. 240)

#### What can we learn?

In these concluding remarks, I will address the fourth and final research question, which is, "What can other citizens' action groups and school districts learn from CEN's educational activist strategies?" First, I will discuss what I believe to be the essential, non-negotiable ingredients to CEN's success. Next, I discuss the risks that CEN has taken in their educational advocacy, and that other community activists groups might

face, as well. Finally, I discuss what makes CEN, and other similar groups, fragile entities, despite their appearance otherwise.

### *Key ingredients*

There seem to be three key ingredients to the success of CEN, which should be noted by anyone interested in replicating their approach: 1.) the personality, passion, and leadership of the Executive Director, 2.) the willingness to orchestrate crisis as a strategy, and 3.) the social and political capital of the members of the CEN board.

#### *1. The personality, passion, and leadership of the Executive Director.*

Jon Butzon models the passion, courage, and boldness that are the hallmarks of CEN. He is not afraid to speak up for what he believes is right for children; in fact, he says he is “called” to do it. Butzon is impatient with those who do not sense the urgency for school reform in the same way he does. He has the audacity or daring or confidence to write to a school board member, “It is clear that you should not continue as a member of the Board of Trustees. You might best serve our children by devoting 100% of your time praying for the success of your replacement.” It is hard to imagine CEN’s success without the passion and personality of Jon Butzon. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the only tool in his toolbox is being edgy. Butzon is smart, well informed, personally charming, a constant learner, a driven worker, and intuitive about people. And he acknowledges that he is slowly learning the wisdom of pantomime artist Marcel Marceau’s comment, “It’s good to shut up sometimes.”

#### *2. The willingness to orchestrate crisis as a strategy.*

CEN board members have adopted the strategy of being edgy, or orchestrating crisis, and they are not only not afraid to use it, they believe that it is the only way, in

many cases, to be that staunch advocate, catalyst for change, and force for accountability that their mission dictates. Butzon models and encourages the use of this strategy, but without his board standing behind him as they do, he would soon become ineffective. A great example of the willingness of not just Butzon, but of other CEN members to be edgy, is in the words written by Robinson to a school board president, “Quit whining when the public (CEN) seeks to hold you accountable. As out late President Harry Truman espoused, ‘If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!’” Other educational reform activists agree with the importance of using crisis, saying that successful school reform requires “. . . banging on the doors of power to demand a role in solving problems, while coming armed with policy research and lobbying acumen to bolster its in-your-face tactics” (Gehring, 2004, p. 1).

### *3. The social and political capital of the members of the CEN board.*

While CEN members are certainly not “all white men,” neither are they remotely representative of the Charleston community as a whole. Members include successful attorneys, retired CEO’s, bank and utility executives, presidents of local colleges and universities, and members of the media. Social capital is defined as “the network and relationships between members” (Mediratta, K., Fruchter, N., & Lewis, A. 2002, October, p. 16). Political capital can be defined as “the clout and competence a community can wield to influence public decisions in order to obtain resources, services, and opportunities from public and private sectors, functions” (Mediratta et al., p. 16). CEN members have lots of both. They are individuals who can contribute in significant ways to the Board, either through personal passion, knowledge, contacts, or fundraising.



All are well educated, and many have other interests which connect them to other passionate, educated, and powerful people.

### *Risks*

CEN's history so far reveals certain risks that a community-based group should consider in adopting their more confrontational approach. Among them are 1.) making enemies, 2.) being wrong, and 3.) giving up.

#### *1. Making enemies*

Making enemies, or at least the willingness to make enemies if necessary, is a risk that adversarial efforts require. Since systems resist change, they will also resist efforts by community groups to leverage change. Sometimes that resistance takes the form of personal attacks, as CEN experienced in the spring of 2002 when three letters in rapid succession accused CEN of multiple bad intentions, including being racist. The racism charge seemed unfounded on the surface and unsupported upon exploration, but this did not keep frustrated targets in the school system and community from leveling them, possibly motivated by a desire to deflect attention and to discredit CEN.

CEN members may also make enemies in the schools. Consider this finding by the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University:

Teachers who attended meetings with organizing groups were singled out by district administrators as troublemakers and threatened. Too often, teachers do not trust organizing activities, and some have used their power to make school life difficult for youth and parents involved in organizing.

(Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 13)

What might happen inside the school walls to children of CEN members, or to teachers or principals who want to work closely with CEN?

## *2. Being wrong*

This may seem at first glance like a small or unlikely risk, but it is actually a substantial one that Butzon takes every day as he disaggregates data, interprets policies and regulations, helps in crafting legislation, and reports all this information to the media and school board members. Even one mistake might cause him to lose his credibility as a reliable and accurate source of information, because many already question his “standing” as an educational reformer since he is not an educator in the traditional sense. Ironically, he appears to be more educated about school reform and school data than many people in the field of education, and certainly school board members respect and seek his knowledge.

Another type of being wrong could occur if CEN proposes or supports impractical or ineffective solutions to problems. Certainly, not everyone agrees with CEN’s ideas of how to fix public education. Presently, there are different viewpoints about whether or not the governance legislation supported by CEN is a good idea. Some might consider Butzon’s ideas of jailing superintendents for failing to transfer students ludicrous. Others might say that transferring 500 children out of low performing schools, or reducing class size to 10 to 1, or removing the 80% of the principals that Butzon believes are ineffective, or refusing to enroll inadequately prepared college freshmen are impractical, or even irresponsible. Most of these ideas have not been tried, but if they were, and they yielded damaging fallout, CEN would likely suffer severe embarrassment and loss of credibility.

### 3. *Giving up*

As Butzon says, community driven educational reform is hard work; it involves “heavy lifting” and it requires us to “break a sweat.” He also laments the difficulty of “always being cross-threaded” with the district or someone else in the community. School reform, at least the CEN brand, is relentless, exhausting, and often performed without enough yeomen. As the Institute for Education and Social Policy noted, “It is difficult to keep members involved over extended policy campaigns; the daily pressures of members’ lives and the lack of concrete, winnable benchmarks work against sustained participation” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 12). CEN, it should be noted, has already made a few “winnable benchmarks”: overturning the tax cap, replacing a CEN-unfriendly superintendent, seeing CEN-friendly board members get elected, and having more access to the inside. In spite of these wins, however, CEN is still operating in what Butzon calls a “target rich environment.” There are many more problems to solve than have been solved already. “Heavy lifting” can be exhausting.

#### *Fragility*

Finally, in many respects, despite its apparent significant influence in educational matters in Charleston, CEN is on many levels a fragile organization. Recognizing where these weaknesses are should help other organizations be aware of potential pitfalls. Threats to the future of CEN include: 1.) the charismatic leader leaves, 2.) the organization cannot sustain the effort financially, 3.) the organization loses its politically powerful base of support, 4.) they lose their signature edginess or edginess becomes a fatal flaw, or 5.) the work of educational reform gets done.

### *1. Charismatic leader leaves*

CEN members are well aware that Butzon, as CEN's alter-ego, is rather irreplaceable. Since "he is CEN," as I was told so many times, it is questionable whether CEN would rebound if he were to leave. This troubles Butzon, because as much as this is a personal calling for him, he does not want the effort to fail if he is "called" elsewhere. He also sees it as a weakness of an organization if it cannot be sustained beyond the current leader. The goals, strategies, and commitment should be institutionalized in the membership, and not so bound up in one individual. However, history is full of efforts that could not survive the departure of their charismatic leaders, and CEN may someday become one of them.

### *2. Cannot sustain the effort financially*

Sustaining a non-profit financially is a great challenge, no matter what the cause. In Charleston's school reform efforts, where the largest stakeholders are often poor, and the largest potential contributors often have no children in public schools, or "no dog in the fight," this becomes an even greater challenge. Couple this with the tendency of Charlestonians to exhibit and value impeccable manners, and the tendency of CEN to be bold and brash, and the potential resource base becomes even smaller. Halkyard even cautioned against broadening the base of financial support for CEN. He predicted that the larger the base of support, the more homogenized the organization would be obliged to become to keep the donors happy. He prefers having a "small, restrained, effective, willing-to-be-confrontational [group] . . ." even at the risk of limited funding. There likely are donors that refuse to support CEN because they do not want to be associated

with an adversarial group. How CEN maintains balance on the “edge” can affect the level of community financial support.

### *3. Lose politically powerful base of support*

Without question, if the Mayor had not supported CEN when the false accusations of racism began to surface in 2002, CEN would have been seriously undermined. If financial supporters had not been willing to contribute \$100,000 in private donations last spring, the effort would have folded. If busy, talented folks like Neil Robinson, Bishop Rembert, John Barter, Ted Halkyard, and many other members of CEN did not make the time for the organization, replacements would become difficult to find. The members of CEN are valuable to their mission because they have both the social and political capital to be effective and the willingness to use their predominant strategy of orchestrating crisis. *Warfighting* would say that CEN is winning battles specifically because of these members:

There must be men of action and of intellect both, skilled at “getting things done. . . .” Resolute and self-reliant in their decisions, they must also be energetic and insistent in execution. (Gray, 1989, p. 57)

### *4. Lose edginess or edginess becomes a fatal flaw*

It is clear that CEN bases much of their strategy on crisis orchestration, or the use of “edgy” strategies. Several members have said that the organization’s successes to date can be attributed to that. Bishop Rembert, for example, said, “I don’t think the compassionate appeal would have worked months ago, a year, I really don’t. I think the only thing that would have really worked is what [Jon] did.”

Edginess, however, can be a fatal flaw. The analogy does not have to be extended too far to see that when something has a sharp edge, there is also a risk of harm.

Remember that Halkyard, who first applied the “edginess” moniker to CEN, said:

“You know, obviously, our overall objective is to be effective, and we believe that our effectiveness is or flows in large measure from our willingness to take on unpopular stands. Now, if you get to the point where that, my word, ‘edginess’ begins to make you ineffective, then you have to kind of revisit it.” *Warfighting* warns that “Boldness must be tempered with judgment lest it border on recklessness” (Gray, 1989, p. 44). While CEN has not taken on the more traditional activist role of demonstrating in large numbers, such as those furthered by ACORN, they have caused the district significant discomfort by using political and social pressure, as was seen by the flurry of accusations following their *A Chance for Every Child* project.

Lack of edginess, too, could be the undoing of CEN, especially if there is disagreement among the members about the appropriate degree and use of orchestrating crisis. CEN is “recalibrating” its level of edginess during this honeymoon period with Dr. Goodloe. How long that will last is unpredictable. It is doubtful that Butzon will ever give up his edgy approach long term, because he is convinced that it is the only strategy that really works, though he can set it aside for a while when necessary. But Butzon, himself, predicts “at some point I will cross the line and won’t get fired, I’ll just be reined in, and then I’ll quit.”

### 5. *Work gets done*

I include this under reasons that CEN is fragile somewhat facetiously, unfortunately. Certainly, there would not be a need for educational reformers if there was

no reform needed. However, no one predicted to me that the work of educating all students to a high standard would indeed get done, or that there would ever be no need for educational reformers like CEN in the near future. In fact, the increasingly multi-ethnic society and other changes in community and family structure will likely make school reform even more necessary in this century than it was in the last. Consider this dialogue I had with CEN member Ted Halkyard when I asked him how he will know when CEN is finished with its mission:

Halkyard: Number one, when I don't have to be ashamed to tell people that I live in South Carolina because of the education system. And I do, and I am. When it comes to the time when our dropout rate for all kids comes to a point where it's something more than disaster, when it comes to the point where all the kids in the community can leave school knowing that they've been adequately prepared to get some satisfaction from what they do and support a family and establish a household and all those kinds of ideals. Yeah, that's when it will be over.

Interviewer: And do you think you'll see that in the near future?

Halkyard: No. No.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Halkyard: Just too many impediments to overcome in the near future.

### Final thoughts

I leave the reader with two final thoughts. The first is a note of challenge and encouragement, appropriately via a military analogy, that former Civil Rights attorney and present school board member Gregg Meyers wrote to CEN Chairman Neil Robinson on April 4, 2002, after School Board Chairman Oliver Addison complained about CEN's activities. Meyers wrote:

Trying to move the district is like trying to invade Russia. In each of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Russia was invaded, the reaction of the Russians was to retreat and let winter do its work. In 1812, Napoleon took Moscow, presuming the country would capitulate once he had the capital. Instead, the Russians waited for Napoleon to outlive his supplies, and when he tried to retreat, the Russians and the winter of 1812-1813 reduced his army to less than 20,000.

The district is accustomed to invasion but not to persistence. It has successfully resisted every attempt to make it responsive to every child, being resiliently and aggressively comfortable with mediocrity for most.

Keep it up.

Finally, I conclude with Jon Butzon's guidelines for doing community based education reform, offered in response to a query from a staff member of the National School Boards Association (Butzon, e-mail to NSBA, November 21, 2003). After each of these guidelines, I discuss what the data from this study suggest about CEN's efforts to live up to their own principles.



1. *First, it's about children. Take the high moral ground of what is best for children and hold it. Make everybody else either join with you on that high ground, or fight against children.*

CEN seems to consistently, even passionately, place children first. Their mission statement begins, “The mission of the Charleston Education Network is to be a *staunch advocate for children . . .*” Every one of their initiatives and programs has been aimed, not at making themselves look civic-minded, nor at saving the taxpayers money, nor even at building a good workforce to attract business to the area, but rather first and foremost at making sure all children have good curriculum, good instruction, and a good education. The “moral high ground” seems to emanate from CEN members’ personal values and beliefs. Butzon says unapologetically that he has been “called” to this work of school reform. Ted Halkyard says that what CEN does must always be “for the kids.” John Barter said providing every child a good education is “a matter of social justice.” As the temptation grows strong to unquestioningly support the new Superintendent and her Plan for Excellence, CEN’s commitment to children helps them to keep their priorities in order and their focus sharp. Perhaps some of the negative reaction to CEN’s bold stances has been that those in disagreement with their positions have been cast, fairly or unfairly, in the role of “fighting against children.”

2. *Be clear about what you are trying to accomplish. If it isn't about making certain that we do right by every child, don't bother. This is too much work to do if you're not serious about doing the best for all kids.*

Again, CEN seems dedicated to making sure *all* children learn. It was with forethought that their major community organizing project was named *A Chance for*

Every Child, with the word “every” underlined. CEN does not endorse solutions that “fail the Titanic Lifeboat Test;” they are opposed to vouchers because they view them as benefiting only a few students at the expense of the rest. Rather, CEN is a clear and consistent voice for the mass of poor and disadvantaged children and their parents, who as Neil Robinson sadly noticed, “didn’t know how to express their concerns, so nobody was listening to them.” One of the mantras of CEN is the Ronald Edmonds quote which hangs on Jon Butzon’s office wall: “We can whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” ([www.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.gse.harvard.edu)).

3. *Education reform is not for the timid and faint-hearted. Gather together a group of courageous people. If you don’t have a critical mass of courageous people, don’t bother. Without courage, everything you do will be hollow and it will actually help leave children behind.*

When CEN was first “gathered together” by Mayor Riley, he told them “if this can’t be one of [your] top three priorities, then don’t serve.” A small group of about 25 invited members accepted the Mayor’s challenge; a few of them, perhaps the more faint hearted, later left, by what John Barter calls “the process of natural selection.” Those who are current members of CEN certainly have demonstrated the willingness and courage to take on adversarial positions with other community leaders, such as the school board, and anyone else responsible for “leaving children behind.” They also demand courage from others in leadership positions and are especially critical when those charged with fixing schools demonstrate, if not cowardice, complacency. Butzon and others in

CEN call upon military analogy and strategy to emphasize the necessity of courage, as well as the danger and futility of proceeding without it. CEN members believe that improving schools is analogous to fighting a war, and war takes courage. Moreover, casualties, in the form of any children left behind, are completely unacceptable.

4. *Make up your mind from the outset to be relentless. This is hard work. If it were quick and easy, it would have already been done.*

After four years, no one in CEN is likely to believe that fixing schools through leverage from the community is quick or easy. As Neil Robinson says, education reform “is not Jiffy Lube. It’s just public education, and it’s hard, and it’s not fun.” Butzon complains that too many people are unwilling to do the “heavy lifting” school reform requires. CEN, however, has been relentless in their efforts to improve public education, and their efforts are starting to yield at least intermediate results. A school board that is more aligned with CEN’s thinking and focus on results for all children has been elected and seated, and a superintendent selected by a CEN-recommended committee has been hired. CEN’s work, however, is far from complete. Test results, that bottom line to which CEN holds the school board, and ultimately themselves, accountable, have not yet reflected the sharp upward trend needed to show that all children are learning.

5. *Everybody coming together to work for what’s best for children is a great idea. But it is only an idea. Believe it or not, people will fight you to keep that from happening. Just keep that in mind so it doesn’t catch you off guard.*

This guideline comes from Jon Butzon’s personal, painful experience of being caught off guard once when a few in the community accused him and others in CEN of acting from racist motives. Even if these accusations were not made with the intention

of keeping “what’s best for children” from happening, they posed a serious threat to CEN’s potential to push for change. Sometimes the people who have fought against CEN have done so openly and face to face, but more often the “enemy” is less up front. As Butzon says, “There are still a few folks that believe you don’t need to have a good education to carry suitcases, make beds in a hotel, wash dishes in the restaurants.” These “folks” are most unlikely to come forward to work for what CEN sees as “what’s best for children.” CEN, however, seems undeterred in their mission to advocate and work for what is best for children.

6. *Make everybody, especially you, focus on results. It is easier, and much more familiar, to focus on programs and process. At the end of the day, though, if children still cannot do the 3 R’s well, all the programs and process don’t really count for much, do they?*

Again, CEN’s mission statement proclaims that they are “an unrelenting force for accountability to achieve excellence in public education.” CEN indeed seems to be relentlessly focused on results, which is one frequent point of contention with those in opposition. Some in education, such as the State Superintendent, say that looking at just the bottom line of achievement is not only unrealistic, it ignores small gains and trends. Some school board members have asserted that CEN is only focused on what is wrong with public education and not what is right with it. CEN counters that whether or not students can “do the 3 R’s well” is the only important measure. Furthermore, Butzon says, “I don’t care how they do it, as long as it is legal, moral, and ethical. It’s about the results.”

7. “Try? There is no ‘try.’ There is either ‘do’ or ‘not do.’” – Master Yoda [in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*]

CEN has been tireless and tenacious in their own efforts, and they have little patience with those outside of CEN who “whine,” as Robinson called it, about how difficult the task of school reform is. Butzon says, “I’m tired of the excuses, and I’m tired of the people that resort to the excuses.” He asserts that too often in education, mere activity is confused with meaningful, goal directed action. Therefore, CEN often takes stock of whether or not their own actions are mere activity, even if worthwhile activity, or whether they are moving toward their goal. CEN members agree that failure of school reform is not and cannot be an option, because the price of failure is far too high. In a very real sense, they believe that the fate of the Republic hangs in the balance; as Thomas Jefferson once said, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

8. *Finally, [and again] it's about children. Take the high moral ground of what is best for children and hold it. Make everybody else either join with you on that high ground, or fight against children.*

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## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS STUDY

#### *Five Charleston Education Network Board members interviewed*

1. *Jonathan H. Butzon*, Executive Director of the Charleston Education Network.

Jon Butzon is the sole paid employee of CEN, and he has been its director since its inception in the spring of 2000. He was instrumental in the originating Tuesday Morning Group that met with and advised the previous Superintendent. Butzon was formerly in the United States Navy for 23 years, owned two successful businesses, and was an educational consultant and trainer for about 15 years. He is a tall, imposing, outgoing, articulate white male in his 50's with a quick wit, and he holds a Master's degree in Counseling. Butzon's two adult children graduated from public schools in a neighboring county where they resided.

2. *Bishop Sanco Rembert*, Co-Chairman of CEN. Rembert, called "Bishop" by most everyone, is eighty-two years old, and he has been a long time pastor and bishop in the Reformed Episcopal Church. As a young man, he played semi-professional baseball in the Negro League. One might guess the Bishop's age to be 20 years younger. He is a medium built, African American man with a short black hair, who speaks deliberately and has a very quick and warm smile. Rembert has been Co-Chair of CEN for a little more than a year, but family illness has caused him to ask the CEN board to find a replacement for him after the first of the year.

3. *Neil Robinson*, past Chairperson and co-founder of CEN. Robinson is a successful and well-known attorney and a managing partner of Nexsen Pruet, one of the largest law firms in the state. He is a graduate of Clemson University and the University of South Carolina, and a former Marine. Robinson is an articulate, energetic white male in his late 50's, with white hair and a southern accent. He filed suit and won to have the Charleston County tax cap overturned, which had limited the amount of revenue that a district could raise. Robinson has a young daughter for whom he frequently advocates at her public school.

4. *John Barter*, Co-Chairman of CEN. John Barter is a retired Chief Financial Officer from Allied Signal Corporation, a Fortune 25 company. He has lived in retirement on Kiawah Island for the past five years. Barter is a white male with dark hair in his late 50's with grown children, who attended public schools, and grandchildren. Barter was a founding board member of CEN and has been Co-Chair of CEN with Bishop Rembert for more than a year. He also serves on the Board of the Charleston Symphony and several public and private corporations.

5. *Edward "Ted" Halkyard*, CEN Board member. Halkyard is also retired from Allied Signal Corporation where he was Senior Vice President for Human Resources. It was through his working relationship with Barter at Allied Signal that he was invited to participate in CEN. Halkyard dubbed CEN's strategies as having "edginess," a term that has been picked up and reiterated. Halkyard is a tall white male in his 60's, who speaks with a charming self-effacement and folksiness that belie his professional accomplishments. He has other community interests, such as being President of the Symphony Board. Halkyard did not live in Charleston when his children were in school.

*Three Charleston County Schools Board of Trustees Members interviewed:*

1. School Board Member who wishes to remain anonymous
2. *Gregg Meyers*, President of the CCSD School Board of Trustees. Meyers is an attorney and has a solo practice in the historic district of downtown Charleston. At the time of my interview, Meyers was the President of the Board of Trustees of the Charleston County School District. In November 2003, he was replaced by Nancy Cook as President (by rotation), but he still serves as a Board member. Meyers won a very large and well-publicized sexual abuse lawsuit against a private school in the district. He was, ironically, the United States Department of Justice Civil Rights attorney who first came to Charleston from Washington to sue the school district to force school integration in 1981. Meyers' children attend the Academic Magnet public schools in Charleston.
3. *Hugh Cannon*, Member of the CCSD School Board of Trustees. Cannon is an attorney who was a Rhodes Scholar, Oxford University graduate, and Harvard Law School graduate. Before moving to Charleston in the late 1970s, he served on the administrative staffs of two governors, first in his home state of North Carolina and later in South Carolina. Cannon has served as the Parliamentarian of the National Education Association continuously since 1965; he was also Parliamentarian of the Democratic National Party and the Democratic National Conventions for 20 years. Cannon is the only individual who has been both a member of CEN and the school board.

*Two Additional participants interviewed*

1. *Ginny Deerin*, former CEN Board member of head of Clean Slate. The 2002 school board election was significantly impacted by the informal political action committee called Clean Slate, which had an indirect relationship with CEN. Ginny



Deerin was a CEN Board member who left the board to form Clean Slate because non-profit organizations such as CEN cannot be involved in electioneering and candidate endorsement. Three of the four Clean Slate candidates were elected. Deerin is also the Executive Director of Wings, an after school program for children which she founded in 1996. Wings serves over 240 children daily in school and community settings in Charleston, and Deerin has raised over a million dollars for services to CCSD students.

2. *Joseph P. Riley*, Mayor of the City of Charleston. Riley is the current mayor of Charleston, and he was re-elected in the fall of 2003 to his eighth consecutive term. Mayor Riley has served as mayor of Charleston continuously since 1975, and he is recognized nationally for his leadership in decreasing crime and for promoting historic preservation. He has acknowledged that education is the one major area that Charleston has “not gotten right.” Mayor Riley helped launch the Charleston Education Network in the spring of 2000 and remains a member of its Board.

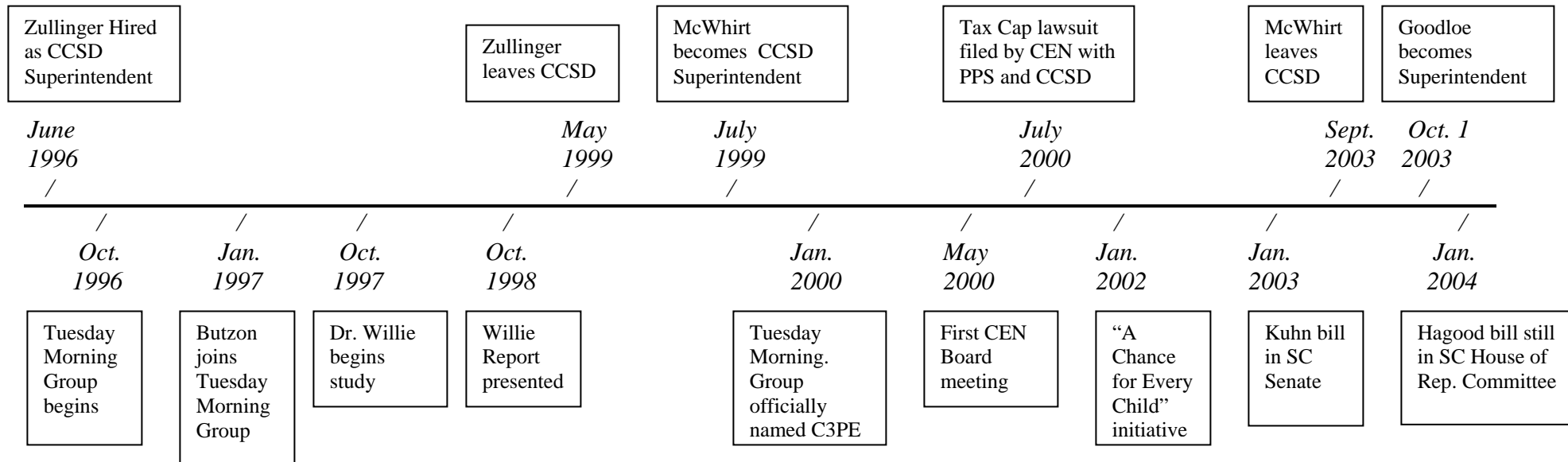
## APPENDIX B

## “CAST OF CHARACTERS”

Name	Occupation	Affiliation	Interviewed?
Oliver Addison	Retired from Railroad	Former CCSD Board President	No
John W. Barter	Retired CEO	CEN current chairman	Yes
Jonathan H. Butzon	Educational reformer	CEN Executive Director	Yes
Hugh Cannon	Attorney	CCSD Board member; former CEN member	Yes
Confidential		CCSD Board member	Yes
Nancy Cook	Director of homeless shelter	Current CCSD Board President	No
Ginny Deerin	Director of Wings After School Prog.	Clean Slate Chair; former CEN member	Yes
Sandra Engelman		Current CCSD Board member	No
Herbert Fielding	Former Legislator	NAACP	No
Maria Goodloe	Superintendent	CCSD	NO
Edwin M. (Ted) Halkyard	Retired HR executive	CEN member	Yes
Rev. Ted Lewis	Pastor	Former CCSD Board member	No
Dr. Ronald McWhirt	Superintendent	Past CCSD Superintendent	No
Gregg Meyers	Private Attorney	CCSD Board member, past Board President	Yes
Hal Ravenel	Real estate investor	CEN co-founder	No
Bishop Sanco K. Rembert	Pastor and Bishop	CEN current chairman	Yes
Joseph P. Riley, Jr.	Mayor	CEN member	Yes
Neil C. Robinson, Jr.	Private Attorney	CEN co-founder, past chair	Yes
Dr. Chip Zullinger	Superintendent	Past CCSD Superintendent	No

## APPENDIX C

## TIMELINE FOR HISTORY OF THE CHARLESTON EDUCATION NETWORK

*CHARLESTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT ACTIVITY**CHARLESTON EDUCATION NETWORK ACTIVITY*

APPENDIX D

THE CONTINUUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

IN URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM

## The Continuum of Community Engagement In Urban Public Education Reform

### **BALANCE OF POWER:**

Defensive Educational System  
+  
Adversarial Community

Collaborative Public  
+  
Educational System

Resistant Schools  
+  
Alienated Public



### **CITIZEN ROLES:**

“Outrage, Combativeness”  
Anyon (1997)

“Civic Capacity”  
Stone et al. (2001)

“Enablement”  
Nakagawa (2003)

### **SCHOOL DISTRICT ROLES:**

“Lacking the Will”  
Hilliard (1991)

“Empowerment”  
Nakagawa (2003)

“Public School Cartel”  
Rich (1996)

### **EXAMPLE CITIES:**

Charleston, SC

El Paso, TX

Atlanta, GA