

## **When Your Reputation Precedes You**

*How Does School Reputation Impact ....Everything? What Can You Do About It?*

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Full Transcript

- [Courtney] Well, hello everyone. And welcome to "When Your Reputation Precedes You, How Does School Reputation Impact Everything and What Can You Do About It?" My name is Courtney Leigh Beisel, and I'm the deputy director of the National Charter School Resource Center. While everyone is signing on, please take a moment to introduce yourself in the chat. I'll give everyone just a few moments to get settled in for today's discussion.

And then we'll get started. All right, let's get started. Today's webinar is being brought to you by the National Charter School Resource Center. NCSRC provides technical assistance to federal grantees and resources supporting charter sector stakeholders. NCSRC is funded by the U.S.

Department of Education and is managed by Manhattan Strategy Group in partnership with WestEd. Some quick norms for our discussion today. We are using Zoom Meetings, so, remember to mute yourself throughout the presentation. You can use chat for questions and comments, or unmute yourself when we come to the Q&A portion. We would love for you to respond to the survey that we provide at the end of the session so you can tell us how we did.

We will be going into breakout rooms later today so we can have some small-group discussions and really dig in on our content today. So, we would love for you to resist that temptation sometimes to sign off when we go to breakout rooms and really dig into this conversation with our peers. And finally, this session is being recorded so that you and your peers may access it at another time. By participating in this event, you are consenting to being recorded.

We will not record the breakout rooms though. I'm thrilled today to be joined by my colleagues from the Resource Center Aimee Evan and Hannah Sullivan who will guide us through today's event. We know that you get your best ideas when you're listening to your peers and hearing and learning from their experiences.

So, we're excited to welcome LaRetha Odumosu from the Charter School of New Castle Middle School and Ryan Gall from the Victory College Prep, to share more about their work and practices. This session is based on our latest report in our research series on the indicators of distress. You may access "Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools Part 2, The Roles and Perspectives of Charter Leaders and Board Members" via the link I am going to share in the chat in just a moment.

And with that, I'm going to pass this off to Aimee and Hannah to get us started.

- [Aimee] Thanks, Courtney. And thank you all for joining us today. Today's session we have three big questions that we're going to wrestle with, "What does school reputation impact?"

"What impacts school reputation?" and "How can you change the narrative of your school's reputation?" But before we dive into that, let's take a step back to where this research began.

Courtney, can you forward the slide please? So, as you know, across the nation, some of the schools doing the very best work of serving students or charters. But so are some of the ones that struggle the most to meet their students' needs. There's been much effort and focus, over the last 30 years, into figuring out reasons for this range.

And we've gotten better at starting, expanding, and replicating schools on more solid footing. But any school at any time can begin to decline, they can begin to struggle to meet their students' needs. What we wanted to know was why we wait so long to intervene. If we were able to recognize schools in earlier phases, could we get them back on track earlier, faster before they spiraled too far?

Our research began by talking with authorizers and then with school leaders and governing board members from across the nation about schools that had previously grappled with achieving but, more importantly, sustaining success. One myth that our research really busted is that schools don't just show up one day not meeting renewal criteria but rather they have struggled for a long time, sometimes years.

Where and in what ways are schools' training? What did schools look like when they started? What were some of the first signs that a school was beginning to show signs of stress? By knowing what these signs look like and paying attention, we can oftentimes help schools recognize these areas of stress and help get them back on track well before we see declines in student outcomes.

So, we use two frameworks really to guide our analysis. The first is an early warning system and the second is what is referred to in organizational research as "the death spiral." You're likely all familiar with an early warning system. We use them to predict all kinds of stuff, hurricanes, heart attacks, students who don't complete high school. How an early morning system works is by examining past events to predict similar events moving forward.

By reviewing schools in the past that struggled, we can then look to see if our current schools are showing similar signs and patterns in order to try and cut them off of the past, give them interventions, supports necessary to keep them from following a similar trajectory. The death spiral, on the other hand, recognizes this feeling of spiraling out of control that some schools experience when they begin to miss targets or experience distress and difficulty and, quite frankly, sometimes of being unable to see the forest long term for the immediate trees in front of them.

The spiraling can cause shifts in mindsets, behaviors, things from secrecy, denial to blame, avoidance, and finally, helplessness. You may recognize some schools currently experiencing this as the stress of the pandemic continues. But if we put these two concepts together, of an early morning system and organizational decline, we begin to recognize not just the signs of school distress but the reality of distress on schools.

And that helps us point us to interventions that are needed. Next two slides, Courtney. Can we go one more please? Thank you. So, through our research, we identified specific characteristics or indicators of school distress in multiple categories, as you see on your screen.

We organize these categories not in order of importance but depending on their relationship to student outcomes. So, those closest to impacting students are, what we call, "the lower stratosphere." These include indicators of talent, whether those are experiencing recruitment difficulties or teacher retention, culture, instruction.

Less directly related but equally important are upper-stratosphere categories, so, things like leadership. If we're seeing leadership churn, governing board, if the governing board is having a difficulty or incapacity of holding the school accountable. And then also indicators in operations and finance.

And if you've joined our previous webinars on the indicators, you know we've explored these into great depth and we've talked about how they're also tied together. So, for example, enrollment declines are an indicator of financial distress. And while this is an important data point on its own, it could also be related to things like poor relationships with families, eroding school culture, difficulties with instruction, etc.

I would encourage you, if you haven't joined our previous webinars on the indicators, we talk about what these are specifically, what the look fors may be. And you can find all of those pre-recorded webinars and our previous reports on the NCSRC website that we'll provide the link to at the end of the webinar.

So, as you probably noticed, in those upper and lower categories, that we also talk about what is happening or going on or being stressed within the school, what are some of the things that schools may need to change in order to sustain that success. But one of the things that we found is that, not only do charter schools experience internal challenges, they also may exist in environments or, what we call, above the stratosphere that can be stressful to their sustainability as well.

So, these include a school's market, whether the charter market is saturated and schools are competing over students, maybe there was a change in authorizer or the political environment, one from charter-friendly to now more charter-hostile. But where we're going to hone in today and focus is something that could be quite elusive for schools because it incorporates not just some of these internal pieces but also external pressures as well.

And that is the school's reputation and what are the ties of the school's reputation to these other categories. Before we dive into those ties, we're going to talk a little bit about timing. Timing of addressing or thinking about your reputation is very important.

Next slide please. We know from studying schools that previously declined, once the school begins to, essentially, that death spiral in action, it's really hard to simply stop and reverse direction. The same is true for a school's reputation.

We know that interventions work best when they're deployed early. And so, the best time to really think about your reputation is before you have to. And to be frank, while a school's reputation may need to be salvaged for a transformation to take shape, just focusing on reputation, as we know, won't transform the school. What we'll talk about next is reputation can't necessarily be controlled but you can work to manage it.

And we have some practitioners with us today who are going to talk about just that. So, at this time, I'd like to introduce my co-author on this report, Hannah Sullivan, and to dive into how we do that. Hannah?

- [Hannah] Thanks, Aimee. First, just a little definitional slide about reputation. So, reputation is the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something. It's very subjective, as I'm sure we all know. It's not just what we are or what we do but what people think of that. Therefore, it's at the mercy of other people's opinions.

And we know that beliefs and opinions are a powerful force that dictate behavior. So, if we go to the next slide, we're going to start with "What does reputation impact?" Why is it so important that we talk about reputation, especially in terms of charter schools? I'll get into a little bit of what we found.

Next slide, please. So, the first thing we found is, unsurprisingly, that the most direct impact of reputation is on student recruitment and enrollment. Parents and students themselves do not want to attend schools with poor reputations. And, as charter schools are schools of choice, they are highly sensitive to school reputation.

One school leader we talked to described how their school was losing enrollment over a reputation built up from previous schools in the building they inhabited and from a lack of paying attention to some of the maintenance needs of the school. The leader said, "We're losing enrollment. We were losing enrollment. The school was operating at a good level but the school had a poor reputation."

It was in an old catholic school building that wasn't necessarily the best maintained and it just seemed like that part of the school was completely neglected. In this example, we see how other components of the school's operation like maintenance, if there are leaky ceilings or poorly-maintained restrooms, that plays into the reputation of the school as a high or low-quality school and impacts students' interest in staying in or enrolling in the school, especially considering the other options available to them.

Next slide. Next was teacher recruitment. We know that the impact of school reputation is not just contained to students and parents, teachers also contend with a school's reputation. One school leader who came on to a school with a negative reputation explained it this way, "There was a stigma in this community. They hated us and treated our teachers the same way. Our teachers would take off their school hoodies when they'd go to the grocery store."

So, there was almost a shame, there's no pride in the school. As you can imagine, this makes it very difficult to recruit and even retain teachers who are already a resource that is in high demand by schools. Without strong teacher retention or a strong teacher pipeline, other areas of the school are then vulnerable or at risk of decline.

Which brings me to our last point is the domino effect. So, what can be so powerful about reputation is that it's a force that has momentum. One school leader described the momentum of reputation this way, they said, "When you have a bunch of vacancies listed on every employment portal, teachers look at that and think, "That school must be so desperate." So, increasing staff retention increases the reputation of the school.

Which also increases student retention. As the reputation of a school improves, that school is able to retain and recruit more students, which increases the financial resources available to the school. The school is able to be more competitive in attracting teachers and the school's program is then bolstered in many areas.

Conversely, reputation's negative impact doesn't stop at sliding staff retention or student enrollment declines. As students leave the school, the school loses funding and then this impacts the school's ability to hire great teachers and invest in the program, leading to further declines in enrollment and financial distress. Similar to that death spiral effect that Aimee was talking about.

At that point, many of the aspects of the school's functions have been touched or affected in a way that's too hard to recover from. So, next we're going to get into what actually forms reputation. And we have a quick little activity, so, if everyone could go to [menti.com](https://www.menti.com) and use the code 4902 3162, we're going to get some opinions on what are some of those key components that build up a school's reputation, what forms a school's reputation in your opinion.

So, if you just go to that website, you should be able to enter in some words, and we'll be able to see everyone's responses. Academic results, certainly.

Students, faculty, alumni, the facility. Yes. Some other thoughts? Looks like we might be getting one more. All right. So, those are big key impacts that we'll talk about. We have a couple more, I'll just shout them out.

General attitudes, teacher retention, data, parent feedback. Culture, a big one. Teachers. Great. Thanks everybody. If you can go to the next slide, Courtney... So, here's what we found.

One of the big phenomenon that we found is that there's an impact to a school's exclusivity on its reputation. So, I'll start with a quote, a leader kind of describing this idea. So, the leader said, "There's an invisible force moving perception through the city that has a lot more to do with reputation than it does with performance. The workings of parents' minds when they're trying like mad to get their kids into a school. A good school."

"And whether I like it or not, exceeding your enrollment targets creates rejection to families who want to be here, which creates demand and brand elevation." So, surely, parents do look at test scores. That gets complicated, right, when we have some pandemic years where you're not able to see some test scores. And we also know that this isn't the only thing that's important to parents...and students alike.

In our research with schools, we identified that the perception of exclusivity helped drive the positive reputation of a school. You know, in economics, as demand for an item increases, its price increases, which indicates quality. Similarly, as the demand for getting into a school increases, evidenced by schools meeting or maximizing their enrollment and families understanding that their student may be put on a waitlist, the perception of that school becomes one of in-demand or quality.

And we'll discuss this more later but this is not to say that you should manufacture demand for your school. Actually, the opposite. This is to say that your school should be investing in

your program and keeping your eye on your goals for retaining and growing enrollment to be able to achieve this exclusivity. Next slide, please.

Next is parent sentiment. Again, this should be no surprise to anyone but the power of parents in shaping the reputation of a school is huge. At a minimum, parents are talking to their friends about their kids' school. At a maximum, they're organizing to make changes at the school. Beyond investing in your program, this means putting specific thought into parent engagement and school transparency.

Here's an example of a parent situation that got out of control, from our research that we heard from a school leader. They said we had disgruntled parents and they got a political organization or a social community organization involved and their goal was to go to the board and complain. So, once they go to the board and complain, the board gets involved.

From there, that becomes a news story. So, once it got this bad, the school struggled to manage their reputation, you know, after they reached this point. You could go through some different thought exercises on how you might relieve on the front end that disgruntled-parent piece so it doesn't devolve into this.

And then the last component that we'll talk about...next slide, please...is legacy. That being the history of perception, the history and perception around schools. So, in many localities, the same schools have been around for quite a long time.

Because of this you can have intergenerational experiences around schools, that's where that alumni piece maybe comes in. Students going to schools where their friends, siblings, cousins, parents, and even grandparents attended. Because of this momentum reputation has, how being a good school can support a school and retaining the staff and resources for staying a good school and vice versa, thought about building a legacy can be a very important component driving perception around the school.

This is how one leader described that legacy piece coming from a school with a bad legacy. The leader said, "There's this kind of legacy around high schools that are considered not good schools. One of the challenges we faced is just on that alone, "This is a school that was bad back in the 90s and only bad kids go there." "So, kids that are applying are not really applying, they're just kind of ending up there."

Again, this emphasizes the impact and momentum of historical legacies on schools and why you may want to put focus on that long term. Now, now that we've heard all this, we're going to go into an activity where we dive a little bit deeper on some of these components. So, I'll pass it off to Aimee.

- Thank you, Hannah. So, as Hannah shared, reputations are built on impressions and they're very personal and they're often driven by feelings. So, we're going to put you in your fields. This time, I'd like you to pull out your phone. If we were doing this 20 years ago, I'd ask you to pull out your wallet. You're going to pull out your phone, you're going to find a picture of a child. This might be a picture of your child, a grandchild, a niece, a nephew, a neighbor, a student that you teach.

If you don't have a picture, that's fine, you can close your eyes and imagine what they look like. As you think about this child going into this role-playing activity, think of all the hopes

and dreams that you may have for him or her. And for this next activity, you're going to be assigned a role. You'll either be this child's parent and looking for a school for them to attend, a teacher thinking about all the many strengths and expertise you can bring to teach this child, or an authorizer of a school that this child attends.

So, what we're going to do is ask you to...in breakout rooms, we're going to first think about what are some of the things you might be looking for, depending on your specific role. What would turn you away from choosing a school? How might you determine if a prospective school meets what you're looking for? What distress indicators would you not be able to overcome?

So, after you've taken a moment to think about those...and again, this is rhetorical, you can jot some ideas down or just keep it in your head, we're going to ask you to look through a couple infopackets on three fictitious schools. So, these infopackets reflect typical information that's available publicly on websites.

Report cards, parent reviews. But we're going to warn you, it's purposefully not much and it's not complete. But using it, you'll make some decisions about where you would either enroll your child, where you would apply for a job, or where you would possibly think about taking on a school as an authorizer.

So, this activity will be fully facilitated, and we have folks who will guide you through. I know that was a very quick overview of what we're going to ask you to do, but I just wanted to give you a heads up. So, at this time, we're going to go into breakout rooms. We're just going to assign you a roll and go from there. Courtney, you ready?

- Yep. All right, everyone. I am whisking you away, and we'll give you notices on timing, as you're in the rooms. So, have a great discussion. All right, it looks like everyone is flowing back from those breakout rooms. I hope you had a great conversation. And I do apologize for anyone that got cut off mid comment.

And I think we're going to have some group discussion now. So, Hannah and Aimee, take it away.

- Great. Thank you. And apologies for folks in my group that got cut off. Aimee, sorry, I'd love for you to share what you were sharing in our discussion as well. But let's start with the parent groups. So, from a parent's perspective, thinking about our hopes and dreams for this child that we were holding on to, what were your impressions?

What drove positive impressions? What drove negative impressions? What were your thoughts about these schools?

- I can share for our group, as parents, we had someone who said, "I go straight for the data. I'm scrolling through this thing, I'm looking at the data." Then we have another person who said, you know, "The school culture is really important to me," you know, "my student has a history of bullying," or, "my student has special needs," and, "understanding the presence of bullying in a school," "communication with parents."

And I'm trying to remember some other key ones...but also whether the school has, you know, a very flashy website but then, you go a little deeper, and it's not looking that great. And so, just kind of kicking the tires a little bit in terms of that.

So, I'll end there and let someone else speak.

- All right, anyone else from that group that would like to share? Okay. Who was the other parent group? What were some of your impressions of these schools? Anyone else in a parent group that would like to share? Okay.

Authorizers. So, I was in an authorizer group and one of the things we noticed was, actually for pretty much all the schools, there was really a lack of cohesion.

It was difficult to determine how students would go through the programs at these schools. And one of the comments was that children are really expected to jump to different kinds of learning, which was concerning for them, as an authorizer. Aimee, do you want to share the comment you were making as we were wrapping up?

Because I think it's an important one.

- [Female 1] Oh yeah, just about the great schools' ratings. I think for a lot of these kinds of things it's kind of like Yelp, right, where there's always going to be some extremes and they don't necessarily capture the full population experience with the school as much as, say, I don't know, if you did like a walk-through of the school or if you sat in on like a parent's meeting or a community event or something.

Which I know is outside the bounds of the activity. But, as an authorizer, I think I would want to get a read of those things too, beyond just the quick Google search.

- Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Anything else from an authorizer's perspective? That was either a positive impression or something that was like, "Oh, I want..." as Hannah shared, "I want to kick the tires on that one a little bit."

- [Kevin] I think the third school was more appealing than the other two, if you had to like rate them. It had more student-focused curriculum and instruction language. The other two just seemed like they were just big ideas that were half-baked and they didn't have a comprehensive plan.

- Yeah, flailing a bit, throwing a whole bunch of spaghetti against the wall and seeing what would stick. Sherri, were you going to say something?

- [Sherri] Oh, I agree with what he said, you know. But to go back to the comments, even as an authorizer, you know, yes, you have those outliers where you have a really disgruntled person who may be just venting, as a comment. But from my business learning standpoint, I've always learned that even that is an arrow to something that might be some worth digging into further, that there may be something there to that disgruntled person.

And that you always dig through all of those in order to find the real truth.

- Great feedback, Sherri. Thank you. What about the other authorizer groups?



- [Robin] We agreed that School 1 tried to tackle too much, there was just too much in their curriculum and it wasn't cohesive enough. Although, from a positive perspective, our group thought they were at least being ambitious and they were trying to create a unique student-centered culture, there were concerns about their test scores, they wanted more information about that and they wanted to learn more about parent engagement.

And we only talked about the first two schools. And then in terms of the second school like they seemed to have an emphasis on inclusivity and meeting students where they are, providing a supportive culture and extracurricular activities. But the website was not visually appealing and it wasn't accessible to parents.

- All right. Thanks, Robin. Anyone else from an authorizer's perspective? All right, let's talk about teachers. Those of you who are looking to apply to a school, what were some of your impressions of these schools?

- [Female 2] In my group, we were teachers, for the moment. And I thought a really interesting point that Kevin brought up was we really only had time to look at School 1 but, within School 1, there really was a lack of student representation, even on the website.

Just in terms of pictures and it didn't seem like that was a priority for the school. And, as a teacher, that might be a red flag. And then there also was a data point there around only 50% of teachers at that school had 3 or more years of experience. And that was another thing that jumped out to our group. And, in general, kind of an interesting connection to the authorizer group as well where one thing that really drove a negative impression is there was a review from a student, which we know sometimes, like we said, there's those outlier reviews that are really negative and you can kind of brush them off.

But this was just a really well-written negative review by a student that pointed out really concrete examples of not being able to reach the leadership team that really drove a big impression for our group. As a teacher, if a student has that negative of a review of the school, that might make us not necessarily want to apply there.

- All right, gotcha.

- [Female 3] My group had similar kinds of things. The limited information was definitely viewed as a challenge. But there were even simple things we wanted to know about like, "What's the mission and vision of the school?" And that didn't always come through but that's can be really important when you're looking to apply somewhere. So, we generated a lot of questions that we would want to ask the school if we were to go interview there, just to follow up around the culture.

The group talked about really wanting things like updated, technology, autonomy, resources, making sure they're going to have a supportive curriculum. And some of that kind of information wasn't coming through really well on the websites. But being updated, like current, was also really important. Saying like, "If that hasn't been updated since 2019, we're not going there."

So, "They can't keep their website up to date, what does that say about the rest of the school?" So, the kind of overall impressions were meh...

- Any other impressions from a teacher's perspective that you want to share? Would you have applied to any of these schools? So, anything bubble up for you in both looking through the information packets, thinking about it from your perspective, hearing the impressions from other groups and other roles?

Anything that bubbles up for you in terms of takeaways from this activity?

- I would say the more information, the better. I think School 2 and School 3 had a lot of information in regards to diversity and just everything that's happening at the school. And I think, you know, from either perspective, an authorizer, a parent, or a teacher, I think the more information you can gather on their website rather than, you know, researching several other websites, the better.

And the more you can show that you are doing something and you are current, you know, with what's happening, you know, in the community around you and in the world around you, I think the better. And I think schools who are on the leading edge, you know, that's top-of-mind for them.

- Yeah. Absolutely, Kevin.

- [Male 1] Yeah. I'd have to agree with Kevin, I was the guy that yelled, "Data." I think it's extremely important. I also see on a lot of websites, not just charter school websites, but just outdated data or data that's not really, you know, used to be making any decisions. I saw one, I can't remember number two or number three possibly, the student...the teacher ratio was 10 to 1. That's pretty darn important.

I know, in my area, that's the main reason, I think, I believe it's number one reason why parents choose their children to go to that school for the 10 to 1 ratio versus, you know, 16, 20 or so in the public schools. So, just up-to-date data that's really clean and, you know, right front and center, maybe on the first page, second page, it's pretty important to me.

- Absolutely. What else? What else were some of your takeaways? We had a chat share that Marie shared the importance of face-to-face conversations and looking at things together, visiting the campus, perhaps going there and feeling the vibe of the school.

You know, one takeaway for school leaders, maybe two, just downloading the information that's available on the web about your own school and looking at it together with your staff, that may give you some different impressions than just looking at it yourself.

I also want to share, which I think is really interesting, is, even when we come at this from a similar perspective, whether we're a teacher or a parent or an authorizer, we all bring very different areas of focus to what we're honing in on. You know, Scott hones in immediately on data.

As a researcher, that would be what I would hone in on. As a parent though, I would hone in on different things, like what are the after-school opportunities? What is the culture like? Is my son or daughter going to be accepted and are they going to get along with the other kids? So, there's, as Hannah shared, there's reputation for different stakeholders but also those different roles and perspectives drive very many things that folks are going to be looking toward.

And you're not going to be able to please everyone and you're not going to be able to meet everyone's need, you're going to kill yourself trying to. But what we did want to share are what two school leaders have found to be some very practical, very universal tactics and strategies to really providing enough information, good information built on very positive, very solid program offerings for parents, for teachers, for authorizers, etc.

So, I'd like to turn it over, at this time, to Hannah to introduce our panelists. We're very thankful that they agreed to join us today. So, Hannah?

- Yes. Thank you, Aimee. This is probably the most exciting part of our webinar, I think you guys are going to learn a lot. So, we have two wonderful school leaders here with us. Courtney, if you could go to the next slide. Again, Dr. LaRetha Odumosu who is the executive director of Charter School of New Castle Middle School, Delaware.

And Ryan Gall, the executive director of Victory College Prep in Indiana. So, we'll start off with if each of you could introduce yourself, you know, how long you've been in education, say a little bit about your school, and maybe what the reputation was like when you came on to the school.

Let's start with Dr. O.

- [Dr. Odumosu] Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to share and to participate in the study and be able to participate on the panel. So, thank you so much for having me. As Hannah shared, my name is Dr. LaRetha Odumosu, I generally go by Dr.

O, and I am entering my 17th year in education and my 12th year as a school leader. Just a quick background of me. I started my formal charter career, and I've been in charter schools this entire time, so started my formal educational career as a high-school English teacher in Trenton, New Jersey.

I then moved into the assistant principal role at a charter management organization, a high-performing charter management organization out in the Philadelphia area. And then I came here to Delaware, first as a middle school principal and then as the executive director over the middle school. And just to kind of share a quick background with the reputation of the current school that I'm in.

I was coming from Philadelphia charter management organization, I knew very little about the Delaware landscape and knew even less about the school, outside of some familiar people who I had met through another program. So, when I came in, the school was in the midst of partnering with another school in the area and they were seeking to create a management organization.

After about 4 years, both schools realized that's not going to work for the schools, and then both schools went back to being independent charters. In terms of the reputation that I walked into the school, it was a K-8 school, I walked into, as I shared, serving as the middle school principal. And both campuses kind of had different reputations.

I shared with Aimee and Hannah during the study that I would have moments...I didn't actually realize the reputation of the school until I met people in the local area and people would literally stop me if I was wearing school paraphernalia and share with me negative

information that they had heard about the school. I didn't know that, I just knew that this was a school that was going to be operating within a budding new charter management organization, it seemed very exciting, but the reputation of the school really really preceded itself.

Specifically the middle school. Students would come to the elementary school, that was a K-4, Delaware. As most schools, the elementary program runs from K-5 and the middle school starts at sixth grade. But students were actually choosing and parents were choosing to leave the school at fourth grade because that's when they would be entering the middle school.

So, we were seeing this drop off from fourth to fifth grade, the reputation was just not great. People had a lot of negative things to say about the school, whether it was parent complaints, whether it was student behavior, whether it was the location and the building itself. So, the school definitely had a negative...particularly the middle school had a pretty negative reputation among the state.

And we also entered under a bit of a scandal, I'll say, with the leaders ousted. So, there was just a number of conversations happening about the school at that time.

- Dr. O. And Ryan, would you...

- [Ryan] Yeah. So, thing one, thanks for using a photo from 8 years ago, it's incredibly flattering that you put that up there. It's a constant reminder that the bags under my eyes and my hairline have not aged well. So, thanks for that. I think that's probably the best place for us to start. My name is Ryan Gall, I am originally from Flint, Michigan. I am a first-generation college student.

And ever since I was a kid, my parents told me, "You are going to be a teacher," because it's been my passion. I started in Detroit public schools in 2002 and moved to Indianapolis, which is where I am now, in 2004. I've worked in Detroit public schools, I've worked in a national charter network. And then, at my current school, I've been here for 15 years.

Our school is in its 17th year of operation. We are a K-12 school with about 1,000 students. Eighty eight percent of our students are students of color, 88% of our students are economically-disadvantaged. And we've worked really really hard to create a great program for them. It hasn't been easy.

My story is very similar to Dr. O's. When I first came, the school was failing on all fronts. We were a D school, we would've missed enrollment by over 150 kids the previous year. Three weeks before school started, 40% of our teaching positions were still vacant. And similar to Dr. O, I walked in with a star in my eyes and like a dream in my heart that we were going to have a great school.

Three years ago, I led the charge to make a break from our charter management company. We were part of a multi-state charter network, we realized that we were sending that charter network a million dollars a year to run and manage our school. And, at the same time, we were mediocre and had a mediocre to negative reputation in the community.

And we felt like we could really turn that around. And it's interesting, I remember now some of the conversations I've had in. When the National Charter School Resource Center first



called me, they said, "Hey, we heard you were school in distress that really turned things around." And I said, "If anybody told you they've turned things around during COVID, they are an absolute liar." Like we haven't had state testing, we haven't had any real measures of accountability, the only thing that's changed is we changed the name of our school.

We changed the color of our building, we put some banners outside, and I started cultivating local relationships. In that same time, we increased our enrollment to exceed enrollment targets. We've had 95% satisfaction on the Insight Survey for our teaching staff and we've had parents and community members wanting to invest in us.

And literally, the only thing we did was change the name on the building, the face who was leading the school, and we spent a lot of time thinking about our reputation. So, I've heard you guys talk about a lot of different things today, and I think like all those things ring true when we first made a break for it. I ran into just a random insurance claims adjuster, and if you stay with me, I promise, I'll make this connect.

He said, "When we're looking to insure buildings, one of the first things we look at is the flower box out front. And if they're changing the flower box out front in the marquee, then they must be in a good place because they have time, effort, and energy to spend on the marquee and the flower box out front. Schools that are in distress aren't able to spend time on those things." And I held on to that, I was like, "Oh man, we're going to celebrate everything we can, we're going to put banners up on the side of the building, we're going to think about how we carry our reputation and how we can market ourselves as being great, and we're just going to speak being great into existence on all fronts."

And it's interesting, I remember, when I talked to Hannah and Aimee, this was supposed to be a call about schools in distress. And I think, as they've gotten their findings, it's become a how your reputation can be one of the things that lifts you out of distress. And I'm incredibly flattered and honored to be here today.

- Thanks so much for that, Ryan. Dr. O, we would love for you to get into a little bit some of the tools that you use to change that narrative once you realize the school was...you're getting some negative feedback, as you're out, and you need to make some changes.

- Absolutely. So, I would say, initially, because I was walking into a new school, my focus was the school. Right? There were a number of systems and just staff, as Ryan shared with his, every number was just in the wrong direction in terms of discipline, in terms of enrollment maintenance, or enrollment retention, so, keeping the same students.

So, it wasn't necessarily a drop-off per se in enrollment but just keeping the same students from year to year. We saw that variation happening in addition to that drop off from fourth to fifth grade. So really, my focus was actually not about the school's reputation, it was fixing the school. So really, I kind of did the head-in-the-ground bit and really focused my efforts on fixing the school. And one thing that I noticed from the jump, in addition to ensuring that we had goals for our academic results, ensuring that we had goals for our student behavior, was to make sure that our parents were involved.

So, our parents, at the time...specifically, and I always specify the middle school because, even though we were K through 8, we are K-8, actually my co-executive director is on the call, Miss Valentine, our schools were completely in different places. The campuses were in

different places. So, at the middle school, the parent behavior was just to be very negative and just often kind of bring complaints to either the DOE or bring complaints to the school leader.

So, we really want to focus on engaging our parents. So, that actually became our third pillar. So, literally with every goal we had, an academic goal, we had a school culture goal, and then we had an engagement goal to involve our parents, our school dynamic goal. So, we really made efforts to bring our parents into the building.

Parents are used to coming to the building for negative things, so, we said, "Okay. Our parents need to come for some positive events." So, every month, we had an event geared towards getting parents in the building. And we actually put a lot of time and effort into those events. So, these were not throwaways, we did not treat these events as something as an afterthought. We really sat there and planned very very intentionally for when parents were in the building.

We wanted them to have a positive experience. Eventually, about year 3, I used Ryan and I used a similar tactic of changing the school name. And we changed the name because we wanted to move in a different direction from the school's old reputation. So, I would say the main tools that we utilized, and I'll get into what we didn't utilize and the lessons learned, but the main tools we utilized were actually fixing the school, making it a space that the staff wanted to come to, making it a space that the students were excited to come to, making it a space that the parents were engaged in.

And that resulted in a word-of-mouth transformation. So, it wasn't from the outside in, it really was from the inside out where we just engaged our parents, they got invested, and then they kind of spread the word. And then we had these moments where people were catching...even to this day, we still say, "Charter School New Castle's

[inaudible] the best kept secret," but sometimes, in certain spurs, the word is getting out. So, really, we focus on fixing the school and we made sure that our stakeholders were invested. And then that resulted in kind of an organic shift with the school's reputation.

- Yeah. I think I'm hearing from both of you, you know, "You can't just change the name of a school and everything gets better," right? Both of you did the groundwork, the leg work, and then built on that momentum and were able to kind of take a new step with that. Ryan, I'd love for you to expand on...it looks like you put something in the chat, but expand on, you know, those tools that you were using and that work you were doing.

- Like what's the best way to build your reputation? Be a good school. Like period. So, but like sometimes that takes a while for those seeds to take root. So, like step one, make sure you have the foundations to be a good school. Do you have the right staffing structure? Do you have the right systems procedures?

Do you have the right targets that you're benchmarking against? But then, until you can get there, and it's a long journey and like, as we all come out of COVID, that journey has been either paused or delayed or lengthened, like I started asking ourselves, "What do we already do really well that we don't celebrate enough?" And I started using the language with our leadership team and our board, "We need to find ways to make the mundane magical."

So, like, if we do Donuts with Dad's, it needs to be like this banging event that's really special and meaningful for anybody who shows up. And then we need to publicize the heck out of it. You know, we had it for years, we've always had a 90% graduation rate or higher. And it was just part of who we were and we never really capitalized on how great that was for our kids, relative to Indianapolis public schools and what we can do there.

So, we started celebrating the hangout. We put these giant banners on the side of the building that just celebrated some of the things we did well. And then, as soon as I was able, I hired a director of development and communications, somebody who...so, like always our website and our social media was just managed by like school secretary or somebody in the school who had a passion for it.

We found a way, entry-level positions, somebody was eager and hungry to staff that in our school and to begin making marketing and communication efforts central to what we do. We added a news page to our website. We started really thinking about, "How can we really celebrate who we are and what makes us special and how can we share that with as many people as possible?" And then our family coordinator who also is like our registrar and does family outreach, we started investing more time...like she was kind of an afterthought, "Go out, recruit the kids, host the family events."

We started bringing her to our leadership team meetings, making her central to our work, and we shared our enrollment goals with everybody. And then when we hit like bumpy spots in the road with teachers, let's say, we had a fight in the school, then, you know, I would make sure that I would go in front of the staff and we would say, "Look, this always happens this time of year. We can weather this. This is an outlier, it's not who we are."

So, like always thinking about...you know, a lot of times leaders make a decision but they never think about how that decision has to be carried out to the different stakeholders in the community. We made how we communicate key decisions key events, key things that are happening central to any decision-making process that we made. A lot of times, as a leader, you worry about making the right decision. I make a lot of wrong decisions but I make sure that I at least package them up so they sound good and feel good along the way so that we can generate more support and excitement as we make decisions to move the school forward.

- Dr. O, if you want to comment on anything that Ryan said, feel free. And then let's move into some lessons learned about the experience.

- Absolutely. I was going to actually piggyback on everything Ryan said because everything that he mentioned are the things that we did not do, which would be my lessons learned. Right? So, those are the pieces, seriously. You know, we spent a lot of time on fixing the school on this organic kind of grass-root transformation but I think we missed some time in being very intentional with the external marketing efforts.

So, and what happens when you do that is sometimes you can, I would say, take a hit if you know. If you do have the one parent who might have a very, you know, negative experience with the bus company...and, you know, most charter schools don't have their own buses, right, we outsource our bus company, but if a parent has a negative experience with a bus company, then that might be the comment that they want to make on social media.

So, I think sometimes, when you solely focus on the grass-root word-of-mouthpiece, the impact could be you are very impacted when there's a negative comment by a parent. And you don't want to be swayed or you don't want your whole school reputation to be swayed by one experience that, for the most part, you know, those experiences happen and we're able to fix it, we're able to respond, but most people don't go back and say, "Oh, the school fixed it.

Everything's great now," you know, you kind of just have this negative comment lingering in the atmosphere. And we haven't...again, one parent comment isn't going to take an entire school down but I think, when you do the grass-root thing, it does make you more susceptible to those moments. Versus making sure that you're engaging parents, making sure that you have a great school, and then making sure that you actually have a strong marketing plan or a strong branding plan. And that is something that we are now focusing on.

But I've been in this position or been at the school for 7 years. So, we're now shifting on it and we're now focusing in on it. And I can't even say I would've have had the capacity within the first 3 or 4 years to really do this, I really did have to keep my head focused on the school. But that's a lesson learned. I think the lesson learned is we probably would've been a little bit more intentional earlier on to actually create that branding experience.

So, while we changed our name, we didn't necessarily change a lot of our...we did get a new logo but we didn't take advantage of the moments that we had as much as we could have. So, we definitely revamped some social-media efforts, we definitely had some bulletins or billboards and things of that nature. But that's a lesson learned that I probably would have added that alongside the efforts that we actually did undertake in terms of the grass roots or organize or internal switch from within.

- Thanks for that. And Ryan, how about you? Some lessons learned?

- I think, one, like going on your own is not that scary. I think that's one of the first lessons. Like I was terrified to do this. We left the management company...and I was a principal for 10 years, I thought, "Oh my gosh, I don't know what I'm doing. This is terrifying." One, it's not that scary. Like accounting finance, operations, facilities, like it's just about paying bills and fixing stuff when it breaks and being proactive.

But like the biggest lesson I learned is never walk into a room wondering what people are going to think about the decision you make. Like anytime we did anything, early on, we're doing stuff, trying to build our reputation, build who we are. And I would lead an initiative or something and I wouldn't pre-alert anyone. So, like I think the biggest lesson learned is make sure that my board knows what we're trying to do with our reputation.

Make sure key influential teachers and leaders know. Make sure key parents know. And then, when anything rolls out publicly, we already have a coalition of support behind us. I think the other lesson is, while we had to have a face that was local to build our reputation, we also had to get people at every level of the organization to be in a prominent place. So, we started nominating our teachers for every award we could in the city and we started sending our kids to every workshop and field trip that we could.



And I started appearing places whereas I was like, "Doctor, I just had my head down in my school." I didn't even know what was happening in local news because I was just buried in my school. But like you have to have somebody that's out meeting with people at community parks and meeting with the authorizer and meeting with other charter-school leaders so that it almost is to a point where people can't ignore you because you're making such a splash.

I think a lot of times we think about reputation as being in the media, and we realized our reputation, like Dr. O said, was more about word of mouth at multiple levels of the organization. Parents, teaching community. If you're in a place that has transition programs like TFA, like just being seen is a great place for those people to be.

And then like we did a bunch of other crazy stuff too but I don't know if that makes sense for this webinar. So, maybe have me back for the sequel and we'll share some of that other stuff.

- Thanks for that, Ryan. And let's move into what do you do now to maintain your school's reputation. Dr. O, feel free to respond to anything Ryan just said. And then we can move into, you know, what's happening now. What are you challenged with? What are you working on?

What's working well? All of that...

- I'll say I'm doing the same thing. Right? I'm focused on ensuring that the school is running at a high level, focused on still engaging our families. And as I shared earlier, we're now thinking through a little bit more of our marketing plan and making sure that we are building on the relationships that we have. So, that's one thing that is newer, in the past 2 years, so, you know, as Ryan mentioned, those relationships with TFA.

John just wrote in the chat, and he's also a great just ally for the school and he's our part of our authorizer group with DOE. So, really making sure that we are continuing to keep the relationship strong with our stakeholders in addition to the stakeholders inside the building. Right?

So, you have the champions inside the building, your teachers, your parents, your students, but then you also have your champions outside of the building. For us, John is definitely a champion, having those relationships with TFA. So, making sure that we're maintaining those relationships and that we're taking advantage of opportunities to participate in other groups outside of the school. I think I'm now in a space where I can breathe a little bit. Right?

The school has been running fairly well. So, we can spend a little bit of time going to more conferences and engaging in panels and things of that nature. But I do think that it's important to ensure that the school continues to operate at a high level, that you continue to be there and engage with your families and that you're not negating what's happening at the home front, per se, as you ensure that the school's reputation continues to remain strong.

So, I think continuing to make sure that we have a strong program and then starting to build on the foundation that we've already created would be what we're working on now.

- Ryan, how about you guys?

- I think, from a reputation perspective, is know where you want to go. I think if you're a school in distress or you don't have a great reputation, the first couple of years are "I don't want to be bad" I think becomes your mantra. And if you stay stuck there figuring out like how to get out of crisis, you'll never have an on-ramp for sustainability.

So, for us, we just went through strategic planning. And it's figuring out, "Where do we want to be in 5 years and what's going on in the landscape around us?" So, like what's important now? Like we know Indianapolis public schools is the largest district in the state serving kids, and we live inside their districts. So, figuring out what we want our relationship to be with them, what we want our relationship to be with the rest of the charter community, and how we want to cultivate that relationship is incredibly important.

Instead of just saying, "We don't want to be bad," or "we want to be good," it's figuring out, "where do we want to be in 5 years?" and, "what does that mean internally, in our program, and what messages do we need to be framing and cultivating with key players around the city?"

- Thanks, Ryan. And thanks both of you for all of your insights on this. I'm sure it's very helpful to all of the schools we have participating today. I'd love to pause here and see if there are any questions in the audience. If you want to just enter in the chat any questions for these panelists, they'd be happy...we're getting some praise in the comments, but...yeah, if there are any questions, just let us know.

All right. And we'll have another pause for questions towards the end, but I think we can move forward, Courtney, with the next slide.

So, I think what we heard from both Ryan and Dr. O is developing a plan, developing your goals, cluing everyone into where you want to be, and maybe what their tasks are are really important. We do want to emphasize though that, first, you need to understand where your school is on this decline spectrum.

So, if your school is distressed in multiple areas, what you should be focusing on is being a good school, addressing and investing in those areas, rather than going straight for targeting that reputation. For schools that are not declining, developing a community relations action plan can really help you prepare for the environment that your school is in and start to build that positive reputation and that positive legacy.

As we've said, reputation reflects both what's going on internally at the school and the public's reaction to the school, encompassing that external environment where the school lives. So, how can you express those wins that your school is having? You know, both Ryan and Dr. O talked about that, how can you display those wins? Maybe your graduation rate is continually high, how are you expressing that to your community and to prospective students?

Where are maybe some points of concern that you don't really have an eye on right now? How can you continue to monitor those? You want to come together as a team and identify goals and objectives for the school's reputation and write in detail how you're going to get there, talk in detail how you're going to get there. Write out tasks, resources, timelines, how often you'll be checking in.

Unfortunately, that race of reputation doesn't stop. So, how can you assess how you're doing in an ongoing way and build it into your everyday work? We encourage you all to block some time after this to meet as a team and discuss. Maybe you go through that exercise that we did earlier where you're putting yourself in the perspective of a parent or an authorizer or a teacher.

How's your school looking? How is it feeling to those different groups? And thinking about, you know, where do you want to go with your reputation? What are your goals and how can you get there? All of those things would be really helpful to schools looking to do that. So, I think we can move on to the next slide, which is another slide of questions. And I wonder, Courtney, maybe if we should keep moving and then people can answer questions in the chat...

- So, we do have one question from Marie, "What are some of the ways each of you engaged parents in the reimagining, rebuilding of the school and its community?"

- I mean I think one way is just inviting parents in. So, coming from being an assistant principal into the principal role, that was just an area that I was a little bit more nervous about, just inviting parents in and having to be in the building and things of that nature.

But I think one of the simple things is just inviting them in and giving them an opportunity, sending out surveys to get feedback. I actually get really passionate about my parents surveys, so, like I get sad when I see no one fills out my survey. I'm like, "I really want your feedback." And I think also, when you actually get that survey feedback, being intentional about sharing with families, "This is the feedback that you gave us and this is how we're incorporating it," because then they know that you're actually listening to them.

So, I would say the first piece is just outreach and reaching out and giving them opportunities to give feedback.

- I go the same thing. We didn't do anything like brilliant here. I think we have a parent on our board, our parent coordinator did a lot of individual parent outreach, and then any big changes...we work our butts off to do to average 95% parent conference completion, like the rise of Zoom has made that so much more effective with our teachers.

But then we make sure that all of the talking points for teachers at parent conference meetings are really really intentional. So, I think sometimes the teacher goes in and they just kind of make their own plan for a parent conference meeting. We have a set of school talking points, a set of grade-level talking points, and a set of individual child talking points that all teachers roll out through all conferences. And so, we know the teacher is the best point of contact for the parent.

And so, anything that we're doing to market, reinforce our message, we run through that parent conference because we know we get four touch points a year. And then, in addition, we do some of the traditional stuff of surveys, bringing families in for family nights. But like those conferences, we've really leveraged and put like a whole school spin on what needs to be rolled out during that.

And then, Kevin, I have a terrible answer that is not enough. And, you know, we were talking about you guys in your breakout, doctor and I...like I don't feel like last year, I'll just be really

candid, I advanced our organization at all when it came to anything. We treaded water for a year. You know, we had kids in and out of school, as everybody did, all year long but, again, what we did was, every time we changed our school structure last year, everybody got a personal phone call, we set targets of what percentage of kids we wanted in person, and like it was more about helping parents understand their child was going to be safe.

And now we're trying to figure out what's the on ramp back to a standard parent relationship post...I don't want to say "post pandemic," mid pandemic maybe is the right way to say that, at this point. Which isn't funny but is terrible.

- I would just also add building in some systems to contact parents. So, in addition to, I agree with Ryan, making the most of those conferences, but a couple of systems that we included is just teachers. You have to reach out, I'm in the secondary school, so, teachers, you have to reach out to at least seven parents a week. It should be positive phone calls.

So, making sure, at every level, that you're building in that parent outreach so it's not just coming from the full school community but they're also building relationships with those individual teachers. And kind of having that be a system would be another piece that I'd add in there.

- Yeah. I've been looking for the right time to say this, I don't know how to say it the right way. I think like the better relation...so, I don't know who our audience is today, if you're an assistant principal, if you're a teacher, if you're a principal, if you're an executive director. But, at all stages of leadership, I've made sure I had a really good relationship with whoever controlled our money and made sure that the money person and I were always on the same page with what our priorities are.

So, if it's parent contact, then we need to make sure that, somewhere in the budget, we have a school messenger line to do robo calls and text messages and we have a school app. And like I always overhire for teachers. So, if our payroll budget is a million dollars, I'll hire at 1.2 million because I know I'm going to have turnover and I never want to hire a substitute teacher and I know that that's going to protect not only our reputation but...well, yeah, our reputation because teachers are a heck of a lot happier if you don't bring in subs, and your culture is a heck of a lot better.

So, I think like I can't stress enough, like you and your finance person need to be in lockstep on what your priorities are because like the easiest way to tell what a school's priorities are is not to interview the leader, it's to pull the budget. And the budget's going to tell you, if you funded it, then it matters. If you didn't fund it, then, honestly, it didn't matter enough to move the money around. And that's how like, when we got to the director of development and communication, we knew this was important and how people perceive us is going to drive enrollment is going to drive more money is going to drive teacher turnover.

And so, we have to continue to shape and frame that image. And I say that as somebody who's a lifelong educator, and having to think this way was like a whole mind shift for me when we moved to being independent.

- Well, Ryan and Dr. O, we could probably sit here and listen to you all afternoon but we know you're running schools, as many of the people on this call, so, I'm going to start

wrapping us up. Althea [SP] and Sherri, we will follow up with you with some ideas of organizations you can connect with.

And I'm going to move us along. So, we have some really great pre-recorded videos to help you walk through the indicators of distress work. So, I just dropped a link in the chat that has a whole suite of resources for you to have conversations about this within your organization.

And we, at the Resource Center, have been busy the past a few months. The resources on the screen are just a handful of what's available on our website, so, you can turn to us if you're looking for information on founding Native American charter schools, developing programs for English learners, looking for a primer on serving students with disabilities, or how to amp up your community engagement work.

So, you can find all of this on the Resource Center's website. We would love to hear what you thought of this event. I just dropped another link in the chat, that is a survey to tell us what you thought of this event. We would really love for you to just take a couple moments to complete that survey that I just dropped in there.

And thank you to Dr. O and Ryan for sharing your contact information. You can reach the National Charter School Resource Center on our website, at [charterschoolcenter.ed.gov](http://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov). And if you have any questions about this presentation or resources offered by the Resource Center, you may reach us at [contact-us@charterschoolcenter.org](mailto:contact-us@charterschoolcenter.org). And that's it.

Thank you, Dr. O and Ryan, for sharing your time and your ideas with us. Thank you to Hannah and Aimee for guiding us through this presentation. And our deepest gratitude to all of our participants for joining us. We know how full your plates are these days, especially now, and we're just grateful that you took time out of your busy day to join us. Please, stay well to everyone.

If you're getting snow this weekend, another snowpocalypse, stay safe. And we look forward to seeing you all soon on a future Resource Center webinar. So, thank you, everyone, so much and have a great afternoon.