

Introduction

Under contract #215U030017-05 to the U.S. Department of Education, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the University of Minnesota's Center for School Change (NGA/CSC) provided assistance to six states—Arizona, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Utah—to help them develop school choice policies consistent with their goals and theories of action for educating all students to high standards. Assistance, provided between March 1, 2005 and September 30, 2006, included:

- Meeting with state teams to develop goals for school choice policies and begin to draft a work plan for enacting such policies.
- Holding an Institute on August 11-12, 2005 in Snowbird, Utah to provide state teams with information intended to help them craft the most effective policies and assistance with finalizing their work plans.
- Providing ongoing or “as-needed” technical assistance to state teams via phone, email, or meeting.

To evaluate the assistance provided by NGA and CSC, NGA contracted with Cross & Joftus, LLC.

Overview of Findings

In summary, the major findings from the formative evaluation include the following:

- 1) All six participating states made progress toward achieving many—although not all—of the goals they outlined in their state action plans required under the grant. Five of the six states passed new choice legislation (e.g., charter school districts, vouchers, virtual school) during the project period.
- 2) Most of the states' action plans could have been strengthened by clarifying goals, activities, and assignment of responsibilities.
- 3) Grant managers (usually the education policy advisor to the governor) from each of the states believe the grant to have had a positive impact on school-choice policy in their states. Although no state met all its goals, all interviewees described their states' policy progress as meaningful and a result of the assistance provided by NGA/CSC.
- 4) In addition to policy gains for school choice, the grant managers from most states noted that a positive shift in the public's views about school choice had occurred since the inception of the grant.

- 5) The six participating states valued the support provided by NGA/CSC through the state team meetings, individual consultation with project leaders from NGA and CSC, and the state policy institute. Interviewees rated the assistance from NGA/CSC in 2005 as 4.38 (out of 5) and in 2006, 4.50 (out of 5).
- 6) States' recommendations for improving the support offered by NGA/CSC focused on increasing communication both between NGA/CSC and the states as well as among the states themselves.

Consistent with the research questions, specific findings are presented below in two categories—state policy progress related to school choice and technical assistance provided by NGA/CSC.

Evaluation Methodology

Two research questions drove the Cross & Jofus evaluation:

- 1) What progress has the state made in establishing and realizing school-choice policy goals during the course of involvement with the NGA/CSC project?
- 2) How effective do state teams view the assistance provided by NGA/CSC?

The evaluation conducted by Cross & Jofus was formative—collected data and evaluator findings were given to NGA/CSC as they became available to help improve the service provided to states. In addition, state progress was measured by the policy process taken and policy outcomes achieved, not by any impact on schools or student achievement. The goal of the evaluation was to determine whether the six states were progressing toward meeting school-choice policy goals and whether NGA/CSC provided useful and relevant technical assistance.

Therefore, to conduct the evaluation, Cross & Jofus focused on states' policy accomplishments related to their goals and state teams' views about the assistance they received from NGA/CSC. To do so, the evaluators used five strategies for collecting and analyzing data:

- 1) Analysis of NGA/CSC administered written surveys to state team members following each state team meeting;
- 2) Preview and analysis of NGA/CSC written survey of all participants at the August 2005 Institute;
- 3) Phone interview with at least one member from each of the six state teams (a) following the 2005 Institute and (b) at the end of the project (October 2006);¹

¹ No one from Arizona was interviewed in 2005.

- 4) Analysis of state work plans; and
- 5) Review of NGA/CSC analyses of state policy progress.

Data and findings from each source were given to NGA/CSC as they became available. Data from all sources were synthesized and analyzed for this final report.

Findings

Consistent with the research questions, findings are presented below in two major sections—state progress in developing and implementing policy and communication strategies and assistance provided by NGA/CSC.

State Progress

As part of the grant, each participating state drafted action plans outlining what they hoped to accomplish and how they expected to accomplish it. States focused their attention and legislative agendas on a variety of issues related to school choice, depending on their political climate and existing school-choice policy environment. As discussed below, the six participating states made progress toward achieving many—although not all—of the goals they outlined in their state action plans. Some of the major state policy accomplishments and activities of this project include the following:

- **Arizona** - communications strategies and four choice related bills;
- **Minnesota** – charter school board training, communications about Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, and legislative strategy development;
- **Mississippi** - legislation, which established a virtual public school, created a dual enrollment program and extended charter school legislation (HB 1130), and testimony before the legislative charter school study commission;
- **New Mexico** –legislation to establish charter districts (HB1101) and create a statewide charter school authorizing entity (SB600); establishment of a state charter school office and training for state authorizers and the new state charter office staff;
- **South Carolina** – passage of Act Number 274 that creates a state charter school district and related training; and
- **Utah** - legislation that provides vouchers of up to \$5,500 to students with disabilities to attend private schools(HB 249).

This section details the specific findings related to the states’ action plans and policy activities during 2005 and 2006.

State Action Plans

Teams from six states met individually with NGA/CSC between March 1, 2005 and July 30, 2005 to develop plans for improving their school-choice policy environment. This analysis reviewed the goals, activities, and assignment of responsibilities of the six state plans. Overall, the plans were rated in the mid-range for having clear and specific goals, but most of the plans could have been strengthened by clarifying goals or activities and assignment of responsibilities.

Goals. Five of the six state plans included goals. To determine the clarity and focus of the goals of the five state plans including them, each of the five plans were rated on a scale of 1 (not clear and/or not focused) to 3 (clear and focused). The rating was given by considering the goals of each plan as a whole, not by assigning specific scores to each goal for each criterion and calculating the score. On average, the five plans received a score of 2.2, with one plan receiving a score of “1,” one plan receiving a score of “2,” and three plans receiving a score of “3.” (The average score drops to “2” if the one plan without goals is assigned a score of “0.”)

Activities and Assignment of Responsibilities. Five of six plans described activities to be completed, created a timeline, and assigned individuals responsibility for completing activities. The sixth plan (which had a goal that was rated a “1”) had “potential strategies,” “issues for further study,” “potential areas of agreement,” and “questions to consider.” It did not list specific activities to be completed or timelines or assign responsibility for completion. To determine the clarity and focus of the activities and their alignment with stated goals, each of the five plans were rated on a scale of 1 (not clear, specific, and aligned with goals) to 3 (clear, specific, and aligned with goals). The rating was given by considering the activities of each plan as a whole, not by assigning specific scores to each activity for each criterion and calculating the score. On average the five plans received a score of 2.2, with one plan receiving a score of “1,” one plan receiving a score of “2,” and three plans receiving a score of “3.” (The average score drops to “2” if the one plan without activities is assigned a score of “0.”)

Policy Activities

As part of the project, NGA/CSC produced profiles of the policy context and progress made by each state relative to its school choice goals. Cross & Jofus reviewed these profiles and selected information to present a brief overview of each state’s efforts in enhancing school choice for its students.

Arizona. Arizona has many choice options for its students, through one of the largest charter school systems (consisting of conversion and start-up schools) in the country and scholarship programs in the form of tax credits. For the Arizona team, helping students and their families make sense of all these choices was a key priority. The project partners met with this state team and provided advice on communicating with families. This input has been used to help Arizona develop communication strategies. In addition, the state

has successfully passed four pieces of legislation during the project period that should result in expanding access to school choice:

- 2005 HB 2623: Corporate Tax Credit This expands upon Arizona's preexisting tax credit system to allow businesses to receive tax credits by contributing scholarship funds to the state. There is a \$5,000 maximum contribution per business per year, and businesses receive a matching write-off on their taxes for their contribution.
- 2006 SB 1164: Displaced Pupils Choice Grants. This bill establishes the Displaced Students Choice Grant Program to allow eligible students to apply for and receive a grant for redemption at a grant school. Overall, \$2.5 million has been allocated for this program. The individual grant value has been capped at \$5,000, and the bill limits the Choice Grant Program to 500 students.
- 2006 HB 2676. This law establishes a funded state program of scholarships for pupils with disabilities; provides such students with the option of attending or receiving a scholarship to any qualified school. The Legislature allocated \$2.5 million for one year of this program.
- 2006 SB 1499. This bill creates a corporate income tax credit for contributions made to school tuition organizations. Corporations may claim dollar-for-dollar credits. The credit is capped at \$5 million annually.

Minnesota. With a wide range of school choice laws already in place, the Minnesota team used the project to improve implementation of its current laws. With assistance from NGA/CSC, Minnesota put in place training for charter school boards. Boards are viewed as a key component of the state's accountability mechanisms.² Efforts like the board training are designed to address growing concerns in the state about accountability. The state also worked to improve communication about state choice programs, particularly Post-secondary Enrollment Options, for all students and low-income, ethnic minority students in particular. In addition, the partners convened the state team twice to consider various approaches for increasing the quality of choices and expand the state's education offerings. Although the state did not pass any new legislation during the project period, information shared by the partners is being used to prepare a choice policy package for the 2007 legislative session.

Mississippi. Considering Mississippi's history of hesitancy towards greater school choice, important progress was made in 2006 with assistance from NGA/CSC. Given the contentiousness of charter school legislation, Governor Barbour concentrated on improving other school choice options. The new legislation (HB 1130, signed March 2006):

² The state received a C- grade in 2003 from the Fordham Foundation for its authorizing practices and policies.

- authorizes the establishment of a virtual public school program;
- provides for the creation of a dual enrollment program for high school seniors; and
- extends for another year the duties of the commission to study and report on the feasibility of the charter school concept in Mississippi.

Legislation was also passed in 2005 and again in March 2006 (SB 2049) to study and report on the feasibility of charter school options in Mississippi.

NGA/CSC met twice with the legislative charter school study commission to provide information about charter schools and the structure of charter school laws. Most recently, the partners brought the Louisiana state board of education chair before the study commission to share that state's experience with charter schools. An African American charter school director from New Orleans also testified about the impact of charter schools on African American students in his school and city. The Commission will be deciding during the upcoming legislative session whether to continue and/or improve the state charter school law. If the legislature does not act the current law will sunset.

New Mexico. One hallmark of a strong charter school law is multiple authorizing entities. Until 2006, New Mexico charter school developers only had one option, local school districts, and an appeal to the state for denials. With assistance from NGA/CSC, New Mexico developed and passed legislation (SB600) creating a new statewide charter school authorizing entity. In addition to local districts, charter school developers can now be authorized by the state Public Education Commission. New Mexico also demonstrated a commitment to improving its state's charter schools by creating a new charter school office in its state Education Agency. NGA/CSC worked with the director of New Mexico's newly created charter school office and the New Mexico Public Education Commission (PEC) to implement this change in authorizing. The PEC, as well as district authorizers, learned about authorizing best practices in a day and half workshop.

In addition, the 2005 legislature passed legislation regarding charter districts. HB 1101 allows up to nine districts (three small, three medium, and three large) to apply through a local school board resolution, public hearings, and a petition by employees to the Secretary of Education to become a charter district.

South Carolina. A key focus for the South Carolina team was improving its state charter law, and in 2006 they succeeded with some assistance from NGA/CSC. Act Number 274 ("The Charter School Act") was signed by Governor Sanford in June, 2006. This act creates a charter school district at the state level. Until this change, only local school districts could authorize charter schools. Under this provision, charter schools may opt to maintain sponsorship by a local school district or may apply for charter renewal with the South Carolina Public Charter School District (SCPCSD). Past inequitable funding is also addressed in the changes by new yearly benchmarks based on revenue that local school districts must pass on to charter schools. After passage of the law, NGA/CSC

worked with the team to help implement the new statewide charter district. As part of these efforts, the partners connected the team with experts in the areas of authorizing best practices and communicating with families and the public.

The South Carolina team was unable to make progress on its other school-choice policy priority—tax credits. In early May 2005 Governor Sanford expressed disappointment when the school choice/tax credit bill was defeated. The plan would have credited families up to 80% of average per-pupil costs (approximately \$4,000) and almost all of the state’s families would have been eligible to receive the credit given the \$75,000 income maximum. Given the defeat of the previous tax credit plan, a new compromised version of the Put Parents in Charge Act was proposed. This plan would have provided tax credits to individuals (not corporations) and vouchers to low income families when students attend schools that are declared “unsatisfactory” or “below average” by the Education Oversight Committee. The State Superintendent expressed continued concern about a state voucher program and ultimately Governor Sanford decided in late November of 2005 not to continue his pursuit of the Put Parents in Charge legislation.

Utah. The Utah team focused on charter schools and vouchers during the project. The state made progress in bringing more choice to students with disabilities through vouchers, but remained stalled on the charter school front. NGA/CSC offered information about charter schools and the structure of charter school laws to the state as it continued studying the issue. The number of charter schools in the state remains capped while a charter school funding and policy study is being undertaken.

In March 2005 Utah became the second state (after Florida) to pass legislation (HB 249) that provides vouchers of up to \$5,500 to students with disabilities to attend private schools. Eligibility and voucher amount depend on the severity of the disability, and transfer schools must be pre-approved by the state. Since 2001, there has been a privately-funded voucher program for all students. In the first four years since its inception in 2000, Children First Utah provided \$2.2 million in scholarships averaging \$1,452 per child. This program is directed toward low-income children in Utah.

The 2006 legislative session also saw Utah re-instate caps (SB5) on the number of charter schools allowed in the state until a study on charters was completed. This measure followed a 2005 bill (ISSB 178) that removed the caps.

State Perspectives on Policy Progress

Overall, the interviewees believe the grant to have had a positive impact on policy in their states. During the initial interviews in 2005, the majority of interviewees reported on clarification of policy goals, development of a core group of stakeholders, and an improved ability to communicate with the public about school choice. All of these shifts were attributed to the grant drawing focus to the issue of school choice.

In 2006, most interviewees commented on legislative accomplishments or shifts in public perception about and legislation on school choice that lay the groundwork for new legislation in the coming year. For example, Mississippi passed legislation consistent with two of the goals in its work plan, an accomplishment described as “significant” by the interviewee. One state, Minnesota, did not feel it made progress toward realizing their goals during 2006. This was attributed to a focus on the 2006 elections and their outcome, as well as a lack of consensus about how to move forward at the legislative level with school choice, which according to the interviewee boils down to how to “fix or change tax credit deductions in a meaningful way.”

Although no state met all its goals, almost all interviewees described their states’ policy progress as meaningful and a result of the assistance provided by NGA/CSC. In general, the interviewees expressed a positive view about the potential for even more school-choice legislation to be passed in the coming year. In addition to policy gains for school choice, some interviewees mentioned a positive shift in the public’s views about school choice since the inception of the grant. For example, one interviewee (from New Mexico) stated that the grant had “broken down barriers.... [It] created a space to legitimize choice and the charter school movement. I think the NGA/CSC grant and their presence helped bring validity to the Coalition for Charter Schools.” This perception was repeated during other interviews as a majority of interviewees indicated that stakeholder views on tax credits/scholarships, or school choice in general, appeared to be improving thanks, at least in part, to the assistance provided through the NGA/CSC grant.

Assistance Provided by NGA/CSC

As described in detail below, the six participating states valued the support provided by NGA/CSC through the state team meetings, individual consultation with project leaders from NGA and CSC, and the state policy institute. States’ recommendations for improving the support offered by NGA/CSC focused on increasing communication both between NGA/CSC and the states as well as among the states themselves.

Initial State Team Meetings

Overall, meeting participants offered positive feedback about the experience of meeting with NGA/CSC. Many responded that their team was “off to a great start” or that the meeting had been “very productive.” The evaluation forms revealed some consistent responses across states regarding strengths of the meeting, criticisms, and technical assistance requests.

All states reported that the facilitators guided the discussion ably. Respondents were also very positive about the meeting and project goals being clear and about the usefulness of the information and guidance provided by the NGA/CSC team.

There were some recommendations for improvement. Respondents noted that the discussion and advice from the meeting were not grounded in student and school performance data and that the use of the state profile during discussions was not helpful. Some participants expressed desire for more detailed data, disaggregated in a variety of ways. Many participants recommended including more state and local education representatives such as school board members, administrators, and teachers. Respondents also expressed a need for help designing communication strategies that address their state’s needs and a desire for more information about best practices and model legislation from other states.

State Policy Institute

On August 11-12, 2005, NGA/CSC held an institute in Snowbird, Utah for the six project states. In an effort to improve the state policy context for school choice in the six states, the Institute provided information and resources and worked with teams of state policymakers to set goals for improving policy and to plan for making such improvements.

At the end of the Institute, participants filled out an evaluation form that asked them to rate the usefulness of various aspects of the institute on a scale of 1 (not at all useful) to 5 (definitely useful) and to provide comments about how to improve the institute and shape future technical assistance offered by NGA/CSC.

Overall, participants rated the Institute as quite useful. Of the 16 elements participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5, the mean score was no lower than 3.0 and as high as 4.59. Seven of the 16 elements received an average score of at least 4.0. Table 1 presents the mean scores given by the participants to each of the Institute’s elements.

Table 1: Mean scores given by participants to Institute elements*

<i>Thursday, August 11</i>	
Building Support and Sound State Policies for Multiple Education Options	4.00
State Team Presentations: Challenges, Successes, Goals, and Plans	3.38
Financing and Supporting a Spectrum of School Choice Options	3.47
<i>Concurrent Sessions I</i>	
Media Strategies for Supporting Choice Agenda	4.29
Supporting High-Quality Charter Schools	3.89
<i>Concurrent Sessions II</i>	
Vouchers and Tax Credits	3.88
Creating Education Options in Rural Areas	3.63
Dual Enrollment/Concurrent Enrollment	3.00
Dinner: School Choice in Action	4.15

<i>Friday, August 12</i>	
Holding Choice Options Accountable for Raising Student Achievement	3.64
Communicating Choice Options to Parents	3.20
Lunch: Federal Perspectives on School Choice	3.31
State Team Planning Time	4.14
<i>Overall Reaction</i>	
The meeting goals were made clear at the start of the meeting.	4.27
NGA and CSC staff provided useful information and guidance.	4.18
Were you pleased with meeting location, facilities, and services?	4.59

*1=Not at All; 3=To Some Extent; 5=Definitely

State Perspectives on NGA/CSC Ongoing Support

In 2005, eight interviews were conducted with members of teams from Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Utah. Interviewees were asked to rate the assistance from NGA/CSC on a scale of 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful). In 2005, the average score was 4.38. In 2006, eight interviews were conducted with members of teams from Arizona, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina and Utah. The same question was asked of interviewees, and the same scale was used as in 2005. In 2006, the average score for the assistance received from NGA/CSC was 4.50.

Several of the interviewees noted the accessibility of the NGA/CSC personnel as one of the most valuable aspects of the grant. The ability of NGA/CSC to provide reliable experts from the field of school choice to present information to stakeholders and legislators in a non-threatening manner was also cited as a positive aspect of the grant. One interviewee stated that, through the grant, they were able to bring in people from a neighboring state who “talked like us and looked like us, so they’re not intimidating or untrustworthy.” Another interviewee stated that “bring[ing] some bipartisan support to the issue of school choice is the most useful tool they can [provide].”

Four suggestions were made for improving implementation of the grant. First, state respondents indicated that the grant would have benefited from more regular contact between the participating states and NGA/CSC than was offered. Two interviewees made this point, suggesting that while school choice is an important concern for everyone involved in the grant, more frequent contact with the project directors would have kept issues “more on the front burner.” A second recommendation focused on the facilitation of more meaningful contact among grantee states. For example, one interviewee suggested creating a partnership between states further along the school-choice continuum with states that are not as far along. Again, this point suggests that the interviewees felt that facilitating more communications would have helped to maintain policy focus.

The third suggestion was to make more readily available the information that NGA and CSC have about all 50 states' school-choice policies either through a link on a Website or as a document provided to grantees. The interviewee making this suggestion was particularly interested in "states' political environment toward and legislative policy impacting school-choice." The fourth suggestion for improvement related to the sessions at the Snowbird retreat. One interviewee suggested that the sessions be videotaped and uploaded on a Website so that teams could view them together when back in their home states and use them to educate stakeholders in the school-choice debate.

Conclusion

Based on a formative evaluation, it appears as though the U.S. Department of Education's grant to the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the University of Minnesota's Center for School Change helped to improve the school-choice policy context in the six participating states. All six states made important progress in adopting or implementing state policies related to school choice, and most of the states indicated that, as a result of activities undertaken as a result of their grant, improved public perception of school choice.

Importantly, all six states rated very highly the various support provided by NGA and CSC and credited the organizations and the grant with helping to further their goals. At the same time, the states offered helpful recommendations for how NGA and CSC might improve their support in the future. These recommendations should be taken seriously as NGA and CSC begin work under a new contract from the U.S. Department of Education to support states' efforts to expand access to and improve quality of charter schools.