



## NORTH CAROLINA COALITION FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

### *The Coalition's Origin Story*

*Charter schools need a strong defender.* That simple yet foundational premise galvanized the launch in 2018 of the North Carolina Coalition for Charter Schools. Led by longtime litigator Richard Vinroot, a stalwart band of charter supporters established an organization that could serve as a powerful, on-the-ground advocate for charter schools in Raleigh.

By the time of the Coalition's inception, Richard was already a tested and true champion of charters. He had successfully prosecuted claims from over 50 charter schools, recovering millions of dollars that school districts had withheld in violation of statute. A combat veteran of the Vietnam War (and a 6' 7" center who played Carolina basketball for Dean Smith!), Richard had also served as the former mayor of Charlotte and long-time board member of Sugar Creek Charter School. He possessed skill, savvy, and stature. Most importantly, he believed in the transformative power of charter schools and had earned the trust of charter operators all across North Carolina.

The Coalition has chosen his perspective to frame the organization's origin story.

#### ***Charters were shortchanged on funds—and no one was telling the story***

The Coalition was born, Richard says, from a two-part epiphany: Charter schools were missing out on millions of dollars. And they had no one at the legislature to plead their case daily.

On funding, “the ‘aha moment’ occurred when I was on the board of Sugar Creek Charter School,” Richard recalls. “The judge in the *Leandro* case, Judge Manning, was quoted in the *Charlotte Observer* that morning talking about the per pupil amount that Mecklenburg County and other counties were putting into local school systems. That was a multiple of what we were getting every year from those school systems. I was familiar with the statute that said we were supposed to get our equal local share of the current expense money.”

Troubled by the obvious discrepancy, Richard called the attorney for the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System the next day. He compared the district and charter figures and read the statute out loud to the attorney. “I said, ‘It doesn’t seem like you’re doing this right. You’re supposed to share on an equal per pupil basis and you’re not,’” Richard recalls. “Then, he ticked off several things they weren’t sharing at all! And I said, ‘Well, that doesn’t comply with the statute, and if you don’t agree with me, I guess we’d have no choice but to litigate.’ He said, ‘You’ll have to do that. We’re not going to do it voluntarily.’”

#### ***The ‘Sugar Creek lawsuits’ begin***

True to his word, Richard began litigating for Sugar Creek Charter School. That lawsuit piqued the interest of other schools. “I began to get calls over the next couple of years from charter schools all over North Carolina, having heard about the Sugar Creek case,” Richard says. “They asked me to look into their situation, and darn if they didn’t look pretty much the same! Every board of education and school system was doing exactly what Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools were doing: reading the statute in a way that shortchanged the local charter school.”

Additional litigation followed. “We ended up filing more of what we called ‘Sugar Creek lawsuits,’” he says. “We really never lost. We got appealed a lot. They all got to the same result.”

Unfortunately, charter opponents in the legislature were working to undercut charters’ funding momentum. They essentially gutted the statute that had allowed charter schools to get their fair share of the local expense money, Richard says. He traveled to Raleigh as often as he could to make the case for fair funding, but it wasn’t enough. “I was getting nowhere,” he says of his own efforts. “I never could quite explain it satisfactorily or get the weak-kneed ones to do what they needed to do.”

### ***The Coalition, a strong defender of charters, is born***

Meanwhile, an idea had begun to germinate among some charter leaders: What if the state’s charter schools were represented by an organization that could direct every dollar to advocacy? That idea took root, and in Spring 2018, a group of charter leaders convened in Raleigh to cast a vision for the Coalition. Baker Mitchell, the founder of Roger Bacon Academies, worked to have bylaws written. He asked Lindalyn Kakadelis—a consultant for his education management organization, member of the state’s Charter Schools Advisory Board, and former member of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education—to work on the organization’s launch. In July 2018, Lindalyn met with Richard to share the Coalition’s vision and ask for his help. The new organization needed a leader with relational and reputational capital, and Richard was someone charter operators knew and trusted.

He quickly stepped in to lead the organization, writing to over 100 charter schools to rally support. On September 4, 2018, the Coalition filed paperwork to incorporate legally as a 501(c)(6) organization. Richard and six others—Chris Millis, Sandeep Aggarwal, Ann Walters, Tony Hilton, Paula Jackson, and Nick Paradiso—served on the founding board of the Coalition.

“That’s the story, really, in a nutshell,” Richard says. “We still don’t have the hearts and minds of all of the legislators. With the Coalition, it’s a fight to the end, really.”

### ***Successes behind, hurdles ahead—and awakenings ‘in the strangest places’***

Several years later, how has the Coalition delivered on its early vision? “I think it’s outstanding. I am so proud of Lindalyn,” he says. “It was easy to recommend her to schools that were convened to give birth to this Coalition. I knew she was a house on fire! The best thing that ever happened was our nascent board employing her on a full-time basis to do what she did. She’s dynamite.”

Despite successes, hurdles loom on the political horizon. “We are still a small minority,” Richard says. Yet the cultural zeitgeist, post-pandemic, is shifting in charters’ favor. “There is more noise out there nationally and everywhere else in favor of choice,” he says. “There are awakenings occurring in the strangest places. We just have to count on the truth ultimately winning. It’s always going to be a numbers battle.”

As history can attest, a numbers battle, though daunting, is insufficient to deter a movement born from conviction, commitment, and freedom. “There is some value in being a battling minority as opposed to a self-satisfied majority,” Richard says. “We are *right*. We are the little engine that could.”

He adds, “Our message is about as American as apple pie: that somebody ought to be able to compete for the right to educate our children. Educating our children is only the most important thing we do or don’t do in America. It’s what will make us or break us.”