

State of the Organization Address

Given by Founder/C.E.O. Richard Norman Rickey

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Welcome back to the start of another school year at Orenda Education. It is an honor to have you join me in my vision to educate the youth of Central Texas. What a great challenge and responsibility we have to teach the children of parents who freely choose to enroll in one of our public charter schools.

Let me give you a quick update on somethings I'm going to be focused on this school year. I want to start by playing a short video I made last year that I call the "Free the Teacher Revolution". Some of you may have watched this already, but most of you have not. It takes a little over three minutes, and then I want to make some follow up comments. Here it is.

I have a job to do, to make sure that Orenda Education represents the voice of teachers who have had their freedoms stripped away by a growing government that continues to burden them with unfunded and unproven mandates. As the rights of parents have increased, the rights of our educators are being ignored. No More.

Charter Schools are the inheritors of an exceptional tradition - an education reform idea that was noble and beautiful. The idea that teachers should be free to teach, and parents should be free to choose. We must be true to that inheritance.

How many great teachers are we going to lose? Enough - expecting the teachers to fix all the problems in our society. Enough – expecting our teachers to get every child to pass an overhyped high stakes standardized test. Enough – expecting them to be social workers, counselors, nurses, nerdy tech experts, and first reporters. Enough already!!!!

There are many parents, like me, who are fed up to here watching the negative impacts these heavy handed government mandates are having on the teaching profession. Let me be very clear on what I'm talking about.

Nowhere in our Constitution does it give any hint that the education of my children, or your children, should fall within the governments purview *without our consent*.

The idea behind free compulsory local government run schooling - that didn't begin until after the Civil War in most states - has now morphed into a huge Federal & State Department of Education that cripples and compromises local control of how best to educate the youth in our communities. As the Federal and State Government Dictators have taken in more tax money, and gained more power, our teachers value has decreased. This must be reversed.

Big government should get out of the classroom. Teachers should be afforded more respect, and high standards for students and teachers need to be maintained.

Teachers and parents should be able to enter into a voluntary association, whereby the public education dollar follows the child..... so that the teacher, along with the parent, gets to determine what great education looks like.

The bottom line is this - our teachers need more freedom to teach. Actual teaching is popular with teachers you know.

If you want to unburden our teachers so they can love their profession again, join me in my work for teacher and parent freedom in education. Click SUBSCRIBE on my web site to join.

If you take just one thing away from that video, I hope it is this. I believe your job as an educator is one of the most important and essential jobs on planet earth. I put teachers right in there with doctors, nurses, supply chain, transportation, and utility workers as quote “essential workers”. As we learned during the most recent pandemic somebody has to keep it all working when everything else gets shut down. You, Orenda teacher are an essential worker. You, campus leader and Orenda support staff worker, are a critical piece in the education supply chain.

And that supply chain is broken. Let’s not bury our heads in the sand and ignore the data. Here are the facts. The most recent National Center for Education Statistics Study among 13 year olds in the United States shows a significant drop in math and reading scores, falling to levels not seen since 1971. During the past three years scores in math have dropped nine points, and in reading four points. In history and civics, 8th grade scores fell to the lowest levels on record. Only 13% of 8th graders met proficiency standards for US History. And recent reports of college entrance ACT and SAT scores have also shown significant drops while the grade point averages of incoming freshmen have been increasing. Clearly grade inflation is going on in many of our country high schools.

The second take away from that short video is that I hope you understand and appreciate that by choosing to work for a public charter school you are a part of a great experiment to improve public education. Our job at Orenda Education is to reverse these trends and to be, as our 35th President John F. Kennedy said and I quote, “a rising tide that lifts all the boats”. We are the coast guard rescue boat that goes around pulling many students out of the cold waters of apathy, boredom, low expectations, and not reaching their God given potential.

And we have some very encouraging news on public charter school results across the country. A recently published 2023 Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes study (referred to as “The CREDO study”) concludes that most charter schools produce superior student gains when compared to the traditional public schools those same students would have attended. In many cases charter school scores showed charter students were ahead 73 days in math and 78 days ahead in reading compared to traditional public schools. And Charter Management Organizations like Orenda Education that operate multiple charter school campuses showed better results than stand-alone charter schools. This is likely the result of a learning curve that can be applied to many locations.

Charter school educators are called to be reformers, experimenters, protesters, innovators, and up-setters of the status quo. We are to be anything, anything - but boring, ordinary and predictable.

And the final take away from that short video is that I want Orenda Education to be the most teacher friendly, fulfilling and fun educational setting for teachers to teach. Each of our school campuses should be a place where educators want to work, love to work, have and maintain high expectations, and where they want their own children to attend. If you are a competent, compassionate, inspiring teacher, we want you here and we want you happy to be here.

During the past several months I've taken an honest look at our organization. I've asked myself, is Orenda Education the great, outstanding, heads above the rest educational organization that I envisioned when I started this company? And I've met individually with many of you these past few months to get your answer to that question. And here is what I think is the answer to that question. No! We are good, very good by many measures, but we are not quite where I thought we would be by now. We are not great. Not yet.

To get to the next level of greatness and consistency, not only in student achievement, but also in campus morale among the staff, we need to get better at leadership - leading people. We are in the people business. We don't make a product that comes off an assembly line. The growth we see in our students is a direct result of what our educators infuse into their students. All of us in a leadership role at Orenda Education, both at the district office, and at each campus, must be outstanding, heads above the rest leaders.

If you have been employed at Orenda Education for a few years or more, you probably know that while some of our campuses have had exceptional, steady campus leaders, some have struggled with leadership issues. Like all school entities, we have our challenges.

But here is the advantage of working for our charter school entity. We are like a coast guard rescue boat; small, quick and nimble. When things are not going as well as they should we quickly adapt, change course, recalibrate and improve. Unlike most big bulky traditional school districts, we don't need to go through five layers of management, four committees or remove three governing board members before positive change can start happening. I know what needs to get fixed. I've heard from you, and I can see with my own eyes. The board sees it. Our district leaders see it. And now we are going to get to work to improve it.

So this year at I'm going to be focused on leadership training and team building so we make the leap and go from being good to --- GREAT! I am currently developing a leadership training program that all our district and campus leaders will go through. I'll be sitting in on some team meetings and providing individual consultation and tutelage to our leaders.

In addition, over the past several months I've recorded several educational videos that are posted on our Orenda Education YouTube Channel. I encourage all of you to subscribe to it. This channel is to be a resource for Orenda Education employees, parents and our students. We have posted

several educational videos covering topics such as the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools, our philosophy of education, and much more. We have podcasts that feature our scholar-athletes, interviews with our staff, and news and highlights on our individual campuses. Soon I will be adding some content on leadership.

Let me quickly give you a sneak peek on what I believe about great leadership. Great leaders have the following **attitude** toward leadership:

- They believe the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality, and the last is to say thank you. In between the two, they want to build relationships with their people.
- They set the vision and agenda but, after that, they mostly serve and facilitate to fulfill the vision **through people**, and
- Mostly they are humble, appreciative, and modest. They don't hog all the credit.

Great school leaders take the following **actions**:

- Better than an open door policy, they get out and rove around. They catch people doing great things. They brag on their best teachers, yet they correct when needed.
- The moment they feel the need to micro-manage someone, they know they made a hiring mistake, so they don't micro-manage.
- They get the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus. They know that letting the wrong people hang around too long is unfair to all the right people.

When we improve the quality and effectiveness of our leaders this is what we will all observe:

- Less turnover, and higher retention of our talented people who share our company values and work ethic.
- Visible growth in our young teachers' instructional competency.
- Seasoned teachers taking on more leadership on each campus.
- More fun, more joy, and more people stepping up to take on the hard tasks that always make the most difference.

Yes, our leaders will have those difficult conversations with our people, but confidentiality will be maintained - always. Fear will be replaced with trust, and frustration replaced with enthusiasm.

Good to Great! Some school districts never make the leap. Only a few do.

So let's take this time together to build a spring board.

I look forward to seeing you all around campus.