

Orenda Education History, Vision & Values

Talk given to new employees by Founder/CEO Richard Norman Rickey

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As Founder & CEO of Orenda Education I want to welcome you to our company. I'm humbled that you have decided to join us on our journey to educate the youth in our communities.

I know that some of you will be with us perhaps for a short time. Others for several years, and hopefully, if you are really talented and a perfect fit, decades. No matter how long, my hope is that you have fun and find fulfillment along the way.

I like to take this opportunity to address our new employees; to share a brief history of Orenda Education, our vision, and our company values, so you get a taste of our special flavor; what makes us just a little bit different and unique from most other schools and traditional school districts in the area.

So in my family almost all the adults were either preachers or teachers. That's just what you did. So I started down those two paths, not knowing for sure which of those two options was best for me. After receiving an undergraduate degree in education from a liberal arts college just outside of Boston (where I'm originally from), I then received a master degree in theology & philosophy. But I soon realized that church ministry is not a career path I wanted to continue on, so I used my under grad education background and landed a job with a private organization that provided special education and student assistance services to a large school district in Oklahoma City. For three years I worked in various classrooms with some of the most difficult "at-risk students" sent to me by the principals and counselors. Part of my role was to keep the students in school, and not become a drop-out statistic. I learned a lot about the challenges of educating students with special needs. I'm grateful for that experience.

But my own personal circumstances changed, some opportunities came along and I chose a completely new career path in healthcare. After obtaining a second graduate degree, this one in healthcare administration, I went to work for Hospital Corporation of America and worked my way up the corporate ladder, eventually landing a position in 1988 as CEO for a new healthcare facility opening here in Central Texas. It served children and adolescents with severe behavioral and psychiatric disorders, and various addictions. One of the units served kids in child protective services who had been removed from their homes because of severe abuse or neglect. Many of these children would stay in our facility for twelve months or longer, receiving mental health and addiction treatment, but also education. We had a school on site with several teachers, a principal and support staff provided by the local independent school district.

Over time I became frustrated with the poor quality of education the children in my care were receiving from the local school district. I also became aware of this **[Slide 1]**. It's an international research study taken every three years comparing American students to students from all over the world. For decades our American students have been falling somewhere between 23rd and

29th in Math, Science and Reading. Now I don't know about you, but that is not OK. Our students use to lead the world in academic achievement, but something had changed. We live in a global society, with a global economy. Our sons and daughters are going to be competing with students from China, India, and Morocco for the best jobs and careers. Those kids are motivated, and they study and work really hard.

Many of us came to believe that our **[Slide 2]** traditional public education system here in the U.S. was like this big cruise ship, with lots of students on board. A slow moving vessel heading for **[Slide 3]** an iceberg of low expectations.

So it makes you wonder, how do we improve our public education system? **[Slide 4]** Education reform is controversial, and there is no clear consensus on what exactly is best. Numerous strategies and new policies have been introduced over the years. Some say we need to pour more money into our existing public schools. Other proposals call for vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credit scholarships to name a few. It seems we are constantly tinkering with our public schools. New teaching methods, more testing, you name it, it's been tried. But few of these measures have worked, and many are seen as just too controversial to implement. The education bureaucrats and teachers' unions have blocked many of these.

One idea that did catch on in several states, and has had some modest success, started in **[Slide 5]** Minnesota in the early 1990's..... and that is to create public charter schools. This caught my attention. The idea behind it was that the traditional public ed system is just too bureaucratic and slow to adapt to our changing society, so... rather than expecting we can make the necessary changes from within, **[Slide 6]** just carve out a part of the traditional education system, and give this carve out group more freedoms, and less red tape to deal with, so they can be innovative and create new educational environments, and more options for families.

This reform moment came to Texas in 1995, **[Slide 7]** with the primary objective to encourage innovation and creativity. Now, when you want **[Slide 8]** innovation and seek creativity, we all know innovation is hard, messy, and unpredictable. Not all innovations work. Sometimes you get this. **[Slide 9]**

This is not a picture of my son, but it could be. Here we have a boy tangling from a bunk bed. Something my son would do. So I have two children. My first born was a girl, and six years later I had a son. They were so different in personalities, learning styles, and interests. I learned as a parent, and we all know, that our kids can have vastly different intellects, abilities, interests, or challenging circumstances to overcome. Why would we think that one educational model works the same for all children? Of course not! Our children are not some product to be but together on an assembly line.

[Slide 10] I look at charter schools as a coast guard rescue boat that that goes around pulling children out of the cold waters of apathy, boredom, laziness, and not reaching their potential. We are a smaller boat, fast, nimble and can change directions quickly to meet the rapid changes needed to adapt to our evolving world.

But there are still some misunderstandings about charter schools. [Slide 11] Charter schools are public schools, not private schools. They must comply with the states standards and requirements for curriculum and graduation. Open to all, if a seat is available, there is no tuition to attend, so they are funded by the state. [Slide 12] There are basically three types of charter school operators allowed. The vast majority of charter schools in Texas are operated by not-for-profit corporations, of which Orenda Education is one. [Slide 13]. So most charter schools in Texas are public schools that are privately operated.

But the charter school reform movement is also controversial. [Slide 14]. Many traditional public school people are anathema to charter schools. They like to say that charter schools take money away from the traditional public school system, thereby harming their ability to educate. Some of them say really nasty things about charters. Now personally, I do not retaliate! I don't believe charter schools are the panacea for what ails the American public education system. And I don't believe they should take over public education. Charter schools are meant to serve a niche. They are to be a compliment to the big traditional education system, offering another school choice for parents, students and teachers.

[Slide 15] A great reference on this controversy is the book Charter Schools and their Enemies published in 2020 by scholar Thomas Sowell.

So, while employed as a hospital CEO, I decided to ignore the naysayers, and incorporated Orenda Education, [Slide 16] with the idea to eventually open a charter school with the mission to create new and innovative school choice opportunities in Central Texas, and a vision to be [Slide 17] a leader in the school choice movement.

Well..... you can't just open up a charter school, you have to get approved. Here in Texas you must make application to, and receive approval from [Slide 18] the Texas State Board of Education. Once a year they accept applications. By law the state has capped how many charter school operators will be allowed. Each year most applications are rejected.

To put together my application, I sought out three education experts to assist me. With just enough education background to be dangerous, I was smart enough to know I needed educators who knew more than me. For my education philosophy I turned to [Slide 19] Dr. Martin Brokenleg, a sociology professor, who had also been a Divinity School graduate and chaplain, and member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. He co-authored a book Reclaiming Youth at Risk, that had a big influence on me. Using the heritage of Native American child rearing, terms and images, he called this [Slide 20] a "Circle of Courage". Native peoples see the person as standing in a circle surrounded by the four directions: North, South, East and West. His was an integrated holistic approach to child development and learning that promoted a sense of

Belonging - At the core is a commitment to provide a school culture where all students feel welcomed and know they are a vital part of the school community, and accepted just as they are.

Mastery – The belief that each student has unique talents and gifts that must be discovered before the student can begin to feel competent. Increased competency enhances self-esteem and provides the motivation for further achievement.

Independence - That you must provide a stimulating academic experience where students can grow, develop and have ownership over their learning. Schools are to be a place where students can have the freedom to learn in their own style, at their own pace and through their own interests.

And finally, **Generosity**. Today little is asked of young people except to be consumers. So teach them how to be generous and unselfish and expect students to serve the school and the community through participation in various service projects. By doing so, children learn they are needed, and to be counted on.

To select and explain our instructional methods [Slide 21] I recruited Dr. Susan Perez and Dr. Allen Booth. I explained to the State Board of Education that we would use [Slide 22] Personalized Learning Plans, Advanced Placement Curriculum, and Blended Learning instructional methods (and later we added AVID). You will learn more about these methods at your individual campus, but I do want to say just a few things about Blended-Learning. We wanted to be an early adopter of using technology to enhance the teacher's instruction, connecting the student to the teacher's content 24 hours a day, every day of the week. And we looked for new software to take over more of the mundane tasks for the teacher..... such as grading. Now we all know technology has been both a blessing and a curse. There is much improvement still needed to reach our goal of a seamless, smooth technology integration in our classrooms. But the possibilities, and the hope, remain.

So our application was accepted by the State Board of Education and they granted us a charter. But there was a catch. We would have more freedom, but held to a higher standard than traditional schools. [Slide 23] "Three strikes and you're out" is the policy for all charter schools. If a charter school fails to meet academic or financial standards set by the State three years in a row, they are automatically shut down.

[Slide 24] I also learned that while charter schools were granted more freedom, they would not receive as much state and local funding as traditional public schools.

[Slide 25] The big difference is that charter schools have no taxing authority and receive no local tax revenues, the source of funding traditional schools use for school buildings, football stadiums, and performing arts centers. Depending on what independent study one uses, charter schools receive anywhere from about \$800 to \$2,000 less per student per year. So a big part of my job would be fund raising.

[Slide 26] So in 2001 Orenda Charter School became a new school district owned and sponsored by the parent company, Orenda Education.

[Slide 27] And under that umbrella, as of 2022, we have opened five special mission campuses with 2,000 students. By 2034 we expect to have seven campuses in Central Texas serving 4,000 students.

[Slide28]. It is important that all our faculty, administrators and support staff know and support our company values. Here they are.

[Slide 29] Education Freedom. So long as the government is forcing a citizen to pay a tax for public schooling, we believe that citizen should have the freedom to choose an educational option that best meets the needs of their children. Those options should include charter schools, home schooling, traditional public schools, small learning pods, private schools, etc. The dollars expropriated for public education should follow the child.

[Slide 30] Scholarship. Our schools promote open inquiry and scholarship, keeping the academic standards high. While we believe in equal opportunity, we appreciate the vast differences in circumstances, intellect, abilities, and motivations that impact what a child can learn, and how fast. Therefore, we do not believe all students need to attend a four-year college or university, but we teach every student how to take ownership over their learning, and be an independent critical thinker.

[Slide 31] Citizenship. All public schools should promote the ideas and values of our Founding Fathers as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States of America. Our students should be sufficiently knowledgeable to defend and promote those founding principles of: liberty as a blessing, natural rights, free-enterprise capitalism, and the sovereignty of the people.

[Slide 32] Student - Centered. We stay focused on the students, and how our school can enhance their well-being. The school story should be about the students. Teachers, administrators and support staff are guides showing them what is possible, and how to avoid the obstacles that stand in their way to success. Decisions are to be made with the students' best interest in mind, not the adults.

[Slide 33] Teacher Quality. To be a great school you need the best teachers who can convey, inspire, and motivate children to learn. Our company will work each day to create and sustain a school culture that allows our teachers to thrive, while at the same time holding them, and ourselves, to the highest professional standards.

[Slide 34]. Well, I hope that gives you a good overview of Orenda Education, and our Orenda Charter School District. Welcome aboard our coast guard rescue boat.