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March 2022

Dear Friend,

In 2017, six years into our founding, we undertook the development of a new six-year strategic plan. The resulting plan laid out a framework for change that embraced the opportunity found in the four million children born each year in the United States and organized our work into four “big bets” for years 2018-23. Those bets—More People, Greater Opportunities, Smarter Goals and Better Tools—were meant to guide and grow our network of campaigns as we sought to overcome the country’s growing political divides and re-energize the work of education advocacy to “move us closer each year to the excellent and equitable education systems our kids deserve.”

No one could have imagined that three years later, tens of millions of children would have their relationships and rituals with school disrupted as deeply as they have been by a once-in-a-century pandemic. In the spring and summer of 2020, our staff and our campaigns came together to share insights and ideas drawn from their communities and then pivoted to address these challenges, radically altering their goals, tactics and approach to meet the basic needs of children who could no longer attend school in person. It was clear that a new reality was being created and it was essential we work to shape what that reality might be.

Because 50CAN is a network of learning and change, we intended to do a midpoint update to this strategic plan based on what we learned since its release. That intention became a necessity as we adapted to this new reality. Some of our campaigns have had monumental success even as they could not go to their own state capitols. We’ve made new policy connections with parents, partners and innovators that have had a profound impact on how we pick goals. And we have taken a different stance on policy, starting with the publishing of our policy vision statements “Fund Everything” and “Measure Everything,” and culminating with the release of our new policy framework, “Believe in Better.”

The world of education is different, and 50CAN is different as well. This ability to adapt, in our states and leaders, in our goals and approach, has always been our strength and it is the foundation upon which we will continue to stand. We are excited to share an updated strategic plan that builds upon everything we have learned, is anchored in our diversity as a network working across political divides and that embraces the challenge of this new reality.

While the past two years have revealed in stark relief the many inequities in the traditional education system, we have also seen elements of a new, more dynamic, learner-centered future present themselves. This once-in-a-century challenge is also a once-in-a-century opportunity, one where we can renew our commitment to be policy leaders in building a better, more just education system where every child can become the best version of themselves.

Over the next two years, we plan to leverage our unique position as a bipartisan education advocacy organization with a bold nationwide vision, strong and diverse local leadership and the know-how to secure the policy wins needed for a more resilient, dynamic and creative education system to emerge. One that will draw on local community and civic institutions, online opportunities, and universities and businesses to deliver learning tailored for each student’s interests, curiosities and dreams. Our kids and their families deserve nothing less.

The need for the education system of the future has never been greater. This strategic plan is our best effort to show how we intend to get there. We invite you to join us in our campaigns as we work together to make it a reality.

Warmly,

Michael Phillips
Chair, 50CAN Board of Directors

Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D.
CEO and Founder, 50CAN

Derrell Bradford
President, 50CAN

Michele Mason
COO, 50CAN
Executive Summary

Four Million Opportunities, Four Big Bets

Our work to improve education in America springs from our belief in the immense potential found within every child. Every year, four million children are born in our country, and we know the most important way to nurture and develop the full potential of each of them is through our public investment in education.

We also know that the education systems we entered the pandemic with aren’t going to be able to deliver the kind of personalized connections, experiences and instruction our children will need in the post-pandemic recovery. The problem is existential. We need to build these education systems of the future or risk losing this whole generation of kids.

The success of these efforts will depend on attracting, connecting and investing in people who come from the communities they serve and helping them put the needs, desires and potential of children at the center of education decisions. It is our civic responsibility to take on this challenge. But we need to grapple with changing a vast network of thousands of neighborhood, town, city, county and state systems connected by more than a century of policy and practice.

Because of this, our locally-led, nationally-supported network of executive directors and citizen advocates must also be a vast one, with leaders drawing upon their own unique insights into the needs of their communities while sharing and learning together under a common vision to accelerate the nationwide pace of change.

Building upon the lessons learned from our work over the past decade, we will marshal our organizational resources around four big bets needed to build these education systems of the future in communities across the country:

→ More people. We will recruit the next generation of local advocates and invest in them heavily so they can lead this nationwide effort to provide all children with the education they deserve.

→ Greater opportunities. We will provide more opportunities for local advocates to create new campaigns, seek out new partnerships with existing campaigns and help organizations scale up to grow this movement.

→ Smarter goals. The disruptions of the pandemic pushed us to invest more in innovative policy thinking.

Through new support systems, workshops and trainings, we will help local advocates develop and implement the policy ideas needed to usher in a whole new era of education.

→ Better tools. We will invest in a suite of advocacy tools to help these local leaders build, carry out and learn from their campaigns while leveraging research on what works so that they secure more wins for kids across the country.

While we are proud of the 198 policy wins we have secured for kids in our first 10 years, and the successes achieved during the past two years of the pandemic, we know we still have a lot to learn. We are eager to join forces with partners wherever we can to take on these big bets together. By helping passionate local advocates lead the way forward, we strive not just for a return to normal, but a belief in better made real by our advocacy.

The school system of the future supports many different paths to success, and empowers parents to drive better outcomes for their children. It is a system that provides education leaders and entrepreneurs with the flexibility needed to pursue excellence while avoiding the traps of a one-size-fits-all approach. Finally, it is a system that supports effective and sustainable policy change that is owned by the communities served.

We will strive to be resourceful and nimble as we push forward for the changes our kids deserve. We aim to see every win—and every setback—as an opportunity for our growing network to learn what’s working today and envision what might be possible tomorrow. We know we don’t have all the answers and we can only succeed by constantly testing our assumptions, working in deep collaboration with others and investing in an inclusive culture enlivened by diverse viewpoints from across our states.

We will work tirelessly in pursuit of an America where every child receives the educational keys to unlock whatever doors they choose, even as we recover from an unparalleled pandemic. To reach this goal, we will be guided by big bets on the power of bottom-up change: More people, given greater opportunities to lead, aimed at smarter goals and equipped with stronger tools to transform education in America so all children can fulfill their potential.
1. FOUR MILLION OPPORTUNITIES

“Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children.”
— Walt Disney
Every year, four million children are born in America. Our work to improve education in this country springs from our belief in the immense potential found within every one of them. The four million children born in 2017, when we were first writing this strategic plan, will be entering kindergarten in fall 2022. The majority of their childhood has been disrupted by the turmoil of the pandemic. How does education in America need to change to give them the four million opportunities they deserve?

As we seek to recover, rebuild and renew our commitment to education, we know that all our children deserve more than just a return to normal, they and their families deserve to believe in better.

While the pandemic revealed much about what is not working in American education, it also presented an opportunity for families, students, educators and communities to show their ingenuity, determination and creativity. It sparked innovations and challenged long-held assumptions about how and where learning should take place, as well as who should be charged with the delivery of this learning. It changed funding arrangements at the federal, state and local levels. Most importantly, it fundamentally altered the way parents interact with the education of their children.

Parents have always been a child’s first teachers but our education systems haven’t always recognized that role. Now as we seek to rebuild, recover and recommit to education in America, we must strive to usher in a new era of education with families at the center of everything we do. Over the past two years, parents have stepped forward in ways big and small to keep learning going in our country and bring new innovations, like learning pods, to life. In 2022, a commitment to parent-driven, grassroots change must be at the center of all our work.

Education in the United States is everyone’s responsibility, and the success of our efforts to create school systems of the future will depend on attracting and connecting people from all walks of life into a common movement for change. Indeed, it is the work of these local advocates in building bridges, seeking understanding, organizing neighbors, informing lawmakers, supporting entrepreneurs, sharing best practices and bringing urgency to the debate that makes fundamental change possible.

50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now exists to help these local leaders turn a belief in better into a new era of education for all.
OUR CORE INSIGHTS

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”
— Margaret Mead
50CAN was inspired by the example of a small group of parents, teachers and concerned citizens who came together in 2005 in their home state of Connecticut to advocate for the changes that the children in the Nutmeg State deserved. Over the next six years, the nonprofit organization they formed, ConnCAN, emerged as a tireless champion for putting students’ needs at the center of the debate at the state capitol.

Between 2005 and 2010, these local leaders tried and failed and tried again until they found their way to an effective advocacy organization that could get policy wins for kids. During this time, they ran 26 issue campaigns that researched new policy ideas, built coalitions of support, elevated the voices of fellow parents and teachers, drove a statewide conversation in the media and lobbied for action at the Statehouse. The result of this tireless work was 15 important policy wins for kids, including:

- The largest overhaul of teacher certification rules in 25 years;
- Millions of dollars to build a measurement system grounded in student growth;
- More equitable funding for public charter schools; and
- The transformation of the Hartford school system into a portfolio system of schools.

The CAN Model
In 2010, Marc Porter Magee, ConnCAN’s chief operating officer, took up the challenge of helping more local teachers, parents and concerned citizens in other states create statewide campaigns of their own. What emerged was a new kind of locally-led, nationally-supported advocacy organization. Not a national organization, but a network of state campaigns working together to advance a common cause. We called it 50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now.

Over the past decade, 50CAN has partnered with community leaders across the country to bring new locally-led education advocacy campaigns to life. Through this work, and many stumbles and setbacks along the way, the 50CAN team discovered, in ways big and small, how to help local leaders benefit from a network of support while preserving the entrepreneurial energy of locally-led campaigns.

In the first 10 years, these local advocates ran 361 issue campaigns to lead the way towards an education system that meets the needs of all children. While it wasn’t always easy, together with the help of their local and national partners, the citizen advocates of the 50CAN network secured 198 important policy wins that helped tens of millions of students across 17 states.

Over the past two years, as the pandemic disrupted every aspect of our lives, these local advocates stepped forward with innovative campaigns that got results, including:

→ Ensuring that emergency education spending plans in Colorado, Georgia and North Carolina include direct aid to families.
→ Passing historic funding reform in Connecticut that brought equity to the state’s school funding formula.
→ Securing the funding and removing the red tape in Delaware and Colorado to create learning pods.
→ Expanding free tutoring for students in New Jersey.
→ Creating a free summer camp program for 200,000 students in Tennessee and every student in Atlanta, Georgia.

Through these hard-fought victories, we have learned many lessons and developed a few core insights about what it takes to build an education system that can help all children fulfill their potential.
Our goal should not be uniformity but a mosaic of excellence.

We know that we should not settle for anything less than the highest-performing and most equitable K through 12 education system in the world. This was true in 2017 when we first wrote this strategic plan and it is more true now as we strive for better and not just a return to normal. Being a child in America should mean that you will have access to a world-class education no matter where you live, the color of your skin or how much money your family makes. In this new era, it should also mean a universe of diverse educational opportunities are within reach, whether they be online, in a museum, in a classroom or in a living room. An increasingly diverse array of educational options is foundational for a system that allows every child to find the education that works for them, on their terms.

Achieving this goal is more complex than rocket science.

We know that the only way to reach this goal is to embrace its complexity by rejecting one-size-fits-all, top-down master plans. Instead, we need to enable a policy environment of abundance, opportunity and connection that allows new methods of learning to be piloted, evaluated, adapted and adopted in communities across the country. It challenges us as advocates to put moms, dads, teachers and community leaders at the center of a bottom-up approach to change. This means working not only to enact changes, but to set in motion dynamic, adaptive educational systems that will evolve in response to teachers’ innovations and students’ needs.

To overcome these challenges, we need to harness the power of open advocacy.

50CAN has always believed that one of the most effective things that could be done to change the American education system was simply to have many more people in more communities involved in building something better. This belief in opening up the world of advocacy inspired our series of guidebooks, fellowships and training programs and technology platforms. In this new era, we not only need to make it easier for many more people to advocate for change, we also need to connect all of these change-makers together into a nationwide community. That means casting aside one-size-fits-all, top-down mandates and embracing a larger, more diverse, more dynamic network of thousands of citizen advocates working together in every state in the country.

These insights, born of the work of more than 361 issue campaigns over the past decade, point the way forward. But to get there, we will need to marshal our organizational resources around the big bets that will power us all on the road ahead.
FOUR BIG BETS

“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work.”
— Daniel Burnham
We are proud of all that we have accomplished, but we know we have just scratched the surface of the changes needed to reach our goals.

Building upon the insights from our first six years of successes and failures, we are eager to go further.

Four Big Bets of the Future

When we developed this strategic plan in 2017, we set as our goal the bringing together of three worlds that don’t overlap all that often in our communities: people who want to be local advocates, people who have the policy knowledge and political skills to get wins for kids and people who can raise the funds needed to sustain campaigns in the long term.

To bring these different worlds together in communities across the country, we committed to investing in four, interconnected big bets:

1. More people with diverse skills and backgrounds;
2. Given greater opportunities to lead advocacy campaigns of all shapes and sizes;
3. Aimed at smarter and more transformational goals; and
4. Equipped with stronger advocacy tools to increase the odds of success.

Over the past four years since we first committed to those goals, we put this work at the center of everything we do while also adapting and evolving our approach to the challenges and opportunities of this new era.

MORE PEOPLE
+ GREATER OPPORTUNITIES
+ SMARTER GOALS
+ BETTER TOOLS
= ALL KIDS EDUCATED TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL
1. More people

Our original bet on movement growth was grounded in identifying, supporting and showcasing the stories and experiences of local advocates as they worked to make change in their communities. Our belief was also that advocacy campaigns needed to be designed and led by a universe of advocates with more diverse experience, and in a variety of locations that traditional education reform had not reached. As our original plan asserts, “Education advocacy campaigns should be led by citizen advocates who are part of the communities that they’re working to serve.”

Over the first three years of this investment in “more people,” our analysis found that the single most important tactic in securing wins was grassroots organizing. At the same time, the use of grassroots organizing in our campaigns increased from just 19 percent in our first three years to 51 percent the past three years.

Over the next two years, we plan to make even deeper investments in this approach, with new fellowships and trainings for parents, teachers and students to help a whole new generation of changemakers lead us into the future.

→ By 2023

We aim to have made grassroots organizing a key tactic in 100 percent of our campaigns, double the number of fellowships and workshops offered and to have recruited and trained more than 5,000 local advocacy leaders.
2. Greater opportunities

When this new generation of education advocates steps forward to lead, we need to ensure that there are many opportunities for them to do so. We’ve seen the power of serving as a catalyst for community leaders to launch campaigns with our support.

At the same time, there are also many more organizations that exist now that didn’t just a few years ago that we can learn from through new partnerships and a more expansive approach to community. While supporting smaller campaigns, primarily through incubation and fiscal sponsorships, is an important and unique offering of 50CAN, new strategies to expand partnerships are also needed.

By creating connections across campaigns inside and outside our organization—from part-time neighborhood efforts to single issue regional campaigns to multimillion dollar integrated 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 statewide campaigns—we can turn these greater opportunities into the education systems of the future we all want for our children.

→ By 2023

We will have increased the number of local campaigns we support by at least 30 percent, with comprehensive full-time, part-time and intensive advocacy training programs serving as on-ramps that allow local leaders to join our network, fiscal sponsorships for leaders to build and scale up their campaigns and partnerships for more mature organizations to be part of our learning community. Through our sister 501(c)4 nonprofit, the 50CAN Action Fund, we will ensure 100 percent of the campaigns we support are able to engage in candidate recruitment, candidate forums, electoral work and lobbying to ensure that the voices of parents are heard.
3. Smarter goals

These advocacy campaigns, no matter how successful, won’t help kids achieve their potential if we are advocating for the wrong goals. That’s why in our third big bet, we are focused on helping local advocates choose the policy goals that will add up to the new, boundaryless education systems of the future our kids deserve.

Our original plan focused on using common policy language and locally-created vision guides to jumpstart a fresh approach to goal setting across our network. The disruptions of the pandemic in 2020 pushed us further to invest in policy thinking that fundamentally reshaped how education works, resulting in the publication of “Fund Everything,” “Measure Everything” and the “Believe in Better” policy framework.

Over the next two years, we aim to bring this bold vision to life through a new generation of policy campaigns grounded in this ambition to create the education systems of the future. To get there, we are investing in a new support system to help local leaders build policy plans, a network-wide culture of sharing and learning, a suite of policy workshops to ensure everyone has access to the latest evidence and research and an approach to policy goals that focuses in on a few key areas that can have transformative effects.

→ By 2023

One hundred percent of citizen advocates working within the 50CAN network will be choosing their goals as part of the Believe in Better policy framework and make significant progress towards the fundamental elements of the education system of the future, including direct funding for families, new systems for measurement, supporting educational entrepreneurialism and a shift away from education boundaries.
4. Better tools

The ultimate test of what we have built is if local advocates are more likely to usher in this new era of education in their community as part of the 50CAN network than working alone. In our final big bet, we will invest in advocacy tools to connect all our local campaigns together into one learning community, maximize our power to secure wins and provide the data on what works in advocacy to maximize the odds of success.

In 2017, we sought to organize a best-in-class suite of advocacy tools and make them available to the network to both drive down their cost and streamline their use to make campaigns more effective. This suite of tools—called “Expedition”—has emerged as the backbone of our learning community. Over the next two years, we will continue to work to identify new tools and invest in the training needed for local leaders to use them to execute their campaigns.

At the same time, through a unique partnership with FutureEd at Georgetown University called AdvocacyLabs, we will push the frontiers of how change happens in education policy, using reports, briefs, interviews and events, grounded in both academic research and exclusive data from our own campaigns.

→ By 2023

We will have increased the number of tools available to advocates in our network by 50 percent, our entire network of advocates will be connected together through a best-in-class training on all our tools and we will have published at least four new reports with insights from the analysis of data gathered through our platform.
4.

GETTING TO WORK

“It’s always impossible until it’s done.”
— Nelson Mandela
At 50CAN, we benefit from a strong and seasoned team that is building upon the experiences gained over the course of more than 300 advocacy campaigns in blue and red states. We are able to take these next steps forward because of the hard-fought lessons learned from our first 10 years. But we know we still have a lot to learn and we are eager to join together with partners wherever we can to take on these big bets together: teachers pioneering innovative practices in their classrooms, academic researchers pushing the frontiers of knowledge, think tanks shaping insights into smart policy, advocates specializing in key ideas or specific change strategies, technology companies building the next generation of tools, community nonprofits empowering a new generation of leaders and many more.

If we work together as a great network of local advocates in communities across the country, we know we can set in motion the changes that will help ensure America has the highest-performing and most equitable education system in the world. This educational mosaic of state, regional and neighborhood systems will be dynamic and supportive of lots of paths to success, it will empower parents to drive better outcomes for their children, provide education leaders with the flexibility needed to pursue excellence and rigorous standards to measure their success and support effective and sustainable policy change that is owned by the communities served.

We feel an urgency now that is unlike at any time in our prior history. The need for policy change and transformation is great. And the challenges our kids face dwarf those we tackled when this report was first released.

The four million babies born in 2017 will be entering high school in 2030. What kinds of revolutionary changes can we unleash so that, by then, the educational opportunities that await them are unimaginable to us now?
Believe in Better

As we seek to recover, rebuild and renew our commitment to education, our students deserve MORE than just a return to normal, they deserve to ... Believe in Better.

The education that’s right for you, because every student learns differently.

→ Choose from a variety of personalized, individualized choices of in-person schools, virtual schools, learning pods or homeschooling.

→ Be taught by dedicated, diverse educators who believe in you and see your potential.

→ Receive equitable funding that overcomes historical injustices and delivers every student the resources they need to thrive and pursue lifelong learning.

A family’s right to know what’s working – it’s all about accountability.

→ Know – line by line and dollar by dollar – exactly how much money is being spent on your child and how those dollars are put to use.

→ Know the performance of any educational choice you choose. Again, this is about students’ and parents’ right to know exactly how hard-earned taxpayer dollars are being invested in our children and our future.

→ Receive real-time information on your progress towards college or a career. Learning works best with constant, consistent feedback and clear goals. We are putting that principle into action.

A clear path to the career you choose. It’s about “finding your fit” and your pathway to a meaningful life.

→ Become an informed participant in the American democratic system, in order to contribute to your community, institutions and country.

→ Earn credits from civic, non-profit, university, professional and government organizations, on a schedule that works for you. More than just credits, these connections will help you to get ahead by opening up doors of opportunity and access.

→ Choose a high school internship, apprenticeship or work-based study program to build your skills. It’s all about what works for you...for students, not the system.

→ Access college credits earlier than ever for advanced coursework in high school. If you want to get ahead, we will help you get there. Initiative and hard work should, and will, lead to results.

→ Graduate from high school with acceptance to college or the credentials for a high-skill, high-wage career. Our job is to prepare you for life, for work and for success. Our mission is to get you where you want to go.
How to get involved

“More people” starts with you. If you are inspired by this vision for the road ahead, we want to talk about how we can travel the path together. You can reach us by email at partnerships@50can.org, on the web at 50can.org, on Twitter and Instagram @FiftyCAN and on Facebook @50CAN.

Individuals

→ **Sign up for our emails.** Want to learn more about what we are doing right now? Sign up for our emails at 50CAN.org so we can keep you plugged in to everything happening across our network.

→ **Start the conversation.** Sometimes the best place to start is with a conversation. We would love to hear from you and talk more about our plans and how we might be able to work together. Email us at partnerships@50can.org and we will respond with a way to take the next step.

→ **Read the 50CAN Advocacy Guides.** We have taken everything we have learned about building education advocacy campaigns and written free guidebooks that we would love for you to read. Visit the Resources page of our website to download it and let us know your thoughts.

→ **Apply to a training program.** We offer training programs and other opportunities for engagement across the country. Find out more about these programs and how to apply on the Programs page of our website.

→ **Join a campaign.** Visit our website to find out which cities and states we are running campaigns in this year. We would love for you to get involved as a volunteer, intern, staff member or advisory board member. Visit the Careers page on our website to find out more about opportunities within our current campaigns.

→ **Make a contribution.** Give ‘til it feels good! We love individual donors and nothing makes us more proud than when a fellow advocate chooses to support our work. You can find out more about how to contribute on the Donate page of our website.

Partners

→ **Speak to our staff.** We are always looking to learn from others in the field. If you are willing to share your hard-earned wisdom, we have a ready audience. Send us an email at partnerships@50can.org!

→ **Join a network gathering.** A few times a year we bring the whole network together to share what we are learning. We are always happy to have partners sit in on these off-the-record gatherings. Send us an email and let us know if you’d like to be added to the invitation list.

→ **Partner on the big bets.** Like what you are hearing about the four big bets of more people, greater opportunities, smarter goals and better tools? Great! We would love to share our latest project plans in each area and talk about how we might work together to make these ideas a reality.

→ **Join the network.** Interested in a deeper collaboration? Let’s talk about what it could mean to bring your organization into the 50CAN network as a campaign branch, affiliate or independent partner.

Funders

→ **Let’s talk.** Strategic plans are exciting, but we have more to share and are eager to hear about your plans. Let’s start the conversation with a phone call or coffee. Email us at partnerships@50can.org to set up a time.

→ **Visit a campaign.** There is nothing like seeing the work in action. We can help arrange a visit to the campaign of your choice at a time that works for you.

→ **Support a big bet.** If one or more of 50CAN’s big bets aligns with your philanthropic goals or sounds like the kind of idea you want to help become a reality, let us know and we can share more detailed project plans with you.

→ **Support the network.** None of this is possible without the general operating support that our most committed supporters provide to power the whole network. We would love to share more about how important your support can be in advancing our mission.

Have thoughts on this strategic plan in general? We would love to hear them! Send them our way at partnerships@50can.org.