

PROJECT ANALYSIS

To: Center for Education Reform (CER)
From: Jonathan M. Baron
Re: Analysis of Charter Schools Survey Research and Discussion Groups
Date: Monday, March 17, 2003

Methodology

This project consists of two distinct components: first, a survey of individuals connected with charter schools in the states of California and Indiana; and second, a series of three discussion groups that included individuals connected with charter schools in Washington, DC.

The survey of opinions of individuals connected with California and Indiana charter schools was conducted February 12 – February 26, 2003 among a total of 59 individuals, 50 of whom were connected with California charter schools and nine of whom were connected with Indiana charter schools. All interviews were conducted by professional interviewers by telephone. Among respondents from California, interview selection was at random from a list of 133 individuals generated by the Center of Education Reform. Among respondents from Indiana, interviews were attempted with all 10 individuals who were included in a list generated by the Center for Education Reform, and interviews with nine of those ten individuals were successfully completed.

The three discussion groups held in Washington, DC on February 12, 2003 were arranged by the Center for Education Reform and moderated by Thomas R. Healy of HD Strategy & Communications, LLC. The groups consisted of seven, four, and five individuals, respectively, who are affiliated with charter schools in the city. The discussions lasted an average of approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Transcripts of the discussion groups were prepared by Beta Reporting & Videography Services of Washington, DC.

Key Survey Findings

This survey of charter school officials in California and Indiana reveals a complex, but not contradictory, set of opinions held among respondents: high levels of overall satisfaction with the assistance being provided accompanied by the sentiment that additional and more effective support is required in important and specific areas.

While survey respondents consistently indicated that their charter schools maintain frequent, ongoing, and positive relationships with a very limited number of support organizations, the results of the interviews suggest that charter schools are not receiving adequate assistance in areas respondents consider the most important.

Clearly, the respondents in this survey value the help being delivered by support organizations, as respondents expressed a remarkably high degree of satisfaction with the quality of service provided. This satisfaction, however, does not mean that the pressing support needs of charter schools in California and Indiana are being met.

In fact, the very areas of assistance (“legal advice” and “networking with legislators”) most commonly being provided by principally two existing support organizations are also identified by respondents as some of the very same areas of assistance that they continue to find most important. Also, other specific service areas identified by respondents as among the most important (“public relations” and “special education assistance”) are not being offered, as a general matter, by the support organizations with which respondents have existing arrangements.

This pattern supports two central findings of the survey: first, even as existing support organizations are supplying help in critical areas, such help is not being delivered in a fashion that allows charter schools to conclude that further assistance in those areas are no longer important; and second, in certain other critical areas, the known and preferred set of support organizations are not offering assistance at meaningful levels.

In this way, the “satisfaction” expressed by respondents may really be a sense of appreciation felt by charter school officials who are genuinely thankful for the help they are receiving from the current set of support organizations. Again, this sentiment should not be mistaken for a general view among respondents that they are consistently receiving the levels of help they need where they need it most.

These findings from the survey flow from the following specific data:

- Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they are aware of (96.6 percent) and satisfied with (94.3) charter school support organizations.
- High percentages of respondents have used (93 percent) and currently are using (89.8 percent) charter school support organizations, and the overwhelming number of respondents (92.5 percent) indicate that they have used such an organization either several times (34 percent) or frequently (58.5 percent) during the past year.
- Respondents indicated that support organizations most commonly supply services in the areas of “legal advice” (30.2 percent) and “networking with legislators” (28.3 percent) and much less commonly supply services in the areas of “special education assistance” (5.7 percent) and “public relations” (1.9 percent).
- Respondents identified only a limited number of possible areas of additional assistance as overwhelmingly “important”. Specifically, respondents expressed particularly strong interest in assistance concerning “legal advice”, “networking with legislators”, “public relations”, and “special education assistance”, with more than 70 percent of respondents describing each of these assistance areas as “important”.

Other Notable Survey Findings

- Among support organizations, CANEC and the Charter School Development Center are, by a wide margin, the most heard of (73.7 percent and 35.1 percent, respectively), the most historically utilized (73.6 percent and 45.3 percent, respectively), and the most currently utilized (67.9 percent and 32.1 percent, respectively).
- Other than CANEC and the Charter School Development Center, only four specific groups are currently being used by more than five percent of respondents: Center for Education Reform (7.5 percent), Charter Alliance/Indiana (5.7 percent), Charter Association/Indiana (5.7 percent), and Round Table (5.7 percent).
- No single factor was dominant in explaining the reasons for their high level of satisfaction. Respondents most commonly reported the following three aspects of the service they received as making them “most satisfied”: “timely/prompt” (16 percent), “rapport/relationship” (16 percent), “provided answers” (16 percent).
- When asked about the manner in which initial contact was made, respondents are almost three times as likely to have contacted charter school groups (54.7 percent) than to have been contacted by those organizations (18.9 percent).
- When looking for assistance, respondents consult the Internet (40.7 percent) more than any other single source of information, and for additional help with “issues or strategies for charter schools,” respondents rely most often on their “school district” (32.4 percent) and “state/government group” (17.6 percent).
- When asked to identify the “type of resource, support, or service” that they would request “first”, respondents most frequently answered “don’t know” (28.8 percent), followed by “funds/financial resources” (23.7 percent) and “miscellaneous” (10.2 percent).
- Respondents are least inclined to consider assistance with “start up,” “teacher recruitment,” and “managements procedures” as “important”. In fact, when asked about each of these categories, fewer than 50 percent of respondents indicated that assistance in these categories is “important” (30.5 percent, 40.7 percent, and 45.8 percent, respectively).
- Respondents indicated that their schools were most likely to include grade levels “pre-k/kindergarten” (76.3 percent) and “elementary” (79.7 percent); have student enrollment of 101-250 (33.9 percent) or over 500 (27.1 percent); and have been in operation between three and 10 years (78 percent, which reflects combined categories of “3-5 years” and “6-10 years”).

Analysis of Washington, DC Discussion Groups

Based on attending the February 12 “Charter School Operations” discussion groups held in Washington, DC and reviewing the transcripts of those conversations, it is possible to identify a number of important themes in the comments of the participants:

- Certain participants expressed limited satisfaction with the support organizations currently serving their charter schools and indicated that those entities are not succeeding in providing adequate levels of assistance – (I. Page 8, Line 10): “[Y]ou really sort of do your own search, your own kind of learning, and it’s more people, not necessarily the organizations you go to. . .”; (I. Page 16, Line 21): “There’s no infrastructure . . . the support groups are doing a good job working as hard as they can, but it’s a huge undertaking that has attained a critical mass in the city without the underpinnings.”; (I. Page 18, Line 3): “No, there’s no mechanism in place for [obtaining an opinion letter]. We’re talking about trying to develop that with the charter school association, not necessarily being done by the association, but at least identifying the need and being able to determine whether or not FOCUS or the – the resource center, or the coalition, or the reform group – whether or not that need can be filled by somebody else. But these is no mechanism . . .” (III. Page 19, Line 9): “It’s hard . . . to get help.”; (III. Page 25, Line 6): “I was thinking, one of the things we delve in today I don’t feel is being fostered as partnerships among charter schools. We’ve kind of done our own breaking ground . . .”
- Certain participants identified a need for a centralized database of tested solutions to common problems – (I. Page 56, Line 7): “[O]ur perception is it seems like there is a lot of reinvention of the wheel going on out there.”; (I. Page 58 Line 9): “It’s as simple as a data base . . .”; (I. Page 59, Line 8): “[W]e could put something together so there are short cuts for the people who are planning to open, and they can dedicate themselves to really doing the best job they can do right from the beginning . . .”; (II. Page 50, Line 11): “A centralized, like a nerve center with the lobbying capacity, public relations, marketing communications, making sure that we’re all aware of what we need to be aware of.”
- Certain participants expressed an urgent need for improved public relations/media relations/outreach capabilities – (I. Page 47, Line 6): “. . . [A] lot of the information that is being provided is incorrect. I can understand when, why, when people are reading the article on the same paper, you tend to believe the stuff that’s in the papers. So, that is – it is very frustrating when that information is incorrect, and it’s really damaging.”; (I. Page 36, Line 12): “Part of the problem, I think unfortunately, in this city, we’re starting under a disadvantage. People don’t take charter schools seriously to begin with.”; (III. Page 49, Line 18): “It’s difficult finding ‘school-friendly’ reporters.”

- Certain participants would like additional assistance with special education, technical reporting requirements, and other compliance issues – (III. Page 11, Line 5): “Well, I said we needed technical support in responding to special education monitoring requests, and sites, and visits.”; (I. Page 25, Line 13): “So, though we seek out technical assistance from the Board [of Education], which is our governing authority, you know, they’ve been remiss in providing [it].”
- Certain participants indicated problems in identifying appropriate facilities and basic services – (III. Page 22, Line 20): “Facility is the issue. . . . We know there are buildings available that are not in use. It’s just, you hit a brick wall every time you try to find out how to get these things, and how to kind of access them, and get around to it.”; (I. Page 94, Line 17): “You know, last year, my issue was facility. You asked me, ‘What’s the problem? Facility. This year, transportation . . . we need to get a bus service that serves charter schools.”
- Certain participants expressed frustration with the lack of financial resources, called for a reassessment of the basis for the per-pupil allotment, and in doing so, identified the need for a more robust advocacy function – (I. Page 22, Line 7): [I]t costs roughly \$56,000 a year to provide services to a child. However, we receive \$28,000 per child. So, you know, there’s no way to, you know, to sort of get out of a deficit spending mode without additional supports.”; (I. Page 63, Line 3): “So, while I’m trying to educate a child within my allotment there are also a lot of things that were not thought about in the development.”

Conclusions

According to the data collected, a very limited number of charter school support organizations are extremely well known by the charter school community and currently providing services. Despite this high degree of visibility and contact with charter schools, the varieties of assistance viewed by respondents as most important are either not being delivered at all, or that assistance is being delivered in a manner that has led charter schools to conclude additional help in those areas remains important.

In this way, the responses of the survey research and the discussion groups are consistent. Both sets of information strongly suggest that charter schools are satisfied with the effort support organizations are making, but those charter schools are not receiving the assistance needed to eliminate problems related to the areas they consider the most important, including networking/advocacy, special education, legal/compliance, and public relations.