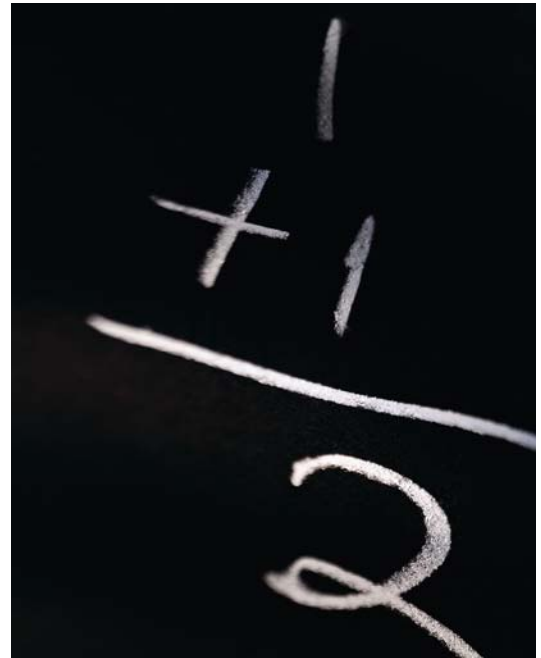


Report & Analysis Jackson, Wyoming Focus Group



Presented By:
the polling company™, inc.
Kellyanne Conway, President & CEO
October 2007

THE Center for Education Reform



WYOMING ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Creating quality public schools like no place on earth



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TO: Jeanne Allen, Founder & President
Center for Education Reform (CER)
State Representative Amy Edmonds (R-Cheyenne)
Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools

FROM: Kellyanne Conway, President & CEO
the polling company™, inc.

DATE: October 2, 2007

RE: Jackson, Wyoming Focus Group Results & Analysis

I. Introduction & Methodology

the polling company™, inc. is pleased to present to the **Center for Education Reform (CER)** and the **Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools** this report and analysis following one focus group of registered voters in Jackson, Wyoming. The focus group was conducted on September 17, 2007 at 12:15 PM (Mountain Time). The discussion lasted two hours.

Participants were residents of the greater Jackson metropolitan area. They varied in terms of age, political party and ideology, education level, household income, and marital and family status (see page two for full participant profiles).

The objective of this research project was to assess the interest in and knowledge of issues related to school choice and charter schools in Wyoming and how the public support for the might grow and advance. A key element of the discussion included testing facts to be used as messages about charters as well as several visual elements of a communications and outreach campaign, e.g., advertisements and brochures. Two future discussions in other locations in Wyoming are planned along with a statewide poll of voters.

An original discussion guide was crafted by **the polling company™, inc.** and approved by representatives of CER prior to execution of the group. It was also reviewed by State Representative Amy Edmonds (R-Cheyenne), who leads the Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools – an organization which aims to increase acceptance and availability of charter schools in the state. The guide is attached to this report as Appendix A.

Kellyanne Conway, President & CEO of **the polling company™, inc.** directed the discussion and was assisted in planning and execution by Shelley West, Project Director and Danielle King, Operations Manager.

II. Participant Profiles

Elizabeth

Caucasian Female
Aged 35-44
Strong Democrat/Very Liberal
Post Graduate
Employed Full-Time
Single
Parent of One Child in Public School
Household Income: \$35-45K

Victoria

Caucasian Female
Aged 45-54
Strong Democrat/Somewhat Liberal
Post Graduate
Employed Full-Time
Divorced
Parent of One Child in Public School
Household Income: \$45-60K

Donna

Caucasian Female
Aged 65+
Independent/Moderate
High School Graduate
Employed Full-Time
Widowed
Household Income: \$35-45K

Corbett

Caucasian Male
Aged 35-44
Not-So-Strong Republican/Somewhat Liberal
College Graduate
Employed Full-Time
Married
Parent of Three Children in Public School
Household Income: \$45-60K

Herman

Hispanic Male
Aged 65+
Not-So-Strong Republican/Somewhat
Conservative
College Graduate
Retired
Married
Household Income: \$35-\$45K

Mary

Hispanic Female
Aged 55-64
Independent/Somewhat Conservative
High School Graduate
Employed Full-Time
Married
Household Income: \$45-\$60K

Adrienne

Caucasian Female
Aged 65+
Not-So-Strong Republican/Somewhat Liberal
Post Graduate
Retired
Married
Household Income: \$100K+

Patricia

Caucasian Female
Aged 55-64
Independent/Moderate
College Graduate
Employed Full-Time (at home)
Divorced
Household Income: \$80-100K

Theresa

Caucasian Female
Aged 45-54
Not-So-Strong Republican/Somewhat
Conservative
College Graduate
Stay-At-Home
Married
Parent of One Child Who Is Home-Schooled
(6th Grade)
Household Income: \$45-\$60K

III. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Dismal Marks for Wyoming's Public Schools

The moderator opened the discussion by asking discussants to enumerate their hypothetical “to-do” lists if given the chance to take charge of the country or state. If given the chance to sit in the Oval Office, participants proffered tasks ranging from implementing a healthcare model based on Massachusetts’s system to term limits for Senators and Representatives to putting an end to the War in Iraq. When asked what they would do if they were to occupy the Governor’s Mansion, demands for health care, another railroad line, and updates to the state’s infrastructure (roads) could be heard.

None of the nine participants indicated any specific changes they would make to the nation’s or the state’s education systems. However, although education was not top-of-mind, all nine of the participants readily, candidly, and intelligently shared their concerns and suggestions for improvement while demonstrating their respectively astute in-depth understanding of the state of affairs as they relate to education.

The moderator asked participants to rank the nation’s economy, their own finances, the nation’s moral values, and the Wyoming public education system on a scale of one to ten, with one being “extremely bad” and ten being “extremely good.” The box to the right shows the participants’ ratings.

PARTICIPANTS' RATINGS		
	MEAN	MEDIAN
PERSONAL FINANCES	5.6	5
NATION'S ECONOMY	5.2	6
WYOMING PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM	3.7	3
NATION'S MORAL VALUES	3	3

Despite the fact that not a single one of them mentioned education initially as something they would change, they were unrestrained in their criticism of Wyoming’s public education system, ranking it a 3.7 on the 1-10 scale. Were that converted to a grade, it would most certainly be a D or an F. These numbers are that much more remarkable given that the focus group was conducted among ubiquitous proclamations of a poor and declining national economy.

Which Came First: The Regulation or the Problem?

To begin the more focused discussion of Wyoming public education, participants were asked to share their biggest concerns with respect to the topic. With answers ranging from a lack of parental involvement to national regulation to the impact of immigration, discussants voiced a variety of worries that were, in many ways, the causes or effects of one another. Case-in-point: the one participant’s apprehension over No Child Left Behind could be the result of the schools’ poor performance that could be due in part to the impact non-native English-speaking students have on the districts’ scores. Although participants did not necessarily make these associations explicitly, one could logically connect the dots between their individual responses.

“There are too many students not getting enough individual attention and they get lost in the process. Parents are taking up the slack doing homework at home because they [teachers] are not covering what they should cover during the day. There is not enough discipline in the schools, especially on the playground.”
—Theresa

“My vote would be higher if there were more adequate programs for gifted and children with learning disabilities. I do not see problems with discipline, but there needs to be a much stronger gifted education program.”—Victoria

“This is indirectly related to Wyoming, but I do not believe in No Child Left Behind or that grade-school kids should be doing 2-3 hours of homework a night.”
—Patricia

“In Wyoming, we are suffering with an immigration problem and how it affects the school district. There should be a summer for a child to take an English course paid for by the Federal Government to get them ready to start school.”—Mary

Although some participants hinted as to whom they believed should be the important individuals in a child’s education during the beginning of the discussion, the moderator probed discussants to share what role specific individuals, such as parents and teachers, played in a child’s education. **Participants clearly indicated their preference that parents play the biggest role in the education system, but at the same time they expressed a certain amount of discontent, noting that parents are often powerless to influence or hold the school board accountable. They recognized the school boards as having the greatest, albeit not necessarily most positive, influence on what happens in the classroom, but simultaneously wanted the school boards to remember for whom they work.**

“I am not as familiar with the school board. I think parents need to be involved. It makes a huge difference in both parents and children’s relationships with the teachers. The teachers think the principal and school board are in charge.”
—Elizabeth

“The school board does not listen to parents. I wanted a filter and the computer system and they would not do it.”—Donna

Idea of Merit Pay Embraced, But Perceived Hurdles to Implementation Worry Some Wyoming Voters

When the discussion turned to teacher compensation and discussants were asked to share their knowledge of *how* teachers are paid, participants cited what they perceived to be inequalities in salaries not only across the county, but also across the state, noting that the City of Jackson pays its teachers more than other places throughout Wyoming. They noted that the higher salaries in Jackson were the result of a higher cost-of-living in the city, which they believed was the standard determinant of salary across the state and country.

When the moderator put forth the idea of enhanced compensation for teachers based on student performance, most participants supported the idea, but some were less eager to voice their endorsement. Some were cautious not because they expressly opposed the idea, but because of the obstacles they saw in the way of implementing merit pay, namely, the teachers' unions and the language barrier (for which they say teachers are not necessarily responsible) that allegedly affects student performance. However, reluctance to utilize a single standard was countered when a participant suggested that they model the business world: use different measurement techniques. **This part of the discussion indicated that participants do not see the schools as any different from businesses in the private sector; they expect quality results, efficiency, and innovation at a reasonable cost.**

"If they aren't effective, we should be able to get rid of the teachers. You should compare with another school to judge effectiveness. Find out why one child is doing better than the other: is it the teacher or is it the kid?"—Herman

"The effectiveness should be used to determine if they should be retained. There is simplicity and beauty to having benchmarks in a large administration by which to pay people."—Veronica

"You have to take the Latino element into consideration and the reason why they cannot meet the 'No Child Left Behind' standards is because 30% of the class does not speak English. It's impossible to come up with a rating of compensation to child performance because of the language barrier."—Mary

"Teachers unions have been against merit pay so it will be difficult to get it through."—Adrienne

"In business, the managers will be responsible and find different ways to evaluate effectiveness. So, in school, the principals and superintendents should sit in on the classes and be knowledgeable enough to make tough decisions. The PAWS [Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students] drives me nuts because the kids have to take this test for the teachers to be evaluated. It doesn't make sense to me. It's a lot of pressure on kids to do well so their teachers will be evaluated."
—Patricia

However, one person saw merit pay as a "Band-Aid" fix for the overall problem of poor-quality public education, pointing out that teachers can only do so much, if parents refused to be involved.

"I used to be a coach and the biggest problem was the parents. I could not get the parents to come to the game or bring the kids in. There was a lack of parental involvement. I traveled more than 50 miles to pick up kids and paid for gas. Parents didn't care and were too busy doing their own thing."—Herman

Do Mom & Dad Need Detention?

Taking the comments about the role of parents to another level, participants were asked to share what rights and responsibilities parents should have in their child(ren)'s education. Discussants shared their disgruntlement with Teton County (Jackson) parents, whom they said were not active in the schools and inattentive to attendance and discipline. Many in the room said that adults in the community were more interested in attending to their own affairs rather than attending to the needs of their children.

In a rare indictment of their one's "own backyard," they said that Jackson was an exception, however, to the rest of Wyoming where they perceived parents were more involved. And, quite ironically, parental involvement was measurably increased when they believed a teacher disciplined too much.

Wyoming Voters Express Support for School Choice, With Reservations

Before disclosing the term "school choice" to participants, the moderator asked the group to share their feelings about allowing parents to select the school their children attend without geographical restrictions and additional costs. Participants overwhelmingly supported allowing parents this option, but at the same time, brought up some of the more contentious "political" elements (or, frankly, misconceptions) related to school choice, such as additional taxpayer costs and potential racial overtones. When asked if it is better to assign children to one public school based solely on where they live or allowing the parent to choose from a variety of schools, discussants proffered answers spanning the spectrum:

"The kids deserve the right to go to any school. I prefer kids to be in the neighborhood they're close to and their kids are used to."—Corbett

"I would vote for sending a child to another school at no additional cost, but most kids around me go to Wilson because they don't want to send their kids to Jackson. They do not want to pay extra to go to different public schools as long as there is enough room at the school they want to attend."—Theresa

"Effectively, it's happening in Teton as far as public schools are concerned. They are coming from all over. I have heard people say that the movement is racist in origin, saying that they are getting the kids away from the Latinos. Wilson has one-tenth of the Latino population compared to Jackson."—Victoria

One participant with two children (one in a Christian academy and one in public school) expressed her desire to see tuition for the private school to fall because she feared having to send her child back to the public school where she feared he would "go backwards." Another participant countered her point with his own personal experience saying the students he has tutored in both private and public schools were on par with one another.

Some participants briefly discussed Wyoming's Journeys School (an independent school in Jackson Hole) *sua sponte* and shared their dissatisfaction with the non-public venture.

“I have spoken with parents who have taken their kids out of the Journeys School. Kids there have slipped behind in math or other subjects. They were a year lower in math than they should have been.”—Adrienne

“I reject the Journeys School because they could not accommodate the math structuring needs of my children.”—Victoria

A single, anecdotal experience can often “jade” a person’s perception of “the big picture.” As is the case in quantitative research, it is important to distinguish an outlier from a trend; although one or two people may have had negative perceptions of non-traditional schools, their comments are not necessarily indicative of an overall disapproval of school choice, charters, and the like. In fact, throughout the discussion, Adrienne and Victoria, the critics of Journeys, were two of the most vocal supporters of the tenets and principles of school choice and charters.

The moderator then provided a definition of “school choice,” as below. Interestingly, no participants challenged the source or the accuracy of this definition, but tried to sort through the barriers that could prevent them from utilizing such an option.

Moderator: School choice is a broad term that can refer to a number of educational opportunities and programs. In this case, I am speaking about allowing parents to use their own tax dollars to send their children to a school other than the public school assigned to them based on where they live. This may be a public school in a different district or a private religious school. Based on this definition, overall do you think school choice is a positive or negative thing? Why?

*“I would rather have a boarding option in Casper than doing the commute.”—
Victoria*

“It is difficult in the state of Wyoming to move children because of the distance. I cannot imagine not working with the teachers instead of hauling your kids to another city.”—Mary

The discussion once again inevitably drew in finances, as standards and taxpayers became a point of contention among the participants. Although in the beginning stages of the conversation the participants rated their personal finances as better than the national economy overall, Wyoming schools, and the nation’s moral values, participants still wanted to protect their pocketbooks.

*“This is not necessarily as it is; in Wyoming, the kids go to public schools where money does follow the student and a private school where money does not.”
—Victoria*

“If tax dollars go to private and religious schools, then the PAWS test would have to apply to those schools also. Whoever hands out tax money should determine the criteria for the PAWS test.”—Theresa

“If we are going to give money to a school that is not standard, then you have to teach certain subjects. Journeys School would protest and say that they have their own program even if it does not meet your own standards.”—Victoria

Charter Schools Met with Varying Level of Knowledge and Enthusiasm

Six of the nine participants indicated familiarity with charter schools. And, despite the focus on the actual and presumed financial obligations and constraints, no participants expressed negative feelings towards charter schools. While three participants said that they had positive feelings about charters, the majority (six) said they were neutral. When asked to explain their sentiments, the positively-oriented discussants shared some of the struggles charter schools must overcome in order to grow and to win the support of the populace:

“There is an organization that has set up charter schools across the country and has done extremely well. They have been very well received, maybe through testing. The challenge is why give money to that instead of improving what we have.”—Patricia

“That is part of the challenge. It’s parents nationwide deciding that the education their children receive is not meeting their needs and then having to get state recognition and money.”—Victoria

One participant who initially expressed a neutral feeling towards charter schools provided a very positive description and assessment of the schools when asked to describe them.

“The benefit [of charter schools] is that parents have deliberately chosen the school they want their child to go to. If the parent has a charter school choice, it is better for the child. I am unsure if it is better for the teacher because I have a relative who works in a charter school and does not get paid the same as other teachers. He does it because he is young and idealistic and believes that charter schools are better with even lower pay.”—Adrienne

“I like the idea of choice and choosing your schools.”—Corbett

“The problem is if you have all the good parents go to the charter schools, then you have the bad parents at the public school. If you gut the public school of all its best students and best parents, what have you left for success at the public school?”—Victoria

Over the years, the polling company™, inc. has done numerous surveys for the Center for Education Reform across the nation and in several states. In each survey, respondents were asked to characterize charter schools as “public,” “private,” “magnet,” or “religious.” Although no qualitative conclusions can be drawn from this discussion, the Wyoming discussion yielded a higher awareness of charter schools as “public.” Previous work has indicated awareness levels to be in the mid-20 percent range.

HOW WOULD YOU CLASSIFY CHARTER SCHOOLS? (MULTIPLE RESPONSES ACCEPTED)	
WYOMING DISCUSSION GROUP, SEPTEMBER 2007	
PUBLIC	6 OUT OF 9
PRIVATE	1 OUT OF 9
MAGNET	5 OUT OF 9
RELIGIOUS	2 OUT OF 9

The moderator then read aloud and posted on an easel a definition of “charter schools.” When asked to share their reactions, the explanation again spawned a discussion of finances. Although not all the participants were parents of school-aged children—or any children—they all shared one thing: everyone contributed to the community coffers. In essence, they all shared a proximity to the situation and an interest in its outcome. There seemed to be neither shrugged shoulders nor indifference between those participants with children and those without. While no one objected to public financing of schools, there was a mutual understanding that the tax dollars should be used efficiently and wisely and at the discretion and consent of the people, thereby making it a truly “public” school.

Moderator: Charter schools are public schools formed by communities of parents, teachers, and other concerned individuals and open by choice. They are held accountable for student results but free from most burdensome rules and regulations other public schools must follow except for health, safety, discrimination, and standardized testing requirements. Charter schools are funded by public tax dollars but do not cost taxpayers any additional money over what they already pay. The tax dollars that previously went to the public school the child was attending ‘follow’ the child to the new school. What is your reaction to this definition of charter schools? What is most appealing or surprising? How, if at all, does this change or help form your impression of charter schools? Why?

“I think that was a good definition. The charter schools still have to do testing, but are not bound by rules that aren’t working. I would rather apply my tax dollars to a private school. The ratio at the private schools are very small. The teachers have lots of help. One-to-one teacher to child ratio. However, in home school, my kid is getting a private tutor all day.”—Theresa

“One of the issues that we have is the attempt to create a charter school: who is to say if you have the idea, why not go out and do it and expect the money to follow it instead of having to beg the school district to allow you to do it.”—Victoria

“It appeals to me as a parent of three small children, but is this a valuable use of your tax dollars?”—Corbett

“It depends on how they are different rule-wise. Are they focusing on a separate area similar to the magnet schools?”—Elizabeth

“I see the words ‘does not cost additional tax dollars.’ We are paying the same amount per kid no matter where the kid goes. What does this do to the school tax rate that everyone is paying?”—Adrienne

“If you get the same education at public and private schools, why would you pay more to send them to private school?”—Herman

“There are smaller classrooms. [I like that.]”—Patricia

The moderator then presented the participants with six facts about charter schools on an easel and asked them to indicate whether each point made participants feel more positively towards charter schools. Each participant was invited to vote for a maximum of the three statements that they deemed most compelling in supporting charter schools. One woman suggested the seventh element which had been discussed earlier – teacher pay tied to student performance. Five others rallied behind her, placing it among the most appealing aspects of charters to the group. The results appear below.

CHARTER SCHOOLS...	
6	TIE TEACHER PAY TO STUDENT PERFORMANCE.
6	EMPHASIZE AND OFTEN REQUIRE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT.
6	EMPHASIZE INNOVATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS.
3	ARE REQUIRED TO MEET THE SAME STANDARDIZED TESTING AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENT REQUIREMENTS AS OTHER SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT.
3	EMPHASIZE ACCOUNTABILITY – FROM STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS.
3	DO NOT COST TAXPAYERS ANY ADDITIONAL MONEY – THE TAX DOLLARS THEY ALREADY PAY SIMPLY FOLLOW THE STUDENT FROM THE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL TO THE CHARTER SCHOOL.
2	ARE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

One of the recent debates surrounding charter schools is the use of the word “public.” Some have argued that there is an inherent value in the word and that using it compels citizens to support charter schools. This discussion demonstrated quite the opposite, as only two participants said that the “public” element would be one of the most appealing characteristics of a charter school.

Although previous parts of the discussion led with concerns of finances, most participants did not select “no additional taxpayer costs” as the most compelling aspect of charters. Nonetheless, their previous comments indicate that “no additional taxpayer costs” is a hidden expectation, almost the “cost of admission” for them to sign on to charters in their area and across the State of Wyoming. These residents need to be reassured that they will not pay more, but most importantly, they need to know the academic/educational benefits that will result from such endeavors.

As was the case in several other parts of the discussion, participants expressed their belief that Mom & Dad are fundamental to a successful school.

“Why can’t we make parental involvement a requirement in a regular public school by having parents sign things every day or give teachers time to meet more often with parents?”—Mary

“In the charter schools, they can kick the kids out. If parents do not get involved, they should be able to kick out the kids. In elementary school, it is a lot easier to get in and be more involved than in middle school or high school. They should make it friendlier for parental involvement or observation at the middle or secondary levels. Nothing on the board surprises me. I don’t have a problem with charter schools”—Victoria

The moderator then proceeded to discuss the laws regarding charter schools and participants’ familiarity with such legalities. One participant, Victoria, shared her own personal experience and struggles with trying to transform a formerly public school into a private school, *“I went through a process where the board was heavily involved in whether or not a closed charter school could become [a private school] and it became a private school because it was delayed for a long period of time.”*

Her comments indicate that life stories usurp legalities and that bad experiences will probably inform opinions. It is possible however, to use those personal stories not only as an impetus for change in law, but also in public opinion.

The moderator explained the current law regarding the formation of charters in Wyoming. Most of the reactions to this objective explanation were negative, sensing that the State had passed an impossible standard.

Moderator: Currently in Wyoming charter school applications must be approved by local school boards. Applications denied by the local school board may be appealed to the State Board of Education. In order to get a charter up and running, it must be approved by 10% of the teachers in a given school district or 50% of teachers in a particular school AND 10% of parents in a school district or 50% of parents in a school. When a parent decides to enroll a student in a charter school, 95% of the funding that the school district would have given to the regular public school to educate that student follows him or her and goes to the charter school. Did anyone know this was the law?

“That sounds tough [to meet], especially if the school district is protective.”
—Victoria

“I don’t know if they will ever allow it to go any further.”—Theresa

“There should be an either/or somehow not having the board of education be the gatekeeper. Because if half of the parents in a school and 10% of the district is interested, then there is obviously something there.” – Elizabeth

“I think there has to be a gatekeeper beyond the interested parents. Somebody for the theoretically good of the district and all the students, which we would like to believe the school board represents.”—Adrienne

When asked if other entities (beyond the local or state school board) should have the power to authorize school boards, participants indicated a desire to examine the policies of other states, demonstrating their preferences for the “tried and true.” They also shared their concerns of “school board protectionism” that could hamper parents from successfully pursuing what they believe to be in the best interest of their children.

“How does this compare to other state charter schools? Do they have this same structure for approving charter schools? If you have so many parents getting together to create a charter school that should be enough.”—Victoria

“I don’t know if they should depend on the school board or any of the people that have to do with the school system because they might think their jobs are going to be taken away.”—Theresa

The moderator responded to their inquiries about “best practices” of other jurisdictions’ when she told them how seven states allow universities to authorize charter schools and how seven others give the authority to mayors and special commissions. That raised many eyebrows and attracted a fair amount of agreement that this would be a more suitable plan for Wyoming.

“That would be better than a school board.”—Corbett

*“I think it should be a combination because our school board does know the ins and outs of running a school district and I like the university being involved.”
—Mary*

“It seems like there is another piece to it and that would be the school district size. If the school consists of ten people, like in the rural areas, then the numbers to approve the charter school would not be feasible.”—Elizabeth

“I believe that an official board of some type should be involved in the checklist element. Is it going to be safe at the facility? Is the basic curriculum sound? Those types of checklists. Once you get past the checklist, is there a need for a charter school? There needs to be an examination of the sustainability that looks into the future. You have to look at the non-qualitative issues—is the budget going to work? Are there budget issues? Sports involvement? Additionally, you have to have the parental side of the qualitative issues—you want a school that will focus on the XYZ.”—Victoria

Evaluation of Media and Materials

In the final section of the discussion, participants were asked to assess the visual elements of a possible outreach and communications campaign, including advertisements, fact sheets, and a logo “close-to-home.” The materials are attached as Appendix B.

Messages Must Have Positive Themes and a Plausible “End Theme”

The first advertisement -- featured at right -- was not well-received in the group. Participants did not respond well to an African-American child, because in the words of one, “*Inner-city. I think that is terrible. Minority child, failure.*” She immediately thought the ad tried to connect failure or potential failure to minority children. Another person pointed out that the African-American population in Wyoming is small and that “*people in Wyoming are going to say, ‘Oh yeah, sounds like someone put the black kids somewhere else,’*” while another said that people in Wyoming would not relate to a Latino child in the ad either.

Those who focused more on the message believed it to be too negative. One person tied the type of messaging to “No Child Left Behind,” when he said “*[NCLB] is a great slogan, but ultimately implies that children are being left behind. It doesn’t imply that are all growing together.*” Another person added the message lacks any promise of success.

Your Children Deserve
A Great Education.
Make sure they get it.

You have rights. Use them.

- Do you know if your child is learning at "grade level" or if your schools are working?
- Do you know if your child's school is on the state's "needs improvement" list?
- Is your child's school safe?

If you said "no" to any of those questions, you may be able to get special help, or even to move your child to a new school.

Know your rights. Contact *the* Parent's Network for Better Education to see if your child's school is doing its job, and to find out what options and choices you have.

Call 1-877-881-9800.
You have rights. Use them.

The Parents Network for Better Education

Your children deserve a
great education.
Make sure they get it.
Call 1-877-881-9800.

The Parents Network for Better Education

Scare Tactics Don't Work...Or Do They?

The second set of materials given to participants, “*Your Children Deserve a Great Education*,” a two-sided card outlining parents’ rights, received mixed reviews. While some felt the messages to be “combative,” others saw them as provocative, so as to instill “fear.” **However, despite their negative comments about the ad, it certainly got them all to think and react with passion.**



“It is combative against the current public school system and I don’t think that would be a good way to start.”—Patricia

“‘Your children deserve a great education, make sure they get it,’ is like saying your child is not getting a good education. It’s like the signs say, ‘Drive Slowly. We love our children.’”—Mary

“This guide comes across like a doctor’s office, i.e. ‘Do you know your heart might fail one day?’”—Theresa

“This emphasizes the word ‘rights’ and I think it should emphasize the words ‘options’ and ‘choices.’”—Adrienne

“It’s negative advertising. It’s pushy and it’s negative. It’s working with fears. I’d like to see an ad that is straight-forward. ‘We all love our children, we want them to do great. There are ways we can do this.’ Not ‘Is your school safe? Is your child performing well? Is the grade level not right?’”—Victoria

Logo... “Go” or “No-Go”?

The focus participants rendered a split decision on the proposed logo for the Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools. While one person said she did not like the image of the Tetons, another person said she liked how the tagline—“Creating quality public schools like no place on earth”—incorporated Wyoming’s existing slogan. Beyond content, two people offered suggestions for improving the visual quality, such as different colors or a more “discreet” logo.



Wrapping It Up

The final media piece, a brochure titled “Great Schools are Made, Not Born,” presented to the participants received high praise. While one person said he did not “get it,” the others liked the title of the brochure and its positive outlook. This brochure takes into account the suggestions participants had made during their previous analyses of other media elements. It is optimistic, it highlights the word “choice,” and it does not use what some of them deemed scare tactics.

The brochure also includes many of the key principles that appealed to discussants when the moderator gave them seven points to evaluate, such as accountability, parental involvement, and innovative tactics.

GREAT SCHOOLS... ARE MADE, NOT BORN.

Have you ever wished you had a school that was attuned to the strengths and unique talents of your child? In most schools, children are assigned to schools based on geography, and local schools may not offer the programs or atmosphere that your child requires to flourish academically and, perhaps, socially. Many families are frustrated with the one-size-fits-all approach of most traditional public schools but have no alternatives. What they seek is an alternative to their assigned school.

If someone told you that you could send your child to a school that broke the cookie-cutter mold of the traditional public school, that was filled with teachers that chose to be there, students that weren't just assigned to be there by zip code, and supportive parents that chose to send their children there, would you do it? Thousands of families today are doing just that, by sending their children to one of the nation's many charter public schools.

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WHAT IS A CHARTER SCHOOL?

Charter schools are independent public schools, designed by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs and others who are interested in providing a quality education to children in their community. Charters operate outside the educational bureaucracy that too often stifles innovation in traditional public schools. They are not private schools as public schools; charters do not charge tuition and they may not “pick and choose” their students, but charters do have similar attributes to private schools, such as the autonomy and accountability that have allowed most private institutions to provide excellent education to their consumers.

CHARTER SCHOOLS OPERATE FROM THREE BASIC PRINCIPALS:

1 ACCOUNTABILITY
Charter schools are held accountable for how well they educate children in a safe and responsible environment, not for their compliance with district and state regulations. In exchange for freedom from these regulations, charter operators promise to fulfill a set of academic and operational goals that they lay out in their charter. Charter schools are judged on how well they meet the goals established in their charter and how well they manage the fiscal and operational responsibilities entrusted to them. If they fail to deliver, they are closed.

2 CHOICE
Almost anyone interested in affording a better educational opportunity for children can start a charter school. Parents, teachers, community groups, and organizations have already started charter schools in many communities across the U.S. and those schools are as diverse as the communities they serve. Charters can be focused on a specialized curriculum, like the Arts, or they may serve special student populations, such as at-risk students. Some schools use progressive educational approaches and others use more back-to-basics approaches. Charter schools are sponsored by entities that want to foster innovation and excellence in schools: state and local school boards, colleges and universities, and other community agencies. Students choose to attend, and teachers choose to teach at charter schools.

3 AUTONOMY
Charter schools are autonomous. They are freed from the bureaucracy and regulations that stifle the energies of most traditional public schools. Instead of jumping through procedural hoops and over paperwork hurdles, educators focus on writing and reaching high academic standards for their students.

Charter schools offer communities the chance to create the greatest range of educational choices for their children. Charter operators have the incentive to create schools that provide new and better services to students, and charter schools transfer the rest of the expense to work harder and be more responsive to the needs of the children.

DO CHARTERS WORK?

Charter schools continue to develop, thrive and, most importantly, serve the children they educate by providing a more individualized instruction that better meets each child's needs. Their success is evident in student achievement—including students who were not previously successful in traditional public schools—and in community demand: most charter schools have waiting lists.

Charter schools typically receive lower dollars than traditional schools, yet they provide more services and demonstrate achievement at lower rates than non-charter schools.

Charter schools are accountable, successful, and provide innovative opportunities for children and parents across the country.

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1-800-521-2118

IV. Conclusions & Strategic Recommendations

Emphasize What Charters Are and What Charters Do: Many of the characteristics of charter schools—namely, that they emphasize parental involvement and utilize innovative teaching methods—appealed to participants. However, they were interested in the results of such educational elements. Although Wyoming’s charter schools do not have as much hard data to share as schools in other states, it is important to make known the successes of charter schools in Wyoming and across the nation, particularly in areas that are geographically and socio-economically similar to Wyoming.

Utilize the Successes of Other States: Other states have leapt ahead and led on charters, primarily because they have fewer laws and regulations, as well as an easier application process. Wyoming participants indicated approval of and interest in allowing third-party authorizers—such as commissioners, mayors, and people in academia—the power to grant charters. The rule of law is open to modification, but is more difficult to change than public opinion. Part of the communications plan should include informing the public about the current law and barriers that exist for parents who wish to improve their children’s education.

It is important to recognize what Wyoming residents perceive to be barriers to overcome in the fight for charters and quality education generally. People appreciate (and endorse) options as long as the choices are available for them. Move charter schools beyond idea to reality, by addressing the logistical hurdles (i.e. transportation) that automatically came to mind among these participants.

One Way to Quell School Board Power is to Make Sure Parents Reclaim It: Unfettered control by the school board is another reason to compel parental involvement. Pointing out the nature of school boards to overstep the bounds of their authority is an easy way to engage and enrage parents and, subsequently, lawmakers.

Emphasize Parental Responsibility...and Opportunity: Throughout the discussion participants shared their belief that parents should be an integral part of the school policy process. More importantly, they stressed that parents must be a part of the classroom experience. They noted that parents should be able to influence simple classroom policy, such as discipline, but at the same time wanted teachers to have the freedom to discipline children in order to control a chaotic classroom. Make it known that charter schools afford parents greater influence *and* responsibility in the classroom, but also compel parents and teachers to work as a cohesive unit with both responsive to each others’ (and the children’s’) needs.

Positive Messaging is Desired, but The “Truth” Has an Impact: In the analysis of the media pieces participants expressed a preference for messages that were positive in nature, but subconsciously their comments indicated the effectiveness of the messages which struck them as negative. A simple discussion of the education “realities” in Wyoming seemed to be one of the biggest attention grabbers in this focus group.

Utilize Stories of Success...And Failure: Each time the moderator turned the discussion to a new topic, participants were enthusiastic about sharing share their own personal experiences with matters related to education. With stories ranging from prior employment in the schools to the success or failure of their own students, all participants had encountered the public school system in one way or another. At minimum, these Wyoming residents have contributed their tax dollars to the school system. Emphasize the collective benefits of a successful school system, why *everyone*—not just parents—has a stake in the system, and why the current structure does not work.

APPENDIX A

the polling company™, inc. *for* Center for Education Reform

Wyoming Focus Group Discussion Guide

Introduction & Explanation of Session (5 minutes)

- Explain confidentiality & discussion “rules”
- Establish that conversation will be videotaped
- No right or wrong answers

- As each participant to introduce him or herself including name, family, where they live and how long they have lived in the area, what they do, etc.

Most Important Issues (7.5 minutes)

- Please complete the following sentence: “If I were in charge of the United States for day, I would.....”
- Please complete the following sentence: “If I were in charge of Wyoming for day, I would.....”
- How would you rate the nation’s economy on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good? Why do you say that?
- How would you rate the nation’s moral values on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good? Why do you say that?
- How would you rate the nation’s public education system on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good? Why do you say that?

Education (15 Minutes)

- I asked you to rate the nation’s public education system. How would you rate Wyoming’s public education system? And how about the local public education system? Why do you say that?
- What are your biggest concerns with respect to public education and schools across Wyoming generally? And what about here, closer to home?
- Continuing with our discussion on education, let’s talk about the elements that are important to a child’s education. I am going to list a few groups and for each one please tell me your perceptions of it and the role each plays in children’s education. For each one probe: Do you think Teachers/Parents/School Board has too much or too little power?
 - Teachers
 - School board
 - Parents
- Let’s talk specifically about teachers for a moment. What do you know about HOW teachers are paid here In Wyoming? (If nobody answers probe with: do they get paid just for showing

up every day or is their pay linked to how well they do their jobs?) Is that a fair or unfair system?

- Some people have suggested considering student performance when deciding how to compensate teachers – meaning that a teacher whose students actually perform well would receive a higher salary and additional financial rewards. Would you support or oppose such a system? Why?

School Choice (15 Minutes)

- Now let's talk about the role of parents in a child's education. What rights do you think parents should have with respect to their child's education? And what responsibilities should parents have?
-
- Generally speaking, how do you think most parents in Wyoming are exercising or handling their rights and responsibilities with respect to their children's education? How have you come to that conclusion?
- As you probably know, most children attending public schools are assigned to the school they attend by the school district based on where they live. Some have suggested that parents should have the option to send their children to a number of different public schools, with no additional cost, based on which is the best match for the child. This may be a public school in a different district or a private or religious school. Which do you believe is better: assigning children to one public school based solely on where they live or allowing the parent to choose from a number of schools? Why?
- The concept we are talking about here is often known as "school choice." And just to define it for you again, school Choice is a broad term that can refer to a number of educational opportunities and programs. In this case, I am speaking about allowing parents to use their own tax dollars to send their children to a school other than the public school assigned to them based on where they live. This may be a public school in a different district or a private or religious school. Based on this definition, overall do you think school choice is a positive or a negative thing? Why?
- Do you think giving parents more of a role in their child's education is a good thing or a bad thing? Why?

Charter Schools Generally (25 minutes)

- By a show of hands, how many people are familiar with "charter schools?"
- Are you mostly positive, mostly negative or mostly neutral when it comes to charter schools? Please explain your answer.
- What do you think of when I say "charter schools?" How would you explain charter schools to someone who was unfamiliar with the term?
- How would you classify charter schools? By a show of hands, tell me who thinks they are:
 - Public
 - Private
 - Magnet
 - Religious

So we are all operating under the same definition, “Charter schools are public schools formed by communities of parents, teachers, and other concerned individuals and open by choice. They are held accountable for student results but free from most burdensome rules and regulations other public schools must follow except for health, safety, discrimination, and standardized testing requirements. Charter schools are funded by public tax dollars but do not cost taxpayers any additional money over what they already pay. The tax dollars that previously went to the public school the child was attending ‘follow’ the child to the new school.”

- What is your reaction to this definition of charter schools? What is most appealing or surprising? How, if at all, does this change or help form your impression of charter schools? Why?
- What are some of the questions that you still have about charter schools?
- Now let’s discuss some of the specifics of charter schools. I am going to tell you some facts about charter schools and for each one, please tell me whether that makes you feel more positively towards charter schools, more negatively, or does not change your opinion: (THESE SHOULD BE PRE-RECORDED ON AN EASEL OR PRESENTED TO EVERYONE IN PRINTED FORM)
 - Charter schools are public schools. Probe this especially – do they seem like public schools? Why or why not?
 - Charter schools emphasize and often require parental involvement.
 - Charter schools emphasize innovative teaching and learning methods
 - Charter schools are required to meet the same standardized testing and other achievement requirements as other schools in the district.
 - Charter schools emphasize accountability – from students, teachers, and parents.
 - Charter schools do not cost taxpayers any additional money – the tax dollars they already pay simply follow the student from the traditional public school to the charter school
 - In the United States today there are approximately 4,000 charter schools educating about 1.2 million students
 - Charter schools are on a performance contract and can be closed down any time for failure to meet the terms of the contract without having to go through lengthy, costly government processes.
 - One factor that determines teacher pay is their success with students.

Charter Schools & Wyoming (25 minutes)

- Does anyone know the current law regarding charter schools in Wyoming?
- (May be given to respondents on a handout) Currently in Wyoming charter school applications must be approved by local school boards. Applications denied by the local school board may be appealed to the State Board of Education. In order to get a charter up and running, it must be approved by 10% of the teachers in a given school district or 50% of teachers in a particular school AND 10% of parents in a school district or 50% of parents in a school. When a parent decides to enroll a student in a charter school, 95% of the funding that the school district would have given to the regular public school to educate that student follows him or her and goes to the charter school. Did anyone know this was the law?

- Generally speaking, do you think this is a fair system or an unfair system? Why?
- Some have said that giving the local school board the power to approve or reject charter schools is a bit like giving Home Depot the power to approve or reject a Lowe's right next door. Do you agree or disagree with this argument? Please explain.
- Others have said that local school boards have a disincentive to approve charter schools because some of the funding that would have gone to the district's regular public schools will now go to the charter schools. Do you agree or disagree with this argument? Please explain.
- Do you think there should be just one group with the power to authorize charter schools or multiple groups? Why?
- Other than the local or state school board, who do you think should have the power to authorize charter schools?
- Other states have different systems for approving charter schools. In 7 other states, universities can authorize charter schools and seven states have other authorizing entities such as state commissions and mayors. Do you think this system is better or worse than the one in Wyoming?

Visual Testing (15 minutes)

To be repeated for each visual tested:

What do you like most about this piece? Which part or parts of it are most effective?

What do you like least about this piece? Which part or parts of it are least effective?

Does anything about this piece confuse you?

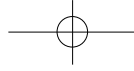
If you could make one change to this piece to make it more effective, what would it be?

In Conclusion (10 minutes)

- Before we finish up, I'd like to go around the table and have everyone answer the same questions for me: If you had the opportunity to talk to your Wyoming state legislators about charter schools, what would you tell them? How would you advise them to act on charter school laws and regulations?

Visuals

Supplied by the Center for Education Reform (CER) and the Wyoming
Association of Public Charter Schools

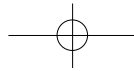


Charter schools: the new ^{public} schools.

BECAUSE **FAILURE** IS **NOT** AN OPTION.

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Your Children Deserve A Great Education. Make sure they get it.

You have rights. Use them.

- Do you know if your child is learning at "grade level" or if your schools are working?
- Do you know if your child's school is on the state's "needs improvement" list?
- Is your child's school safe?

If you said "no" to any of those questions, you may be able to get special help, or even to move your child to a new school.

Know your rights. Contact *the* Parent's Network for Better Education to see if your child's school is doing its job, and to find out what options and choices you have.

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WYOMING ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS



Creating quality public schools like no place on earth



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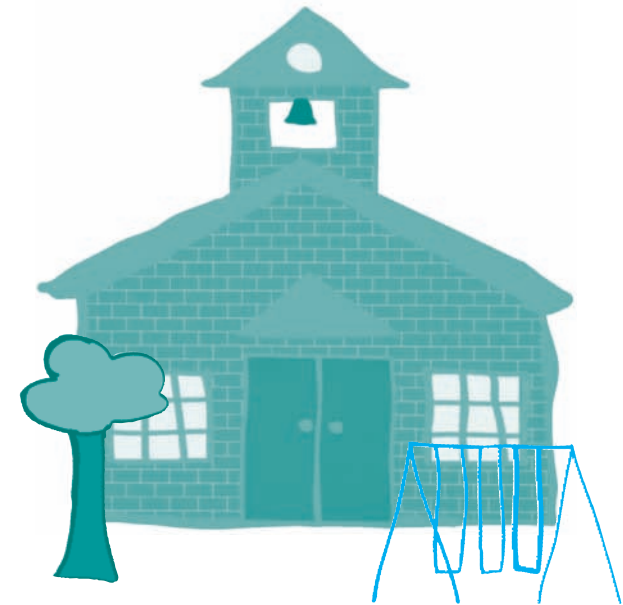
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STORIES THAT NEED TO BE HEARD

RESULTS MATTER

Since opening in 2000, **South Valley Academy** in Albuquerque, NM has had an almost never-ending stream of accolades and accomplishments. The 9-12 grade school, which boasts strong community involvement, was one of four schools in the nation to receive the "Schools for a New Millennium" grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2003. The same year, co-founder Katarina Sandoval received a Milken Educator Award. And in 2004, all 22 students in the school's first graduating class were headed to college. No wonder **South Valley Academy** has a long waiting list.

MAKING THE GRADE

The students of **Wildcat Academy** in New York City came to the charter school with a record of failing grades in conventional public schools. That's what makes the school's success story that much sweeter. Bringing these underserved students back from failing grades was all the school's leaders could hope for. But the kids gave them a lot more. Currently 90 percent pass the Math A Regents test, 87 percent pass the English Language A Regents, 79 percent pass the US History Regents and the Global Regents, 85 percent pass the Living Environment Regents, and 82 percent are accepted to college. These students have come a long way from the failing grades they had in their old public schools.

For more success stories like these, visit www.edreform.com.

DID YOU KNOW?
The people most likely to know that charter schools are public schools are Blacks and Hispanics. In California, single parents were most likely to be able to identify a charter school correctly. In all of the surveys, people with more money tend to know less about charter schools than those who are less advantaged.

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 Center for Education Reform



DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT... CHARTER SCHOOLS

“ But I wish I had one in my neighborhood ”

A summary of national survey research
May 1, 2006
National Charter Schools Week

Charter schools in America serve over a million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. While these innovative, new public schools are meeting parent demands, educating underserved students and doing more with less, two years of study confirm that barely a fifth of all Americans can correctly identify a charter school. However, Americans do embrace some of the most important pillars of the charter school movement, often with pronounced intensity.

As CER wraps up two years of nationwide polling, the results show consistent support for the concept of charters, independent public schools which are designed by educators, parents and others who are interested in providing a quality education to children in their community and which operate outside the educational bureaucracy that too often stifles innovation in traditional public schools. These poll results, coupled with findings from CER's comprehensive surveys of individual charter schools regarding operations, programs and demographics, show that what charter schools offer is much in demand - but little understood.





1 THE IDEA OF ACCOUNTABLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS TOPS THE LIST

One of the golden rules that parents try to teach their children very early in life is that actions have consequences. When it comes to their child's schooling, parents expect the same rules to apply. In surveys conducted by **The Center for Education Reform** and **the polling company™, inc.** 92 percent of respondents said they would feel favorable towards a public school that emphasized accountability, with 74 percent feeling strongly favorable.

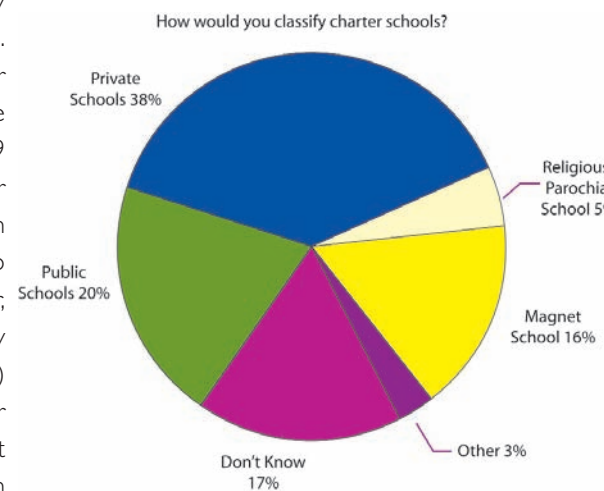
That might explain why more than half of all charter schools report having a waiting list for enrollment. Charter schools must meet the same assessment requirements as other

public schools in their states, and often additional accountability requirements set out in their contracts. Next to accountability, standards and innovation top the list of traits found to be most favorable to the public. Nine out of ten of those surveyed (90 percent) reported that they would favor a school that emphasized standards, with parents even more likely to support this concept.

The notion of innovation found favor among 86 percent of respondents, perhaps because Americans are open to fresh, cutting-edge ideas – something with which conventional public schools struggle.

2 AMERICANS SUFFER FROM AN INFORMATION “UNDERLOAD”

Despite their popularity once explained, the public's awareness and understanding of charter schools is weak. Only 20 percent of those interviewed across the nation could properly identify what a charter school is. However, in states where charter schools are more plentiful, the numbers rise. In California, 29 percent are aware that charter schools are public schools, and in New Jersey, the number rose to 30 percent. Nationally, however, nearly twice as many respondents (38 percent) incorrectly identified charter schools as private. Perhaps that is because charter schools, much like private schools, are smaller and offer innovative programs, and charters allow choices that parents do not typically have at their disposal. In fact, charter schools are for many low-



income parents what private schools are for their more affluent counterparts – an opportunity for their children to do better. A median 75 percent of students in charter schools fall into categories defined as 'at risk'. Nearly 50 percent of charter schools serve a median minority enrollment of at least 60 percent, and more than half serve a free- and reduced-lunch population of more than 63 percent.

Not only are these schools public, but according to the data, they are serving a greater public need as a whole than are conventional public schools.

BIGGEST SUPPORTERS - NOT-YET-MOMS

CER's survey discovered a unique demographic never before identified in education polling. Not-Yet-Moms are those women between the ages of 25 and 45 who are not now but intend to become moms in 3-5 years. Some are single, some are married, some are poor, some are not, some are married, some are black. They span all demographics and political affiliations and offer the strongest base of support by far of any identifiable group. Perhaps that's because women who plan to have children start planning many aspects of those children's lives years in advance, taking the time to think about important choices long before those decisions are upon them. It is Not-Yet-Moms from whom charter schools commanded the biggest applause and they are an important audience with which to communicate about charter schools.

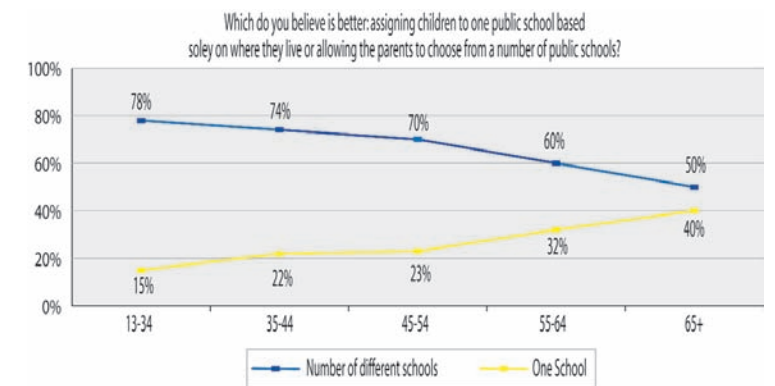
3 THE YOUNGER AMONG US SUPPORT CHOICE IN EDUCATION THE MOST

While most people do indeed agree that choice is better than mandatory assignment (by a 3:1 margin), it is the younger among us where the support is most intense. Fully three-quarters of 18-34 year-old respondents (78%) agree that geography should not be the only factor deciding where a child attends schools. Besides the younger adults, support is highest among Not-Yet-Moms and people with fewer resources. Innovation, choice and freedom to choose are clearly American traits, but they are more likely to be supported by those not already bound by the existing system than among those who have already become vested in the status quo.

It is that status quo that charters schools are least likely to follow.

Among some of the distinguishing characteristics of charter schools, they provide:

- More instructional time with fewer resources
- Multiple curriculum options that respond to the demand for better and more focused curricula
- Hands-on administrators and teachers who manage their own areas of instruction
- Variety of education providers, facilities and venues



4 CHARTER SCHOOLS ENJOY “TRI-PARTISAN” SUPPORT

It has often been suggested that charter schools enjoy support from one political party over another. While those who toil in the charter vineyard firsthand know better, it's often commonly accepted that charters are not widely embraced in certain political and ideological circles. The survey results not only refute this conventional 'wisdom,' but demonstrate that the support of charters is unique in popular culture in that it crosses all party affiliations.

Charter schools enjoyed the often-elusive tri-partisan support of all three major political parties: Republicans (87%), Democrats (74%)—especially woman Dems (77%), and Independents (70%) would all green light community efforts to create these “new public schools.”

Others more likely to support the formation of charters included those earning less than \$30,000 per year; Hispanics (most notably Hispanics aged 44 years and younger), 18-34 year olds, singles, blue collar workers, and those who do not work outside the home.

That might explain why charter school laws have been championed by both Democratic and Republican Governors and Presidents, and why state by state, the only strong laws that become enacted do so with bi-partisan – make that tri-partisan – support.

Candidate surveys taken by The Center for Education Reform over the last several elections confirm this fact. Most candidates now offer at least modest support to the notion of charter schools, a sign that they not only recognize this education reform's political importance among potential voters but also its well-established credibility and success.