

Analysis of Charter School Operators Survey August 6, 2003

Overview:

In June 2003, The Center for Education Reform commissioned Red Sea Communications to conduct an independent survey of charter school operators. The purpose was to better understand the needs of charter schools so CER could assist in identifying and building a more effective infrastructure (and capacity) to serve charter schools locally or nationally. The methodology for this study involved a series of surveys among charter school operators in Arizona.

The goal of the surveys was to gauge the level and quality of assistance charter school operators receive from various state-based and national organizations, and to determine whether the operators actually receive all the help they want *and need* from these organizations.

The results of this survey provide the general types of services charter operators seek out, and have led to more clarity on what charter operators really need on a day-to-day basis.

Key Findings:

After analyzing the results from the survey, CER has drawn the following conclusions:

- 1. Charter operators are aware that organizations exist that serve as resources for, or provide assistance to charter schools. However, there isn't one specific organization that respondents can identify.**

For example:

- 79% of the respondents said that they are aware of service providers for charter schools, both locally and nationally.
- Only 36% of the respondents had "heard of" the Arizona Charter School Association.

- 2. An overwhelming majority of the charter operators say that they receive services from these organizations, and they appreciate the help. However, they want what they're getting, but it's not everything they need.**

For example:

- 91% of all respondents were satisfied with the quality of services provided.
- But only 41% of the respondents said that the assistance was "sufficient," indicating that more assistance was needed.
- The research suggests that while the level of "satisfaction" is high among the operators, it does not mean that their needs are being filled completely.

- When asked which services were provided to them by the support organization, respondents said "legal advice," "budget/grant/fiscal information," and "management procedures." But in every case, a higher percentage of respondents said that they still needed more assistance.
- Over half of the respondents said that the following types of assistance are important to them:
 - i. Special education
 - ii. Legal advice
 - iii. Networking with legislators
 - iv. Public relations
 - v. Legal advice
 - vi. Accounting needs
 - vii. Management procedures
 - viii. Teacher recruitment

- However, when probed further, respondents acknowledge that the only issues that they receive the most assistance with are "budget/grant/fiscal," "management procedures," "training/workshops," and "legal advice." Assistance with public relations, board issues, networking with legislators, teacher recruitment, and special education, while very important to the operators, is not provided as often as the operators need it to be.
- There is a clear indication that charter school operators need direct and timely assistance on the day-to-day aspects of operating a charter school.
- The analysis suggests that there needs to be a clear differentiation between the things that the operators need in order to ensure day-to-day success (board issues, student recruitment/PR) and those that they need for the movement as a whole to be a success (networking with legislators, legislative updates, financial viability, etc.).

3. Charter operators are not concerned with the depth of knowledge or the level of assistance when judging the efficacy of the support organizations.

For Example:

- When asked which aspect of the organization made the respondents most satisfied, the majority of them said "rapport/relationship."
- Factors such as "provided answers," "familiar with law," "networking opportunity," and "technical support," were hardly mentioned by respondents.

4. Charter operators often rely on sources other than the service organizations for help.

For Example:

- 40% of respondents who don't use the support organizations for help, go to their colleagues for assistance.

- 35% of respondents are aware that organizations exist, but first go to the internet, or refer to their colleagues to find organizations that offer charter school support services.

4. There is a clear and strong indication that the schools, as a group, do *not* agree on what service (or services) they need most. Schools are more likely to take what an expert offers than to be able to tell an expert exactly what they want.

For Example:

- When asked to identify the type of service or support they would request first, the largest number of respondents said, "don't know."
 - Even as charter school operators are receiving ongoing help, they don't know what they are getting- or what they need.
 - There is a large variation of services that charter school operators say the support organizations provide; yet there is no consensus on 3 or 4 main services that they can all identify as a group.
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Conclusion:

In these surveys, charter school operators repeatedly indicated that while they appreciate the assistance provided by the various organizations, their needs are not being met in such a way as to ensure the success not only of their individual school, but also of the movement as a whole.

The quality of the assistance being provided is not at the level where charter schools feel confident enough on being wholly dependent on one organization for assistance and guidance.

Charter school leaders often consult "people" rather than "organizations" for help. There isn't a clear consensus among all the operators that a "one-stop-shop" exists to serve their every need. There is a large minority of charter operators who are not familiar or even aware of support organizations, and it may represent a special category of charter schools in need of information about support options.

Charter school operators would like to be told what they need, instead of having to request assistance on an issue-by-issue basis. The operators are too busy running their schools. They do *not* have the time to 1) figure out exactly what they need, 2) figure out if what they are getting is good enough, and 3) ask for guidance and assistance on every issue.

From this, we conclude that an infrastructure should be in place to serve the needs of all charter schools, define the most important issues, and provide high quality, timely assistance on an ongoing basis.