

MEMORANDUM

To: DC Charter School Association Executive Committee (please share with your colleagues)

From: Jeanne Allen, President
Anna Varghese, Director, External Affairs

Date: July 10, 2003

RE: Charter School Survey and Focus Group Results

As you may recall, CER conducted in depth surveys of charter school operators in several states earlier this year. In the District, we conducted this survey through focus groups on February 27, 2003, with 16 of 39 charter school leaders present. These interviews have helped inform CER's work in several states where we conducted interviews.

Following is an overview and summary of key findings that we hope you will use to further inform your own work on behalf of charter schools as a whole in your state.

Overview:

In February 2003, The Center for Education Reform commissioned Red Sea Communications to conduct independent research on charter schools operators. The purpose was to better understand the needs of charter schools so that 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 survey questions conducted by phone for charter school operators in Indiana, California and, in Washington, DC, a series of in-person focus groups. A copy of our survey instrument is enclosed.

The goal of the surveys and discussion groups 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.

Subsequent to the survey and focus groups, CER initiated supplemental discussions with operators that resulted in a more in depth understanding of their exact needs and daily challenges. While the survey provides the general types of services charter operators seek out, supplemental conversations 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, including the notes that were taken during the various discussion groups, CER has drawn three main conclusions:

In all three states, the charter operators know who the service providers are.

For example:

- 97% of all the respondents are aware that organizations exist that serve as resources for, or provide assistance to, charter schools.
- 97% are familiar with the specific organizations.
- In California, 74% of respondents had heard of CANEC and 35% had heard of CSDC.
- In Washington, DC an overwhelming majority of operators are familiar with FOCUS and the DC Charter School Resource Center.
- In Indiana, while most of the operators are aware that organizations exist within their state, there are varying degrees of knowledge about the specific groups.

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

For example:

- 98% of all respondents reported using the services of the various charter support organizations within the past year.
- 94% of all respondents were satisfied with the quality of services provided. 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 they would request first, respondents asked for more of the same services (networking with legislators, legal advice, etc.)
- Over half of the respondents said that the following types of assistance would be important to them: *Special education; Accounting needs; Board issues; Legal advice; Networking with legislators; Public relations*
- Respondents acknowledge that the only issues that they receive the most assistance with are "networking with legislators" and "legal advice." Assistance with public relations, board issues, 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. Running a

charter school is like running a small business, and as one of the operators said, "nothing in this movement prepares you for challenges of a small business."

- 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 and those that they need for the movement as a whole to be a success.
- 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.

The state organizations provide services and support, but rarely initiate contact with charter operators.

For example:

- When asked about the manner in which initial contact was made, respondents are almost three times as likely to initiate contact with the organizations directly (55%) than to have been contacted by those organizations (19%).

Other Findings

- 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.
- 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.

Conclusion:

In these surveys and subsequent conversations, 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 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 the support organizations for assistance and guidance.

We hope this helps guide your thinking about how to best provide services to the growing variety of schools your groups help to serve. If you have additional questions about this or CER's efforts in general, please do not hesitate to call on us.