

Memo

Date: Thursday, April 27, 2006

To: **Teresa Sloyan, Jeremy Kane**

From: **Jeanne Allen, Cindy Boyd, Dan Kidder**

RE: **Initial report and preparation for tomorrow's call**



Summary

As per our operating plan, interviews were conducted with selected individuals throughout Tennessee for the purpose of gauging the knowledge level, attitudes and perceptions of people about the Resource Center; people who may not normally be directly involved but should be aware and/or participating on some level with charter schools in Tennessee. We apologize for any confusion initially in selecting people with whom to speak. It was never our intention to work solely from lists provided; rather-like an independent consultant- we are seeking a broad representation of views that we will use as only one part of an objective evaluation of what is needed to advance the organization and its work most effectively.

Below is a list of people with whom we spoke, as well as a list of people who have been contacted but have not yet returned calls. Those names in bold represent those from Jeremy's list. The others came from our own lists. Two other interviews are still pending. Following the lists are the initial analyses the team here has made of all interviews.

I am waiting until the process is over to reach out to a few other supporters who are already engaged but with whom we'd prefer to talk once a plan is drafted. That includes John Eason and Bill DeLoache.

MET WITH IN PERSON/VIA PHONE

- Dale Ballou - Associate Professor of Public Policy and Education, Department of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations
- Senator Jamie Woodson (R) Chair, Senate Education Committee
- Representative Tommie Brown (D) Vice-Chair, House Education Committee, Member, K-12 Subcommittee
- Representative Steve McDaniel Former National Chairman ALEC (R)
- **Marsha Edwards - Chair, KIPP Academy Nashville, CEO Martha O'Brien Center**
- Sandra Gray - Director of Charter Schools and Choice, Office of Federal Programs
- **Dr. Steve Bares – Chair/Co-founder MASE**
- **Charles Gerber – Chair/Founder, Promise Academy**
- Chris Yancy - Teacher, Promise Academy
- Andrea Tate - Teacher, Promise Academy
- Nancy Wilder - Teacher, Promise Academy
- Blakley Wallace - Principal, Promise Academy
- Desaree Owens - Support Staff, Promise Academy
- John Stone - Education Consumers Clearinghouse
- **Tom Marino, Memphis – Executive Director, Poplar Foundation**
- Bernard Bull, Knoxville area – Professional Educators of Tennessee
- **Charlie Phillips, Chattanooga – Maclellan Foundation**
- **Jack Murrah, Chattanooga – President, Lyndhurst Foundation**
- **Marc Willis, Memphis – Chair/Founder, Stax Music Academy**

CONTACT UNSUCCESSFUL

- Margaret Mary Wilson, President/CEO, Educational Solutions, Inc. (Nashville) – left a message
- Representative Lois DeBerry (D) – left a message
- **Betty Anderson– left a message**
- **Sandra Smithson, Nashville – Founder Smithson-Craighead Academy – left a message**
- **Francie Hunt, Nashville – Director, Stand for Children – left a message**
- Jacquelyn Thomas, Memphis - Supporter – left a message
- Jean Tuggle, Memphis – Supporter – left a message
- Bess Newton (Tamara Ownby is no longer there), Knoxville – CEO Foundation – left a message
- J. Laurens Tullock -President, Cornerstone Foundation – left a message
- Barb Joy, Knoxville – Parent – left a message
- George Perkins, Knoxville area – Supporter – left a message
- Emily Zimmerman, Knoxville – Supporter

I. Analysis of School Survey Results of Operators

Methodology

This segment of the project included a series of 16 questions asked of the 12 charter school operators in the state of Tennessee from April 10-24, 2006 by staff of the Center for Education Reform.

The questions asked respondents about their particular experience with charter school resource providers in the state, and to describe their experience with these providers, to qualitatively express their satisfaction level with these providers, discuss the issues with which these providers assisted, and which issues of any with which they would desire assistance.

Each survey lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, and was conducted by Cameron Coursen of the Center For Education Reform Staff.

Key Findings

Every one of the schools interviewed, or 100 percent of the charter schools in the state of Tennessee, was able to identify the Tennessee Charter School Resource Center as an organization that serves as a resource for, or provides assistance to charter schools in Tennessee. This question required the respondents to give the name of the Resource Center without prompting from the interviewer.

Of the 12 interviewees, 10 of them had utilized the Resource Center in the past and 8 of them were currently utilizing services of the Resource Center with three using them Very Often, three using them often, one using them occasionally, and one seldomly.

The services provided by the Resource Center varied, but most commonly noted were their efforts to create a collaboration among the schools by hosting a Charter School Leadership Roundtable at Vanderbilt University, assistance with interpreting laws, and assistance with meeting legislators. Additionally, the schools cited funding issues, professional development, networking, and special education assistance as the most frequent issues with which they received assistance.

Of the nine schools who had utilized the Resource Center, seven claimed they were very satisfied with the quality of service provided, and two said they were satisfied with the quality of service provided.

Eight of the nine who had used the Resource Center cited service as the quality with which they were most satisfied, with one saying responsive was the aspect with which they were most satisfied. The other choices available were expertise, quality, and cost. When asked the aspect of the service with which they were most DISSATISFIED, none of the respondents provided an answer.

Next, the respondents were asked whether the assistance they were receiving was sufficient or insufficient, all of the nine of the respondents who were currently receiving assistance said the assistance is INSUFFICIENT.

When asked what services were most needed, the schools again gave varied answers, but the most common responses included funding, staff development and recruitment, and improved legislation. Other answers were:

- Legislation to create more schools.
- Better development of existing schools before more schools are created.
- Better definition of "at risk children."
- Broader pools of eligible students.
- Facilities and contracting issues.
- Better public relations and marketing of the good done by charters.
- Best practices.
- Job fairs.
- Assistance with school district conflicts.

Next, the schools were asked to rank 9 different issues in importance, with 1 being very important and 10 being not important at all. The choices were special education assistance, accounting needs, management procedures, teacher recruitment, board issues, legal advice, start-up assistance, networking with legislators, and public relations.

Special Education Assistance

Eight of the 12 listed special education assistance as a number one priority, with only one school listing it as not important at all. The remaining two listed it as a two and a three.

Accounting Needs

Of the 12 respondents, five listed Accounting Needs as a one, or extremely important. Two listed it a three, and the rest rated its importance between five and ten.

Management Procedures

Of the 12 respondents, only one listed Management Procedures as extremely important, with three rating it between two and four. The rest placed it between five and ten.

Teacher Recruitment

Three of the 12 respondents listed teacher recruitment as a number one priority, one as a three, and the rest placing it between five and ten.

Board Issues

Board issues also received a low priority rating with only two schools listing it as a one. The rest placed its importance between four and ten.

Legal Advice

Six of the 12 responded that legal advice was either a one or a two in importance. The remaining half of the respondents placed it between four and ten.

Start-up Assistance

Eight of the 12 respondents rated start-up assistance as very unimportant, presumably because they are all ready operating, and no longer need such assistance. Four of the schools list this issue as extremely important or very important, perhaps thinking back to their own start-up challenges.

Networking with Legislators

Nine of the 12 respondents said that networking with lawmakers, was very important, with five of them rating it a one. The remaining three respondents listed it as very unimportant.

Public Relations

Half of those interviewed rated public relations as extremely important (1 or 2), while four more listed it as very important (3 or 4). Two respondents rated it as unimportant or very unimportant.

Outside Groups

Eleven of the 12 respondents have worked with organizations other than the TN Charter School Resource Center during their time in operation. Four of those schools listed the Hyde Foundation as a one of the organizations with which they have been working. Services provided varied from funding to volunteers.

Other groups include:

- Memphis Bioworks Foundation
- The TN Department of Labor
- KIPP Foundation
- Stax Soulsville, USA.
- Local community groups (Kiwans, Rotary, Etc.)

Greatest Challenges

Challenges faced by the responding schools were varied and frequent. Answers included:

- Food service
- Transportation
- Facilities funding
- Student retention
- Budgeting
- Under prepared new students
- Teacher recruitment
- General funding

- Student assessment
- Inability to recruit at risk children regardless of whether their conventional school is failing

Demographics

The 12 schools serve a diverse population totaling 1,716 students covering all grades K-12.

II. Analysis of Tennessee Citizens Survey Results for the Tennessee Charter School Resource Center

Methodology

This segment of the project included a series of 10 questions and natural conversation with identified charter school stakeholders in Tennessee. These surveys were conducted from April 10-26, 2006 by staff of The Center for Education Reform.

The questions asked respondents about their particular experience with charter school resource providers in the state, and to describe their experience with these providers, to express their level of knowledge of current charter school laws, discuss the issues with which they would seek assistance, and to share what they believe is the biggest issue facing education and charter schools in Tennessee today.

Each survey lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, and was conducted by Cindy Boyd and/or Dan Kidder of The Center for Education Reform.

Key Findings

The survey of charter school stakeholders in Tennessee revealed a complex, but not contradictory, set of opinions held among respondents. While four of the 13 respondents had not heard of the Tennessee Charter School Resource Center, the nine who had reported mostly sufficient levels of overall satisfaction with the assistance being provided. This response was accompanied by the sentiment that additional and more effective support is required. It is important to point out that only seven of the nine respondents who know of the Resource Center could give the name without prompting from the interviewer.

While eight survey respondents reported that they were very or somewhat familiar with the Resource Center, five reported that they were vaguely familiar or completely unfamiliar with the Resource Center. Those eight respondents in the very or somewhat familiar categories expressed positive interaction with the Resource Center. Three of those eight had contact with the Resource Center either very often or often, four had contact on an occasional basis, and one seldom had contact.

The services that the Resources Center provided to respondents varied. The services of note include, providing guidance in interpreting Tennessee's charter school law, assistance to charter schools applying for charters, the hosting of the Charter School Leadership Roundtable at Vanderbilt University, and assistance with meeting and lobbying legislators.

Of the 13 stakeholders interviewed six said that the Resource Center provided them with sufficient information to determine their position on educational issues. Three said they felt the information was insufficient, one said that it was too early to say and three either did not or could not answer.

Six of the 13 respondents said that they felt they were very familiar with Tennessee's charter school law, one respondent was somewhat familiar, two were vaguely familiar and two did not answer. One respondent further stated that it would be a relief off of him and his charter school if he knew could contact the Resource Center when he had a question about the law. He stated that he currently did not believe he could do so.

When asked what assistance the respondents would seek on educational issues, the respondents gave varied answers including the following:

- Personal income by school district to help set equalization rates. (This information is currently available by county but not by school district.)
- How many students are *failing* but not eligible to attend charter schools because they are not in *failing schools*.
- The negative impact of teacher unions and how they are ruining public schools.
- Test scores for every child in Tennessee.

When asked more specifically what assistance the respondents would seek on charter school issues the most common response was a way to create a greater awareness in the community of what charter schools really are and how successful they are. Other responses included:

- More information about conversion schools.
- More opportunities to lobby and meet with lawmakers.
- More educational/networking forums with other charter school operators/teachers/principals.
- More information on legislation that would impact charter schools.
- Information on how other states have successfully passed strong charter school laws.

Nine of the 13 stakeholders said that they have been provided with information or resources on charter schools from other organizations. Except for Memphis Tomorrow, most of these organizations were national organizations. They included The Center for Education Reform, National Alliance of Charter Schools, National Charter School Clearinghouse, US Department of Education, KIPP Foundation, National Association of Charter School Authorizers, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, National School Board Association, and Philanthropic Roundtable.

Next the respondents were asked what they believed is the greatest issue facing education in Tennessee. The three top answers were unions and their stronghold on schools and the legislature, failing schools, and the education crisis not being recognized. More answers included:

- An inability to remain globally competitive.
- Uninspired teachers.
- Not meeting the needs of students.
- Failure of vision.
- Lack of money.
- A lack of value being placed on education.
- Low graduation rates.
- Lack of accountability, parental support, and leadership.

- NCLB Act standards being set too low that then give an unreal perception of student achievement.
- Lack of high standards and accountability of students.

Finally, the respondents were asked what they believe is the greatest issue facing charter schools in Tennessee. There were three answers that were mentioned by a majority of respondents. Those were, the union stronghold on the schools, school boards, and the legislature; the lack of public knowledge of what charter schools are; and the current, very restrictive law. Additional answers included:

- The public perception that charter schools are harmful to public schools.
- Maintaining accountability of charter schools to ensure success and academic excellence.
- A Democrat governor who is unlikely to push or assist with charter school legislation.
- Facilities funding.

Conclusion

According to the data collected and the conversation conducted with identified key charter school stakeholders in Tennessee, it appears that the greatest challenges facing charter schools are the organized unions, a high level of negative public perception towards charter schools, and a narrow and limiting charter school law. These issues are intertwined with one another and therefore cannot be combated individually. The unions have successfully sent a message to the citizens of Tennessee that charter schools are evil. That message has gone, for the most part un-counteracted, and therefore has been allowed to plant itself in the minds of legislators, parents, and Tennesseans. The Resource Center is an established and highly regarded organization. The information gathered in this survey will allow the Resource Center to create a plan of attack in creating a strong PR message. That message will allow the perception of charter schools to change and allow the public to see that charter schools are the future of our education system.