Analysis of Charter School Operators Survey
July 15, 2003

Overview:

In June 2003, The Center for Education Reform commissioned Red Sea Communications to conduct and 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 and Michigan.

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 provides the general types of services charter operators seek out, and has 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 three main conclusions:

1. **In both states, the charter operators know who the service providers are.**
    For example:
    - 81% of all the respondents are aware that organizations exist that serve as resources for, or provide assistance to, charter schools.
    - 93% are familiar with the specific organizations.
    - In Arizona, almost 40% of respondents had heard of the Arizona Charter School Association (ACSA) and 74% had heard of Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA).
    - At the same time, it's also important to note that nearly 1-in-5 respondents were not aware "of any organizations that serve as resources for, or provide assistance to, charter schools." Another group of respondents – also nearly 1-in-5 – reported never having used a support organization, and a much smaller number of respondents professed being "aware" but "not at all familiar" with such organizations. Taken together, these three groups constitute a *significant population* (approximately 40%) of the total sample surveyed.

2. **An overwhelming majority of the charter operators say that they receive services from these organizations, and they appreciate the help. The key point here is: *They want what they're getting, but 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.

- 93% of all respondents were satisfied with the quality of services provided.
- 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 they would request first, respondents asked for more of the same services (legal advice, access to more funding, management procedures)
- Over half of the respondents said that the following types of assistance would be 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 and those that they need for the movement as a whole to be a success.

3. 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.

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 the support organizations 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 represents 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.