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Analysis of Charter School Survey 1996-1997

The Center for Education Reform surveyed 504 charter schools in operation in the 1996-1997 school year. Below we present the responses from 300 schools who returned the survey, representing all of the 16 states and the District of Columbia where charter schools were in operation during that school year.

ABOUT THE RESULTS

We asked operating charter schools general questions about their educational programs and operations. To lend some uniformity to the responses, we provided a number of options for each question, in the form of check-off boxes, as well as a space for write-in answers. Perhaps not surprisingly, in a movement characterized by innovation and individualization, for some questions we received more check-offs of the "Other" box, and write-in answers, than for any other single option. Clearly charter schools are doing their own thing. And in so doing, they're blazing trails to excellence and consumer satisfaction, with 65% of respondents reporting waiting lists.

Two notes: 1) not all schools responded to each question, so percentages are based on responses to particular questions, not on the 300 schools overall who responded to our survey; 2) total responses add up to more than 100%, because schools could, and did, give more than one answer to each question (even in places where we didn't anticipate it, like school location).

OVERALL SURVEY RESPONSES

Total School Responses (to all or part of the survey): 300
Average Enrollment (based on data for 294 schools): 282 students

Percentage of Schools Reporting Waiting List: 65% (194 schools)

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Average Waiting List Size: 135 students (119 schools provided data on waiting list size; the average enrollment for those schools was 295 students.)

SURVEY RESPONSES BY CATEGORY

I. Program Information

Curriculum / Instructional Focus

Total Responses to This Question	261	100%
Thematic Instruction	96	37%
Science / Math / Technology	67	26%
Back-to-Basics	63	24%
Outcome Based Education	52	20%
Core Knowledge	50	19%
School-to-Work	32	12%
Arts	30	11%
Home / Independent Study	29	11%
Bilingual / Foreign Language	26	10%
College Prep	22	8%
Montessori	14	5%
GED	13	5%
Waldorf	6	2%
Paideia	1	0%
Other*	86	33%

* Write-in responses in the "Other" category for Curriculum include: American Sign Language; business/ entrepreneurship; classical; direct instruction; high school completion; International Baccalaureate; project-based; integrated; interdisciplinary; multi-age; and traditional.

Population Served / Targeted

Total Responses to This Question	233	100%
At-Risk/Drop Outs	93	40%
All / General *	75	32%
Low Income	68	29%
Minority	61	26%
Gifted and Talented	56	24%
Special Education	52	22%
ESL / Bilingual	29	12%
Adjudicated Youth	24	10%
Disabled	8	3%
Other **	46	20%

* In our survey, we did not include a check-off box for, as some respondents put it, mainstream or average students, the neighborhood community, or "Regular kids – anybody and everybody!"

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However, that write-in was so prevalent that we added an "All / General" category to the above chart. (We do not intend to imply that charter schools are exclusive. Charter schools, as public schools, are required to accept all students; however, either by default or purpose, charters may serve a particular, identifiable subgroup of students.)

** In addition to responses included in the "All / General" category, write-in responses in the "Other" category for Population Served / Targeted include: teen parents; expelled students; rural students; urban students; and non-traditional learners.

II. Operational Information

Charter School Type

Total Responses to this Question	243	100%
Start-up	165	68%
Public School Conversion	45	19%
Private School Conversion	33	14%

Charter Granting Body

Total Responses to this Question	265	100%
State Chartering Body *	117	44%
Local School Board	114	43%
University / College	43	16%
Other	9	3%

* "State Chartering Body" includes State Boards of Education, as well as the Massachusetts Departments of Education (15 respondents) and the Arizona Charter School Board (29 respondents).

Applicant / Operator

Total Responses to this Question	257	100%
Non-Profit Organization	99	39%
Public School	78	30%
Parents	56	22%
Teachers	43	17%
For-Profit Organization	17	7%
Private School	9	4%
University / College	5	2%
Teacher Union	1	0%
Other*	20	8%

* Write-in responses, in the "Other" category for Applicants / Operators include community groups, members or leaders, and partnerships or coalitions of the various groups listed above, with each other, community groups and local business.

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School Location

Total Responses to this Question	254	100%
District Facility	83	33%
Retail / Commercial	62	24%
Other Non-Profit Facility	31	12%
Church Facility	30	12%
Other Public Facility	27	11%
University / College	6	2%
Museum	2	1%
Other *	42	17%

* Write-in responses, in the "Other" category for School Location, include new construction or modular buildings, private or residential buildings, and various rented, leased, renovated and converted public and private locations, from closed private schools to day care facilities to factories.

Schedule

Total Responses to this Question	257	100%
Traditional	151	59%
Extended Day	43	17%
Year Round	42	16%
Extended Year	34	13%
Other *	28	11%

* Write-in responses, in the "Other" category for Schedule, include block scheduling and 4-day weeks.

Other Aspects of Charter

Total (responses to overall survey)	300	100%
Multiple Locations	56	19%
Part of District-wide Charter	11	4%
Part of Charter Complex	7	2%
Residential (Boarding)	6	2%

III. Additional Information and Comments

CER also provided a section for charter schools to give additional information and comments, as well as asked them if they would be willing to share their expertise with others. Here is some of what they wrote:

Programs, Operations And Philosophy

Charter schools gave us more information about their programs, operation and philosophy:

- West Houston Charter School, TX, is "set up to serve Special Education Students."
- The Arts Integrated Curriculum at Mesa Arts Academy, AZ, "is academically supported by the local public school district and enhanced by art professionals in the area."
- Discovery Academy of St. Johns, AZ, "was begun by parents."

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- Edupreneurship Student Center, AZ, "offers a choice for parents, students and educators who want to provide a *small community setting* with personalized education ... through a thematic study approach, economic based curriculum and character development."
- Flagstaff Arts and Leadership, AZ, requires community service for graduation.
- The program at the Edge Charter School, AZ "has been in existence as a grant-funded program for 12+ years. We became fully independent on July 1, 1997.
- Sedona Charter School, AZ, emphasizes their "low student-staff ratio and parent-school partnerships."
- At Valley Academy, AZ, "students wear uniforms; parents are involved in all areas of school operations."
- The goal of Children's Community Charter School, CA, "is to incorporate mandatory parent participation in an environment where teachers facilitate the students' learning process. The focus is on an integrated curriculum emphasizing the knowledge needed to function in our diverse society."
- Elise P. Buckingham Charter School, CA, is a "performance-based school of *choice* provided by the district."
- At Home Tech Charter School, CA, "all students receive a computer, modem, software and electronic communication accounts during the school year from school at no cost."
- Palisades Charter High School, CA, is "multi-ethnic: 30% white; 30% African-American; 30% Hispanic; 10% Asian." The school's students come from "over 100 zip codes."
- Ready Springs Charter School, CA, has five programs, "including: classrooms, homes school, distance learning and performing arts."
- Sobriety High School, CA, "serves students who are chemically dependent. They require support to lead sober lives and succeed academically."
- The mission of the Pueblo School for Arts and Sciences, CO, "is to develop a K-16 seamless curriculum in partnership with the University of Southern Colorado."
- ACE, LA, "serves 14- and 15-year-old students parish-wide from grades 5-8, preparing them for reading at home school in 9th grade. Additionally we serve students in lieu of expulsion and those court ordered to us."
- Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School, MA, has a "strong emphasis on character development, community service and parental involvement."
- For Colin Powell Academy, MI, the "strength of the school lies with its partnership with the community – businesses, churches, community organizations – and its focus on entrepreneurship training and character development."
- Vista Charter Academy, MI, is a "phonics-based, back to basics public school who accepts *any* and *all* students. We also have a moral component and extreme parental involvement in our program."
- "Alternative approaches to learning" at St. Paul Family Learning Center Charter School, MN, "include a strong advisor program, a personal learning plan for each student, extensive parental involvement, community based learning, differentiated staffing, and a strong emphasis on technology."
- Temescal Canyon High School, CA, is a K-12 charter "comprised of eight individual schools: five elementary, one middle, one traditional high school and a continuation high school."
- Santiago Middle School, CA, requires an "enrollment agreement, uniforms, and 12 hours of parent service."

Successes

Charter schools shared with us some of their ambitions and success stories:

- For Mountain Home School Charter, CA, 1996-97 was "a very successful year! Many students [were] recognized for achievements outside of school work and for academic competitions."
- Bluffview Montessori School, MN, is the "first elementary charter school, and the first Montessori charter school, in the United States."
- Academy Charter School, CO, was the first charter to receive the John J. Erwin School of Excellence Award, in 1996, and received it again in 1997.
- Horizon Charter School, AZ, is "in the process of building a \$7 million facility creating a Community Learning Center including a preschool, K-12 charter school, Arizona State University / South Mountain Community College site, fitness center."
- "The key to success" for Escondido Charter High School, CA, "is having your local school board committed to reform. We have been very fortunate to have a school board that is in favor of providing competition *and* choice to the parents of our district."

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- At Washington Charter School, CA, "our poverty level has gone up 10% since becoming a charter, yet achievement continues to improve as shown from standardized tests, proficiencies, teacher development tests, etc. Would love to share our school evaluation to show phenomenal success."
- Addison Elementary School, GA, is "looking forward to renewing our charter (possibly with a new broader law)! We are in the final year of our charter. We're rewriting it based on two laws."
- The faculty at Jefferson Community School, LA, "does see progress on the part of the majority of students," which includes expelled and suspended students.

Challenges

And some charters told us about some of their challenges:

- A charter school in Colorado said, "Our local district would prefer not to have a charter school. Every year we must appeal to the state in order to be allowed to exist."
- Heritage Academy, Clarksdale, AZ, campus, said: "What a challenge! Too much required by state to allow freedom to be responsive fully to charter mission and local parent desires -- 'Like pushing a tortoise through the Sahara Desert, backward!' We *do* love the freedom and flexibility we have been granted! A great step forward!"

Expert Assistance

At CER's request, charter schools also offered to share their developing expertise:

- New Heights Charter School, MN, is "becoming 'expert' in discipline issues / resolutions, and management of behaviors."
- Community of Peace Academy, MN: "would be willing to offer support or guidance in any area."
- ABC Alternative Learning Center, AZ: "would be happy to offer technical assistance to new charter schools and applicants nationwide. Specific areas include: special education services, parent participation and curriculum."
- Mingus Mountain Academy, AZ, has build up expertise on "Charter Curriculum: Excellence on a Shoe-String; and teaching the emotionally damaged student."
- New Village Community Public Charter School of the East Bay, CA, offered support to other charter organizers in "building a diverse group of participating parents in an urban setting"
- Cherry Creek Academy, CO, offers assistance on governance and board / director relations.
- Mountain View Core Knowledge School, CO, gives the following "Success Tips: don't change your mission or direction; keep communication open and often; be prepared for hard and satisfying work; don't do it unless you can commit to it -- it's not easy; have a great involved governing board and staff -- work well together."
- The area of expertise offered by Heartwood Renaissance Academy, MI, is "developing an arts-integrated curriculum K-12 (K-5 completed at this time)."
- Lake Bluff Academy, MI, has "a great deal of experience with building finance."
- New Heights Charter School, MN, is "becoming 'expert' in discipline issues / resolutions, and management of behaviors."

And Eagle County Charter Academy, CO, summed it up by saying, "Please come visit!"