

Online Survey to Charter School Applicant and District Respondents A Technical Report on Responses Received and Population Surveyed

Institute for Charter School Research

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Introduction

With funding from the 2015 Florida Legislature, Learning Systems Institute at Florida State University has established an Institute for Charter School Research. Its mission is to conduct research on policy and practice related to charter schools with a particular focus on Florida and to provide technical assistance and support to charter school applicants and sponsors. Activities the first year have focused on issues of authorizing and accountability and have included the development of six professional development modules.

Prior to the development of the modules, two activities were carried out to help inform the content of the professional development modules by the Institute: one, a set of two focus groups with charter school applicants and with district staff conducted in November 2015 and an online survey to district respondents and charter school applicants conducted in March 2016. The data gathered in the surveys as well as the information obtained during the two focus groups was used to help in determining topics and information covered in the online professional development modules. This Technical Report provides information on the second of these two activities, the online survey.

Online Survey Development

Information from two focus groups – one with Charter School Applicants and one with staff from Florida School Districts -, held at the Florida Charter School Conference on November 11, 2015 in Orlando, was collected and compiled to assist in the development of the surveys.

Two separate surveys with parallel questions, wherever appropriate, were created, one for charter school applicants and one for district respondents. The resulting surveys included both multiple choice as well as open-ended questions. The working time for both surveys was estimated to be approximately 15 -20 minutes. The surveys were developed in Qualtrics. All prospective respondents were contacted via email and asked to complete to the survey online.

The populations of interest for these surveys were all contacts for charter school related issues from Florida school districts that had received charter school applications within the last three years as well as all main contacts for charter school applications to Florida school districts within the last three years.

Summary of Responses

The responses presented in this Technical Report provided useful information for developing professional development modules on the Florida charter school application process. It is important to remember that the responses included here are the responses of the 16 district respondents and the 57 charter school applicants who completed the surveys. They may or may not be representative of all districts or all charter school applicants.

In a review of comments by district respondents, seven topics were identified.

District Respondents and Charter School Applicant Roles

Almost half of the respondents indicated that their district offices were staffed by one person whose primary responsibility included all issues regarding charter schools, including the charter school application process. Two-thirds reported that they felt their districts were inadequately staffed.

With regard to charter school applicants, almost half (48%) were no longer either directly employed by a charter school or had not been within the past three years. Of those who were, most were principals. Although the remaining 27 applicant respondents were not currently directly involved in the operations of a charter school, they did serve in other capacities (e.g., educational or professional consultant, government employee, business owner).

What Sources of Information Are Used to Understand the Charter School Application Process?

A variety of information was accessed by district respondents and charter school applicant respondents, as displayed in Figure 1. When asked, the most frequent suggestions by district respondents as to where applicants might go for further information included talking with sponsors and existing operators, attending applicant training opportunities, and researching effective educational models. Applicants responded similarly and suggested that other applicants research district needs and refer to a previous application that may be submitted, when applicable.

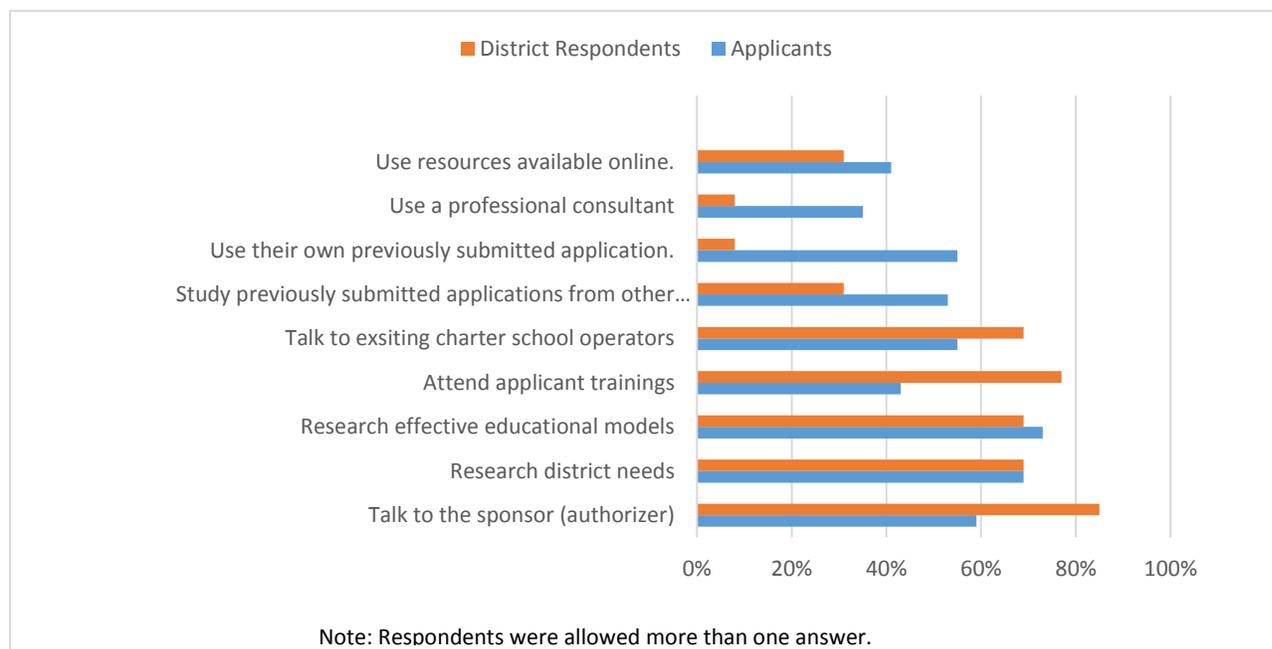


Figure 1. Sources of Information Suggested by District and Applicant Respondents.

District Respondents' Experience with Charter School Applications

Ten district respondents suggested extending the required 60 day timeline so that they would have sufficient time for the review process. Some district respondents also proposed that the model application be amended to include sections on innovations and unique programming to guide the appeal process.

Which Components of the Charter School Application Were the Most Challenging?

Almost all applicant who responded had been involved in a charter school application and over two-thirds were involved with the development of 1-3 applications during the past three years, 2012 through 2015. Over half of the applicants who responded indicated that they had developed applications for only one school district, while other applicants (20%) indicated that they had worked with 2-3 school districts.

Overall, applicants did not find the Educational or Organizational Plans within the charter school application overly challenging. The budget section of the Business Plan, however, was identified as the most challenging element to develop.

Were District Staff and Charter Applicants Satisfied with the Charter School Application Process?

Of the 16 district respondents completing the survey, 15 (93%) indicated satisfaction with the application process for charter schools as specified in Florida statute and in district policy. When asked about innovation in charter school applications, district respondents noted that the Model Application allowed for innovative ideas. One area of concern raised by district respondents was the requirement of the 60 day deadline for the process and review of submitted applications. According to the comments by a number of applicants, this was particularly problematic when multiple applications were submitted and there were too few district staff to manage the review process in a timely manner.

In contrast, two-thirds of charter school applicants who responded expressed dissatisfaction with the charter school application process. Three reasons cited were the length of the application itself and the amount of detailed information required, and the district review and appeal processes.

Which Components of the Charter School Application Process Were Reported as Working Well?

Most applicants noted that the information provided by FDOE including the online Model Application, along with supporting information about the statutes, rules, and calendars were very helpful. Other responses from applicants noted districts' pre-application workshops and feedback were useful in understanding the application process and type of information required.

For district respondents, the identification of specific expectations in the review process carried out by knowledgeable and trained staff and district administrators was considered an element of the charter school application process that worked well at the district level. District respondents also noted that interviews with charter school applicants were useful for identifying the potential strengths and weaknesses of a proposed application.

What Supports for Charter School Applicants and District Respondents Were Suggested by Survey Respondents?

Some examples of suggested supports for charter school applicants include:

- Additional information and guidance from district respondents with regard to expectations and plans regarding district specific policies and procedures (ELL & ESE);
- Options for transportation and facilities;
- Examples of successful applications;
- Webinars on the application process;
- Designated contact person at the district to access during application development to provide feedback on the proposed applications;

- More guidance from the state on charter school governance, finance, educational rules, and laws;
- Authorization of charter school approval process at the state level.

Some topics proposed by district respondents for future professional development or training include:

- The applicant interview process;
- Training for new district staff;
- Review process for Model Applications;
- Rubrics for evaluating applications, such as governance structure, policy and procedures;
- Periodic updates to charter school policies and procedures;
- Charter school accountability standards for management companies;
- Clarity around the necessity of proposals to be clear about the requirements for high levels of student performance and innovation;
- Clarity of district authority during the appeal process.

APPENDIX

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

A list with contact information for all school districts and all charter school applicants between 2012 and 2015 was provided to the research team by the FLDOE Office of School Choice. In total, all 34 district respondents from districts that had received applications within the last three years, were contacted, as were 273 charter school applicants. (It is important to note that the total number of charter school applications for the last three years in Florida is considerably higher than 273 because in many cases, the main contact persons for a charter school application have applied for several schools within this timeframe.) Prospective participants who did not respond to the survey after the initial contact, were sent three reminders before the survey was closed.

Of 273 charter school applicants and 34 school district respondents that were sent surveys, 16 district respondents and 57 charter school applicants who submitted applications in the past three years (2012-2015) were completed. These respondents were distributed across five regions within Florida. Nine applicant respondents submitted several charter school applications in more than one region, yielding 68 applications submitted by the 57 charter school respondents, as described in table 1 below.

Table 1: Survey Respondents by Region

FLDOE Regions	No. of District Respondents	No. of Applicant Respondents
1 – Panhandle (NE)	3	2
2 – Crown (NW)	3	9
3 – East Central	4	11
4 – West Central	3	20
5 - South	3	26
	16	68*

* Nine applicant respondents applied for charter schools to districts in more than one region, yielding 68 applications submitted by the 57 charter school respondents.

Distribution of Charters Schools Associated with District Respondents and Applicant Respondents in 2014-15

District and applicant respondents were asked to identify the number of charter schools in operation in their district during the past year, 2014-15. Altogether, sixteen district respondents reported a total of 243 charter schools. The number of charter schools per district varied widely, ranging from 0 to 50 schools, with the majority of districts (11) reporting fewer than 20 schools, as noted in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of Charter Schools in Operation in District Respondents' Districts (2014-15)

Number of Charter Schools in District	Number of District Respondents
0	1
1-9	6
10-19	4
20-49	4
50+	1

Figure 2 describes the number of charter schools in operation by the 57 charter school applicants who responded to this survey respondents: 30 respondents noted that their charter school organization operated at least one school, while 27 applicants did not have a charter school in operation in 2014-15.

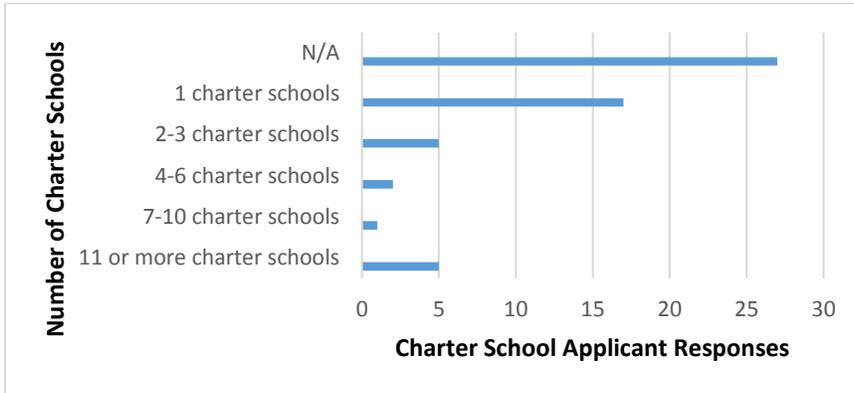


Figure 2: Number of Charter Schools Operated by Charter School Applicants Who Responded to the Survey (2014-15)