



HELPING IDAHO'S CHARTER SCHOOLS SUCCEED: STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FROM A SERIES OF FOCUS GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide strategic advice to Idaho's charter school movement. Driven by public opinion research, including surveys and focus groups in Idaho and elsewhere, these observations may be useful to advocates interested in further invigorating the charter school sector—especially in explaining how parents think about schools, what they really care about regarding their children's education, and how to effectively communicate with parents. These lessons from the field are in large part inspired by the FDR Group's most recent focus group work in Idaho on behalf of Bluum; the observations are augmented by research we've conducted over the past 25 years on K-12 education.

In March 2018 focus groups were conducted with parents of school-age children in Fruitland, Caldwell, Garden City, and Idaho Falls. Participants had children between 4 and 18 years old, and all participants had lived in Idaho for at least one year (many had lived in the state for their entire adult lives). There were mothers and fathers in each group (but mostly mothers); there were people of color in each group (but mostly white); and there was a mix of socioeconomic statuses in each (but mostly middle class). A total of 45 parents participated; verbatim quotes are included to illustrate the strategic insights laid out below. The four focus groups were moderated by Steve Farkas of the FDR Group, who also authored this report.

A few words of caution about the nature of qualitative research: Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring people's spontaneous views on a given topic and for uncovering underlying values that help explain why people feel the way they do. From a policy or communications strategy standpoint, they provide information on how to frame information to appeal to the values and mindsets that underlie people's beliefs. This type of qualitative research is tremendously helpful for listening to people talk about issues, for uncovering the sources of their opinions

and motivations for action, and for generating hypotheses for further research. Nevertheless, focus groups cannot determine how many people hold a particular view, and their findings cannot be generalized to the population as a whole.

8 STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

1. Don't be misled by parents' initially positive evaluations of the traditional public schools; scratch beneath the surface for a complete rendering of their views.
2. Knowledge of charter schools is important...but not always essential.
3. Proof of concept is crucial at the start-up phase.
4. Despite criticism to the contrary, charter schools may actually be pulling kids back into the public school system.
5. Education jargon can be counterproductive.
6. Parents crave honest communication from educators, something they say is lacking in public schools.
7. Differentiating schools — and segments of parents — as a marketing strategy requires a delicate balance.
8. What do parents really want? They want it all.

1. Don't be misled by parents' initially positive evaluations of the traditional public schools; scratch beneath the surface for a complete rendering of their views.

Parents' initial comments about their district public schools can be deceptively positive. But as discussions progress, underlying dissatisfaction often emerges. The lesson for those thinking about starting a new charter school—or trying to evaluate any school for that matter—is to not allow yourself to be misled by initially positive reactions. With a little bit of thoughtful probing, a more nuanced picture may be revealed. Parental discontent shows when they talk specifics: Their child might be a quick learner who is left unchallenged by teachers; or the school's discipline policies fall short; or communication about their child's progress might be lacking. Dissatisfaction is also more likely to emerge among parents who are transplants because they have a baseline from which to compare their current schools.

He is bored, he is not engaged.... Every day he asks me do I have to go to school today. He is 6. I don't want him to hate school.

-- Garden City

She is reading at a higher level but is being held back. You can't move her to a different class to a better situation to keep her growing because of the number of students in each class. So she is stuck there. -- Fruitland

I had my education in India so it is very different for me, and the standards are very different. So when my daughter is doing something, I tend to compare it to how we learned it and how kids back there now are learning. I don't think they challenge the kids enough here. When we visited our family last year, I could see my friends' kids were much more advanced than my kids. -- Idaho Falls

I was so glad to be moving to Boise because they were normally better schools than Seattle, and I was really surprised when I started talking to neighbors and getting other feedback about the school and heard just such a mixed bag. It is not great. It is not good. We have been pretty unhappy with it. And I felt really guilty about that. [I'm unhappy about] the curriculum. The style of education. The lack of continuity from grade to grade. Social emotional education. The worksheet based stuff. It just feels dated and antiquated. -- Garden City

Defenders of the traditional public school system often point to surveys showing high parental satisfaction with their local schools. For several reasons, these can be misleading. One reason is that survey questions generally do not delve beyond the surface, while focus group questions give parents a chance to think a bit more. Another is that when surveys ask parents to evaluate their schools they typically do not specify points of comparison—good compared to what? Another is that people make do and learn to accept what they are given when they have no alternatives. As one parent said:

Most things, when you don't have another option, you try and be happy with where you are at. -- Fruitland

2. Knowledge of charter schools is important...but not always essential.

In Idaho, charter schools are an increasingly known commodity and have penetrated the consciousness of many parents. Even parents who are transplants—

especially those from California—were familiar with the concept. Still, it's best not to overestimate people's familiarity with charter schools since misconceptions and lack of clarity of how they work are still widespread. The most important misconceptions are that charters are private, that they are not free, and that they are not open to all.

My kids, I always wanted them to be in charter schools because charter schools are different.... I like the feel of charter schools. They went to a couple of charter schools around Boise. It is a public school but it has a different education base. -- Garden City

I've worked at a charter school. I did hear about the new one through Facebook.... I was excited because my first two older kids experienced a charter school. And I really liked the charter school.... I just thought this would be a good opportunity. -- Fruitland

For me a charter school meant a free private school where the classes are smaller and they teach them a little more than the public schools do. For me that's what I thought it meant, charter school is free private school. -- Garden City

I have no idea [what a charter school is], you pay for a better education. They may be more in depth, they just don't focus on certain things for a certain amount of time and on to the next. -- Garden City

But we also suspect that the accurate definitional knowledge of charters and understanding how they work are less important to parents than advocates assume. Our judgment is that once you get past geographic proximity, what attracts parents to a school—any school—is the quality of the education it offers: for example, the perceived commitment and skills of its teachers; the comportment of its student body; the perceptions of the level of parental involvement at home; the match of its curricular focus with that of their children.

Having kids as old as I have and as many as I have, I have run the full gamut with Montessori, public schools, and charter schools. It has a lot to do with the teachers that you get and how involved parents are. -- Idaho Falls

To be sure, it is critical for parents to understand that a charter school will be free and accessible to all. But in the end what will matter most is not how the school

is structured or what category it falls under, but whether it fits their family's needs. In fact, one can easily imagine a parent who is completely happy with their child's school without even realizing that it is a charter school.

From a communications viewpoint, it is wasteful to try to explain how charter schools work and what their role is in the K-12 system. Do parents need to know that a rationale for charter schools is that they introduce competition to the traditional public school market and are supposed to drive system-wide improvement? Do they need to know that charter school leaders have greater latitude in hiring and firing staff? Or that charters are at a funding disadvantage because they cannot access local levies? Considerations of this ilk are important to charter advocates but generally irrelevant to a family wondering whether to send their child to a specific school.

Moreover, advocates sometimes tout arguments in favor of charter schools that are counterproductive. For example, the notion that charter schools can be shuttered if they don't work has resonated for reformers looking to innovate. But to the public, closing a school is an intuitively anathematic way to deal with a badly-performing school.

The key when communicating with parents is to recognize that they are not concerned with reforming systems of education nor whether schools are adopting innovative managerial practices. They simply care about having good schools for their children.

3. Proof of concept is crucial at the start-up phase.

In two of the focus group cities, new charter schools were given a critical boost when they were preceded by pilot initiatives that laid the groundwork for the fully developed schools that were to follow. This type of soft launch strategy seems to help for several reasons. It demonstrates to parents that the lead educators can successfully run a program. It helps to counteract the 'I don't want my child to be the guinea pig' doubts that often greet a completely new school. The pilot initiative also becomes a type of marketing showcase that generates word-of-mouth buzz among parents. Finally, it creates what is in effect a starter feeder program that funnels students to the charter when its building is ready.

In Garden City, a very popular summer camp was implemented at the local Boys & Girls Club by the same education leaders who would soon be opening a new charter school. The summer program fostered recognition of the new leaders in the

community, it fostered communication about the new charter school, and it helped to create a natural pipeline of students. Since the charter school building was physically proximate to the Club, the connection was strengthened, and even the building's process of renovation helped create anticipation in the community. Similarly, in Idaho Falls, a highly regarded educator in the district's elementary school started her own charter school in a community member's home. The initial effort was modest and relied on the commitment of a highly active, dedicated group of parents. But it was invaluable as proof of concept to parents who were sitting on the fence, intrigued by the concept but concerned about its implementation. Again, it helped to reassure and to excite parents.

The summer program they ran this summer, around science and engineering, was amazing. -- Garden City

Before they created Alturas, they had a home school they were doing. [A friend's] daughters were in there. They just loved it, they told us about it all the time. We were getting good feedback, but it was still really scary to move my children, take that leap. But I kind of felt like if we didn't do it the first year we might miss out. That was our chance. -- Idaho Falls

4. Despite criticism to the contrary, charter schools may actually be pulling kids back into the public school system.

In the face of perennial accusations that charter schools rob the traditional public school system of students and resources, we found that Idaho's charter schools can sometimes take credit for the opposite—actually bringing students back into public education. This observation is probably most useful as an argument when leadership-type folks are debating the virtues and faults of charter schools, rather than as a discussion point with the general public. But a number of families we interviewed had left private school options such as Montessori, or had stopped homeschooling, and brought their children to charter schools.

We've been to a Montessori which we thought would have been great for one of my sons. We ended up in a charter school, which was fabulous, we loved it.... So when I came here from California and I was able to switch when things went bad? Hell yeah, I'm switching. Because my kids get one shot at this. -- Idaho Falls

When we moved here we knew we wanted to do something a little bit different than the public school. So we went into a

Montessori school for preschool. It was great, but we felt like our daughter could have been pushed a little bit more. -- Idaho Falls

In Garden City, several parents with kids in private school had filed intent-to-enroll forms with the charter school that was scheduled to open in the next academic year.

He attends a Montessori preschool and they also go into Kindergarten, and I love their philosophy for the primary age. Where we choose our house will depend on the school that we are looking at. He may end up going to private school. I really don't know. -- Garden City

The school that he goes to is great, I love it. It is a private school in Nampa, it is great, he gets challenged a lot and I feel he is in a really high level. -- Garden City

5. Education jargon can be counterproductive.

When communicating with parents, a charter school initiative—or any educational initiative for that matter—should bear in mind that the language and jargon used by educators often misses the mark or can even be counterproductive. The language of professionals can lead to misunderstandings when used to communicate with the general public.

One example we observed concerned the term ‘at-risk.’ In Caldwell, when testing parents’ interest in a charter school serving at-risk students, we found that the parents loved the idea of the school that focused on teaching work skills and the trades. But the ‘at-risk’ label triggered only negative associations—they envisioned a troubled school for troubled students. The term educators use so comfortably among themselves generated push-back when used with parents.

Another example is the concept of ‘all kids will learn,’ often repeated by educators and used in mission statements and the like. To parents, it sounds cliché, pie-in-the-sky words that they hear all the time. It is not necessarily negative, but it is often perceived as devoid of real meaning. Meanwhile, this type of language is routinely and almost reflexively used by educators to signal good intentions.

These are only two examples, and it can be argued that their relevance varies from place to place. But the larger point is that such communication pitfalls exist and can be uncovered only through localized research. Communications research

cannot generate language recommendations that will magically provoke parental interest where none exists. But it can point to language that provokes misunderstanding or language that, while comfortably used among professionals, is wasted on ordinary parents.

6. Parents crave honest communication from educators, something they say is lacking in public schools.

The research laid bare an opportunity for charter schools: Parents want honest communication from educators, and many say this is where the traditional public schools often do a bad job. Parents talked about going to meetings and getting updates, all the while feeling as if honest conversations or follow-through were lacking. They think of administrators who, to avoid making tough decisions, will paper over problems just to get through the school year. Some parents are also disenchanted because they connect this lack of clarity to the politics operating within the public schools.

I feel like that was part of charter school, I felt like we had more opportunity to be heard. -- Garden City

I think the administration caves into peer pressure too much. There is too much pressure to accommodate everyone instead of standing up for what you believe in or going against the grain a little bit. -- Idaho Falls

7. Differentiating schools — and segments of parents — as a marketing strategy requires a delicate balance.

To evaluate the potential demand for a new charter school, it may be helpful to identify segments within communities and their specific concerns. A new school does not have to appeal to all parents in a community—but finding a sizeable enough segment that will be excited and attracted to what a charter school offers can give it a good start. For example: In Idaho Falls, there are parents particularly interested in a high school that would offer science, computers, and engineering. In Fruitland, there is a contingent of parents interested in having an elementary school that concentrates on a classical Western education. In Caldwell, there is demand for a high school that features vocational training. On its own, each segment may not be large enough to sustain a new school, so the charter school would have to pursue a

broader appeal as well. But tapping into the priorities of a specific cohort can generate significant energy and momentum.

This may seem obvious, especially since part of the original intent of charter schools was to specialize, innovate, and offer families new options. But the charter school movement may be facing pressure to go in the opposite direction. Increasing state regulations on the one hand and an understandable desire on the part of charters to find successful models on the other, have been pushing charter schools to homogenize and standardize.

It may be overstating the problem, but the pitfalls of this trend can be gleaned from the experiences of traditional public school districts. In communities where Idaho's population has been growing, districts have been unable to respond quickly with new schools. Communities are often divided—especially over raising the money and staff that will be needed. Administrators will shy away from emphasizing a unique vision or mission for the new school because it might exacerbate divisions in their district. Instead, the district will focus on generating the momentum and funding necessary to open a new school; what the new school stands for will be a lesser concern.

Our experience has been, from day one, the district is forced to build elementary schools and now high schools at an incredibly alarming rate because the population demographic is changing so much. In my opinion, the county commissioners are owned by the builders so there is no control and no resources for the school districts. So the school districts are basically left to try to deal with an unbelievable surge of kids running through the system. My kids went to a new elementary school started up a couple of years ago, within two years my daughter's in a trailer because they can't handle the growth. -- Idaho Falls

8. What do parents really want? They want it all.

Interestingly, the parents who respond powerfully to the idea of a charter school with a unique focus—e.g., STEM, Western Civilization, the trades—also tend to want everything else too. One of the tougher challenges for charter schools, and all public schools for that matter, is that parents' litany of education goals is large and diverse.

Parents want their children's schools to be about more than the basics. They also value art, sports, and foreign languages. And it's not only the subjects that they

value—it is also the learning and teaching that goes on. They care about the emotional and social development of their children. Many have absorbed the idea that students learn at different paces, have different subject-matter interests, and have different learning styles. They want their children to be challenged but not overwhelmed. They want orderly schools but not harshly regimented ones. The problem may be how to keep the shopping list reasonable, but the insight is that a narrowly-focused curriculum will probably be less attractive to most parents. Thus, the recommendation that a charter school embrace a specific vision and a differentiated mission must be combined with a recommendation that it also appeals to prosaic priorities as well.

In terms of the STEM curriculum—sounds great to give my kids the tools where the world is going, that trajectory. I would like to see more arts and music. I love the diversity. -- Garden City

In first grade his teacher noticed he is bored. And we lucked out and she would throw him a different paper for math to see what he would do. She pushed him. My husband was really bored in school and we were worried that same thing would happen with my son. When we heard about this charter school, he didn't have to stay on the same level with the rest of the class, he could work at his own level, that this was a great opportunity for him to see what he could do and where he can go. -- Idaho Falls

My oldest was performing far above grade level and his teachers' solution to this for years, different teachers: read a book. My 2nd grader had read through 10 books...in 3 months. That was their only solution for him, was read a book. I went into the school, with the admin, we had set up additional things for him to do when he was bored. -- Idaho Falls

I want the whole person. I want him to be social. I want him to be academic. I want him to be athletic. At the same time I also have this thing that I want his life to be better than mine. I want him to be a good person. -- Garden City