



Back-to-School Alert

1st in a series from CER

CER RELEASES OFFICIAL CHARTER SCHOOL NUMBERS FOR 1999-2000 SCHOOL YEAR *1,684 scheduled to open*

(8/30/99) As the kids go back-to-school nationwide, an unprecedented number of them will be attending charter schools. According to the Center for Education Reform's official numbers, 1,684 charter schools will open their doors to approximately 350,000 children in 32 states and the District of Columbia. Another four states have laws but will not have any charter schools this year (Arkansas, New Hampshire, Virginia and Wyoming).

"Since the first charter school opened its doors in 1992, public school systems have begun to respond and more children are getting the education they deserve," said CER president Jeanne Allen. "Our research proves that charter schools can and will set the example for the future of public education. Charter schools have created not just a ripple but a tidal wave on the educational scene," Allen added.

State laws in 36 states and the District — many of which CER helped establish — provide the opportunity to parents, teachers, civic and community leaders to establish schools that meet the needs of families whose children don't fit a "one size fits all" system.

Charter schools now involve millions of Americans. Involvement in charter schools includes not only the families attending them, but the school staffs, the policymakers involved, the private resource centers and civic groups aiding charter schools and the research teams, authorizers and associations whose jobs involve charter school oversight and support.

Although charter schools are widely embraced by the general public, the majority of traditional education groups still fight to limit their scope and independence. In fact, at the National Education Association's summer meeting, even First Lady Hillary Clinton got a chilly reception to her vocal support for charter schools. It was the only policy line she used during the speech that *didn't* get wild applause from the NEA delegates.

The sharp rise in charter schools is a result in large part of strong law states. The Center for Education Reform officially ranks state charter laws on a continuum from weak to strong using 10 widely respected criteria. This analysis of charter laws, the four-part Charter School Progress Report series and other supporting information is available by contacting the Center or via www.edreform.com.

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In other news, school choice supporters are relieved by Ohio Judge Solomon Oliver's decision to finally allow Cleveland's choice children to return to their schools, but not satisfied that new children are excluded. In protest of Oliver's legislating from the bench, choice activists are holding candlelight vigils in cities nationwide tomorrow, August 31st at 8 pm. For more information, contact the Center.



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THE DEMISE OF THE SATs AND...STRIKING TEACHERS

(9/3/99) Once upon a time the SAT was a solid barometer of student aptitude for higher education. Now the test makers' tinkering has called into serious question the effectiveness of the SAT. 1999 scores are once again disappointing at 505 and 511 for verbal and math tests respectively. The gap between whites and minorities has grown again, a testament to the fact that schools continue to ill serve our nation's less advantaged children.

The SAT's woes are not new. Since the early 1990s the Center for Education Reform has been following the trends in the SAT. Just this week, *Newsweek* magazine reports on a new book by Nicholas Lehman about the SAT, in which he notes:

"...Its original name, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, was changed in 1994 to the Scholastic Assessment Test, but now its purveyors prefer simply to use the initials, to avoid discussion of exactly what the test is meant to measure. The story of the test's creation and its rise to totemic importance has never been told – until now. What will be perhaps most surprising about it is how different the social function the test was supposed to perform is from the one it does perform now: a device meant to eliminate an American class system has instead helped create a new one."

Some of the recent changes to and the results of the SAT are symptoms of a larger problem:

- Since 1987, the proportion of SAT takers with "A" grades climbed from 28% to a record 39% in 1999, even though scores have risen only ten points, pointing to rampant grade inflation.
- The largest decline in SAT scores in the last two decades prior to 1996 were among white students. Only 30% percent of the decline of the '70s was due to demographic changes.
- Minority test takers have increased to an all time high and their scores have risen gradually, but the gap this year is still large, despite the test having been made easier in previous years.
- Recentering in 1995 makes scores appear higher than when most of the adults writing the news took the SAT. The same scores in the 80s were in the high 400 range out of a possible 1600. Recentering adjusted the scores so that the average score was changed artificially to 500.
- Just last month, the SAT's parent company announced it has been purging any questions that contained bias, making it apparent that the SAT has lost much of its rigor and purpose.

CER has pulled together background and historical information on the SAT for your perusal and its available at our special *Back to School* button at www.edreform.com.

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Teachers Strike Out: So what does a union do in a city where half of the children don't graduate from high school and there's clearly a widening racial gap in achievement? In Detroit, they strike. Citing disagreements over time and demands for higher wages and smaller classes, union representatives left 172,000 children stranded. Detroit's teachers are torn, but the current union boss says "this is a group that wanted to strike regardless of the consequences."



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Back-to-School Alert 3rd in a series from CER

FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS STRIVE TO STAY OFF FAILING SCHOOL LIST *First state-wide voucher program explodes myths*

(9/10/99) Since the law in Florida allowing scholarships for children in failing schools was ratified five months ago, dozens of public schools have stepped up efforts to improve.

"These efforts are demonstrating the powerful ripple effect that just the possibility of school choice can have," said CER Research Director David DeSchryver. "Prior to the Florida *A+ Plan*, many Florida public schools were coasting on mediocre test scores and social promotion. Since the first schools made the F List this year, however, schools are rushing to change the way they do business," DeSchryver said. Consider:

- Less than a week after the state graded every school in May, teachers at Chester Taylor Elementary in Pasco County met "to brainstorm ways to boost scores next year," including possibly hiring university professors to better train teachers, according to the *St. Petersburg Times*.
- Broward County superintendent Frank Till said the *A+ Plan* "will drive reform in the district." His associate superintendent said they'd be developing "a support system to keep schools off the F List."
- The last time the state raised the standards, said the president of the Broward Teachers Union, "we worked hard and got all of the schools off the critically low-performing list, and we'll do it again."
- Said Wayne Blanton, president of the Florida Association of School Boards, when it became clear the bill would become law. "We're going to work very, very hard to make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed without having failing schools."

Florida school officials are closely watching for any signs of weak programs or personnel. Said CER's DeSchryver, "While it will take more than reactive, stop-gap measures to reverse years of mediocrity, the impact of the *A+ Plan* is already evident. And that's after just 140 children have chosen to use an opportunity scholarship. Imagine how schools might respond if the numbers increase!"

This year, 900 students in two schools in Escambia County were eligible for Opportunity Scholarships, and statewide, 78 schools received Fs. If those schools remain on the F list, 2,000 students can qualify to attend school elsewhere.

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Opponents Desperate. Despite the positive ripple effect of school choice on the Milwaukee school district over the last five years, The People for the American Way and the NAACP, continue to do all they can to keep Milwaukee's children out of their classrooms of choice. They've complained to the State Education Department with allegations that the schools were violating the random selection requirements: charging voucher students extra fees, having parents sign commitment statements that pledge volunteer hours, not honoring some student's right to opt out of religious activities and classes, and favoring certain students with their enrollment schedules. However, they couldn't find any real parents to say so, and thus contracted with the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council to have people pose as parents of potential students and ask private school officials a series of leading questions. Despite the money spent to unearth alleged violations, the state has not sanctioned any of the schools, and no children have ever been turned away from any of them. "If that's the best they can do in a sting operation, {these claims} are not particularly troublesome," said local activist George Mitchell.

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Back-to-School Alert 4th in a series from CER

NOTABLE SUCCESSES EMERGE IN REFORM

*Evidence of improvement among children is joined
with policy victories in several venues*

(9/17/99) A month that has seen conflicting polls and studies released has produced abundant evidence that reform successes are waxing strong.

Contrary to the "creaming myth" that is argued by choice opponents, the Escambia County School District found that the children using the scholarships are actually below the national and district average on standardized basic skills tests. Rather than the school choice program causing the best and brightest to flee as some suggest, the scholarships are serving children whose scores closely parallel those children still in the public schools.

"It took competition to make improvements" at Spencer Bibb Advancing Learning Academy, the parent of a child using a scholarship, told *Education Week*. Bibb was one of the two Pensacola, FL schools given an F for two consecutive years. "Everyone's focus now is on the kids. It's a totally different scene. Why didn't they do it before?," asked the parent?

That question is being asked today in Cleveland, where a new study by the researchers at Indiana University found 12.5% and 11.1% gains respectively for scholarship students in language arts and science. The researchers concluded that being in the program for two years produced positive gains.

And now: a bittersweet ending to a five-year battle over Colorado's charter school law has charter advocates celebrating. Back in 1994, the Denver school board refused to allow the Thurgood Marshall charter school to open, despite an order to do so by the State Board of Education. The Denver board sued to fight the Board's authority, and just this week, the Colorado Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the state's law. Unfortunately, it may be too late for teacher and charter founder Cordia Booth, who watched all of her best efforts to open up this school for at-risk children be dismissed.

Up north to Washington State, Governor Gary Locke relented in his opposition to having choice-friendly people on his special education commission, and chose Veteran Washington State reformer Jim Spady and education researcher Patricia Lines to bring a reform perspective to the commission's deliberations.

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