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Date: Thu, Apr 4, 2002, 4:13 PM
Subject: FW: Arianna's Latest Column

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-----Original Message-----
From: Bart Lubow
Sent: Thursday, April 04, 2002 1:56 PM
To: Bruno Manno; Lisa Kane
Subject: FW: Arianna's Latest Column

FYI

-----Original Message-----
From: Arianna Huffington [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, April 04, 2002 12:07 PM
Subject: Arianna's Latest Column

Charter Schools Are Transforming Public Education: Is Anyone Running For Office Paying Attention?

By Arianna Huffington

There are only 214 days left until the midterm election, and, like Diogenes going door-to-door in search of an honest man, Democratic Party strategists, desperate to win back the House, are wandering across the political wasteland in search of an issue to run on. They seem so lost: the economy is bouncing back, fear of an energy crisis has dimmed, Enron's stink has proved bipartisan and President Bush's wartime popularity has Republican candidates feeling smug enough to question the patriotism of any dissenters. (The only question is: when will the first "Can you trust your family's safety to Dick Gephardt?" ads hit the airwaves?)

For some reason, politicians on both sides of the aisle, normally slavish poll-watchers, are choosing to ignore what voters, in poll after poll, are telling them: that education is among their top concerns -- often at number one.

But finding a politician willing to talk about fundamental reform of America's education system beyond the president's anemic Education Act is harder than locating a flat chest -- or a real one -- at the Playboy mansion.

It's as if our leaders consider their obligation to fundamental reform satisfied by weighing in every now and again on the hot button issue of school vouchers -- which is quickly becoming the red herring of the education debate, with both sides anxiously waiting to see where the Supreme Court comes down on the thorny matter later this summer.

While the oxygen of the reform debate is being absorbed by this flashy sideshow, almost 600,000 students nationwide are taking part in an education innovation that is flourishing across the land: charter schools.

The reach of charter schools is currently over 40 times greater than that of those headline-grabbing vouchers -- which serve only 14,000 kids at the moment. Moreover, while vouchers remain what Arthur Levine, the president of Teachers College at Columbia University, once likened to a scholastic "Schindler's List" -- rescuing children one at a time -- charter schools have the potential to rescue an entire generation of abandoned kids. They are already proving enormously effective at shaking up our failing school system while giving parents a much greater say in how their children are educated.

Despite their remarkable upside, and the public's abiding concern about the issue of education in general, roughly half of the respondents in a 2000 Gallup survey said they hadn't heard of charter schools.

There are currently 2,357 charter schools operating in 34 states, plus the District of Columbia. And while the charter school movement is still relatively new -- the first one opened in Minnesota in 1992 -- it has already proven what can be achieved when much of the red tape imposed on traditional schools is removed, and when principals are free to hire and fire teachers based on performance.

Charter schools are proving particularly successful at helping the kids who most need help. A new study by California State University found that low-income, at-risk students are improving at a faster rate in California's charter schools than in comparable conventional public schools. And they've brought choice to parents and competition to a calcified public education system.

Perhaps the strongest indicator that charters are working is the number of parents clamoring to get their kids into them. All across the country, successful charter schools have long waiting lists -- 25 applications for every available seat at Sisulu Children's Academy in Harlem, for example, and 1,200 children on the waiting list at the Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles.

So why aren't more charter schools sprouting up as alternatives to the failing urban public schools that serve mostly minority students? The answer lies in a trio of roadblocks to reform: overly restrictive charter laws, insufficient funding, and the resistance of school boards committed to defending the status quo.

Let's start with the laws. In states that impose a bevy of regulations on prospective charter school operators, such as Nevada, where it is easier to open a warehouse than a charter school, very few alternative schools have been formed. By contrast, Arizona's simple and supportive charter law has produced 437 schools offering innovation and choice to parents and students.

As for the money, the per pupil funding of most charters is less than at traditional public schools. And most states fail to provide any funding for building, buying or leasing school facilities. As a result, many charter schools are forced to operate in cramped, dilapidated or makeshift facilities or to spend valuable time and resources on fundraising efforts.

Many local school boards, meanwhile, seem to regard charter schools the same way the movie moguls of old looked at the arrival of television: as the enemy that must be resisted at every turn. Just look at San Francisco, where the school board unsuccessfully tried to revoke the charter of the Edison Charter Academy despite soaring test scores and hundreds of satisfied parents.

Politicians and bureaucrats seem willing to endlessly tinker with our education system, making small, incremental changes. But parents and their kids have a vastly different timetable. As Rochelle Mackabee, a mother who moved her son to View Park Preparatory Charter School in Los Angeles, put it: "I was sitting in a school meeting, listening to teachers and the principal talk about how they weren't going to be able to improve reading and math scores until years down the road. And I turned to a friend of mine and said: 'Our kids will be in high school before they turn things around. We have to get out of here.' And we did."

America's children need help immediately -- and charter schools offer the best opportunity to get it quickly. And if they fail, as they sometimes do, parents can vote with their feet and authorities are much faster to act. Just last week, for example, the school board in Chicago shut down one of that city's 15 charter schools after test scores sank far below national norms and attendance figures plummeted.

"Accountability goes hand-in-hand with freedom," Reed Hastings, president of the California State Board of Education, told me.

It's a bargain we should all be ready to accept. The problem is that our politicians aren't. They love to talk about accountability but seem petrified of allowing even small steps toward freedom. So it's up to parents to demand that they do. And what better time than an election year? Any politicians listening?

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