



the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

**NEW LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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My nest is empty.

Well, not entirely. My 23 year-old son, John, who you might recall from various events and his long time interning here, is working with us now at CER after a year in pharmaceuticals! (yawn) He's a natural — at a lot of things — and so he's been charged with raising funds and raising awareness. (Be nice to him, please?) But I digress —

My friends who just sent their first to college are sad. They say they feel empty and they cry. "Come on," I want to say. I just sent my 4th and last. There are no words. Some of you can appreciate this; others are far away from it happening. My husband and I just made our first dinner with no obligation to feed kids, to yell at them, tell them to do dishes, or (the best and longest running line ever....) to "finish your homework!!!!"

That made me realize in a new way how the rhythm of school is so prevalent our lives.

Please finish eating... so you can FINISH YOUR HOMEWORK!!!

Get off the computer... so you can FINISH YOUR HOMEWORK!!!

No, you can't watch the final episode of that! You need to FINISH YOUR HOMEWORK!!

What? You are finished? Surely you have a project you can start!! ☺

Some have wondered if there is too much of it, homework, that is. While some movies have warned of a dramatic decline in our education system (think *Waiting for Superman*), others have suggested we all back off (*Race to Nowhere*).

A new one actually gets to the real issue — that whether we like it or not, a majority of parents aren't even in a position to demand that their kids finish their homework. They are stuck in failing schools that leave their kids unmotivated, not caring and unable to be part of the dinner time dialogue that we advantaged people have come to know, love and even at times, balk at the repetitiveness of the routine.

Won't Back Down is the real deal. When I first read the script, I was excited but guarded. There was some good meat, the right idea, but it wasn't the full story. The disenfranchised parent and teacher, the sorry state of the failing school — we've seen it all happen before. We've seen many people triumph from making a change. But what was missing at first was the real live experience of those who dare to challenge the status quo. So, we shared stories about real heroes we knew who dared to create their own schools, of those who endured months — if not years — of stall and delay, about real union contracts that prevent teachers from staying after school or doing cafeteria duty.

Well, they did their homework and it shows! Walden Media's new film with 20th Century Fox is a blockbuster. The star power and the story are too good to be true. Like *The Help*, it entertains and engages and teaches us a sad but real story that still happens every day.

Bad Education. And yet, despite the knowledge that real bad education is still happening in far too many places, we are still tied to this nostalgic notion that things just simply don't have to change much, that the problem is somewhere else, someone else's. And that's what keeps us from demanding more from our elected officials. And you know, I think it comes down to homework! We are so familiar and so intimately involved with our children's schooling till the day they leave for other pursuits, that it's hard to see the forest. **We can't fathom second-guessing the teacher who everyone adores**, the curriculum that doesn't yield real learning or even our fellow parents — our friends! — who spend money on tutors and lots of resources to fix their kids when maybe the problems are external and school related! And federal funds have long subsidized deficiencies, but not by focusing on getting results. Rather, until NCLB and all the other alphabet-named changes were made, it was only about providing remedial education, not necessarily getting results. If we all did our homework, we'd understand how to argue for and rebut the tired old worn solutions of the past, that sadly, linger, despite our best efforts.

You know who else could do more homework? Our policy leaders. With a country still behind most other peer nations and urban areas plagued by corruption and failure, one would hope that our bravest, most courageous officials would not tout compromises as a solution. Yet even the best among them act as if the problems we faced can be solved by a compromise over one weak charter law, or a minor tweak to a tenure bill. Don't get me wrong; **I adore Gov. Chris Christie**. Yet the bill he heralds as historic for changing the state's tenure law is being advertised by the New Jersey Education Association, the union, as "*their*" tenure bill. What does that tell you? The new law really does give the unions a lot of say, as evaluations for tenure will be determined by districts with very vague requirements imposed by the state. If the Governor tells everyone it was a major victory, no legislator in their right mind is going to suggest otherwise and attract more battle scars!

New Jersey — my old home state — has been a hotbed of reform activity for years, and dozens of people have thrown their money behind efforts there to create more school choice. **Facebook** founder Mark Zuckerberg gave Newark \$100 million on a match to transform the schools. Mayor Corey Booker has netted accolades for talking tough on school reform. But how, prey tell, does one get reform without changing laws? There was no real change to the Newark labor laws that would allow the superintendent to fire teachers. She can't close failing schools without a lawsuit. She could open more charters but the state's law is mired in bureaucracy. And **school choice** scholarships failed to muster enough votes again for the 9th year running, so few kids can afford other options. Even if they did have the money, their options are closed monthly. As a society, we get crazy about recycling and climate change but we can't keep Catholic schools open to save children! As my kids would say, "unfreakin' believable!"

The Honorable Chris Christie is one of those guys who I just know could do anything he wanted to do. He is part Sicilian, and he's smart and fearless. Yet, he didn't demand that laws change before letting Facebook's largesse go to a Newark fund. I wish he had. There is still time.

I want to scream "DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!!" so real reform happens next time. It's hard to accept incremental change when something bigger was possible. I can't accept calling incremental change historic,

not from really good, really smart people. The Garden State is full of people who want change. They are not engaged and they could be because they are consistently told that everything is well in hand, that this coalition or that association is in charge.

Whenever my kids tell me something is well in hand, and yet I haven't seen results in a while, I question it. We should, too. **We should expect more of our friends** and allies and more of our elected leaders, no matter who they are.

Before you find yourself falling into the trap that assumes work highly praised must be the real deal, look again. Ask questions. Be cynical. And **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!!**

It's the least we can do for all of our kids, all of the families who never have had the pleasure of repeating that mantra night after night for 20 years, knowing that their kids and their teachers cared enough to demand it — and to expect it.

Now it's time to call the kids at College. Might as well. What else have I to do?

Be well, and thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeanne".

Jeanne Allen
President