



the  
**CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM**

**NEW LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
NO. 103**

**OCTOBER 2012**

Dear Friend:

Who comes up with this stuff?

Within our local Montgomery County, MD public schools — acclaimed to be the “best” in the nation — third graders and their parents have evidently been so confused by traditional grades (A, B, C, etc.) that district administrators have developed a new system. Eventually, all students in grades 3-5 will be evaluated as follows:

- ES**, for Exceptional
- P**, for Demonstrating Proficiency
- I**, for In Progress, or
- N**, for Not Yet Making Progress

The intent, according to officials, is to bring specificity to grading, as if generations of Americans have not understood what the “normal” grades are supposed to mean. Granted, not all As are As and not everyone who gets a C thinks their work was average. But we know what they are supposed to mean and we also know there’s a degree of subjectivity to it.

*Proficiency* and *Progress* are gaining traction, no doubt as a result of the new, controversial Common Core which will attempt to standardize what kids learn across the states. Though masked as voluntary measures, states are being pushed and cajoled into adopting them and education establishment types are going willingly along, for reasons that will fill another several pages but I will summarize later. But what standards set out to measure — overall mastery of subjects at the end of one’s tenure in a grade — is not the same as what one teacher seeks to measure in one class. It is possible to measure whether a student is proficient or making progress learning to read, but is it possible to use that same criteria for a particular reading lesson, or when assessing a set of history or geography lessons over a quarter or semester?

Imagine the shouts of joy when your little one comes home with one of these new grades:

Mother: “Oh honey; Look - a **P**! I’m so proud of you. You have demonstrated proficiency!”

Child: “What does that mean, Mom?”

Mother: “Well, clearly you’ve shown the teacher that you have mastered the lesson about the westward expansion.”

Child: “Well, actually I thought it was a little confusing but okay, that’s good.”

**REMEMBER FUZZY MATH?** I'm wondering how many people and how much money it took to come up with this, or how long it will take parents to truly catch on to the fact that the simplicity and clarity of A - F grades has been traded in for something fuzzy, and something that will likely mislead another generation of students into thinking they know something, when in actuality, a set of lessons is simply one piece of a larger puzzle. Measuring proficiency on core subjects is a science and it's best done by the assessment experts in tandem with agreed upon standards. It's clear that somewhere there are expert and credible education professionals that figured we could set proficiency levels for any subject, at any interval and that believe the traditional A - F scales are too harsh. We have heard that before. But it flies in the face of what we have seen can occur when the public has clarity about the quality of their child's work, their school's overall rating, and even their state.

**MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION.** Since Florida adopted A-F grades in the early 2000s, many states have followed suit in an effort to make school quality easily understood. Louisiana is doing it. And just this week Indiana announced a delay in its release of school grades. A researcher told the media:

*"I really think that the Department of Education wants to make sure that they are perfect, that there's no mistakes. I really think [it's] an appropriate level of caution. But people are getting really, really antsy. They need to come out soon, and it's my understanding that they are going to. From what I've heard through the grapevine, they're checking, they're rechecking, they're making sure every bit of data — a ton of data has to go into this. **They want to make sure everything is technically correct** so we get kind of honest grades this first time around."*

I applaud such diligence, particularly when some school officials around the state are pushing back, and claiming it's unfair. The grades are based on school growth, however, not one test in time. But there are some who prefer the status quo — too many — and who will never be for this. The Blob eschews being measured because at its core, they carry the belief that people cannot be measured well for whether or not they contribute to a student's learning. This Indiana superintendent sums it all up — the opposition *and* what they fear:

*"The phrase 'poverty is not an excuse' has become an excuse — an excuse to ignore poverty and disclaim any responsibility for it and its devastating effects. The strategy is becoming all too clear — ignore poverty, blame the effects of poverty on teachers, maintain the public perception of failing teachers and schools with an A-F formula that is designed to rank order students so that the bottom 33 percent will always exist (no matter how much achievement gains are made), use it to designate teachers and schools with low grades, then create a red herring for an impatient public **by offering a placebo known as charter schools and school choice to appease them.**" (emphasis added)*

**THE STRIKE.** The fear of real evaluation lies at the heart of the Chicago Teachers Union strike we witnessed as millions of children were going back to school. I'm not sure anyone would have quite believed that an entity could be so consumed by its focus on adults had they not followed the press accounts of the picket lines and protesters. Evaluations were actually a smokescreen used to drum up sympathy about unfair measurements of teachers. In reality, the Illinois law the Mayor sought to codify in the union contract is actually so watered down that while it "requires" districts to start counting 25% of student performance in a teacher's evaluation, it doesn't define performance and leaves the formula up to districts to negotiate. The Mayor said it needed to include test scores but he didn't go much further than that. This gave the union the excuse it needed to push for higher wages, more benefits, and hide behind a veneer of being against unfair

evaluations, when in reality, it was about benefits. In the end, no one quite realizes how many concessions the unions won. This is a portion of the chart the union published for its members to see how much they'd gained in the end (*the complete side-by-side is on our website*).

Subject	Board's original position	Eventual Tentative Agreement
Length of Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 hour, 40 min day.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 hour day for elementary teachers.</li> <li>• 7 hour and 15 minutes for high school teachers.</li> </ul>
Staffing & Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No additional staff, no expansion of curriculum, no coverage for recess, preps, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 600 additional positions overwhelmingly in art, music, &amp; PE. Memorialized so positions remain beyond interim agreement.</li> <li>• Proposed but not yet accepted: additional social workers and nurses if we receive gambling money from the state.</li> <li>• Workload committee for special education providers to find solutions for large workloads.</li> </ul>
Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory Friday afternoon / early evening or Saturday PD, 75 min a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminated the night and weekend PD requirement.</li> </ul>
Duration of Contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5-year agreement, ensuring labor peace until after the next mayoral election.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-year agreement putting our next contract campaign right in the midst of the next Mayoral election campaign possible.</li> <li>• 4th year with 3% TBD by the UNION</li> </ul>
Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nearly 40% increase for families and couples.</li> <li>• Wellness program that further penalized smokers.</li> <li>• Proposed increases in ER co-pays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freeze on health care premiums and co-pays for all members.</li> </ul>

And what about the parents? What did they learn from this and what if, like most parents in cities like Chicago, they know their schools are failing and can't do anything about it? What if they have no power?

**THE MOVIE.** The Chicago Teachers Union strike was the pre-premiere, I suppose, to the release of *Won't Back Down*. The heroines in the movie weren't concerned why schools fail. They just knew that (speaking of grades!) there was a big fat **"F"** on their school's door and it had been there for 20 years! It wasn't an **ES** or an **N**, but an **F!** It was failing. Let's just say it. Some things fail. It may not sound nice but it's not fuzzy and it's crystal clear.

I hope you've seen the movie and would urge to do so if you have not already. The real story in American education reform today is that literally thousands of parents each week discover what the subjects in the movie discovered and they tried to do something about the failure and fuzziness they saw. This of course attracted the ire of the teachers unions and other groups who worked to discourage people from seeing the movie.

I worked on that film from idea stage to script development. My team vetted data, shared first hand accounts of parent-teacher turn around and new school efforts, showed them pictures of rallies, gave them real quotes from real reports of what people do and say when they are threatened by reform. It was a composite of stories and Walden Media did a fantastic job of staying true to the story line. Many reviewers, aligned with the unions. Rex Reed told his readers that, "It's a film that deserves to be seen, savored, debated and given serious attention."

AFT president Randi Weingarten — the real culprit behind the union strike — called it "demoralizing." Others wrote about the movie's focus on a failed reform effort — the parent trigger law — which cannot

have failed because it has not yet succeeded in getting traction in more than a couple of communities. In those places it's been up against lawsuits and vitriolic opposition. But whether or not you need a trigger or a charter law or an option for kids in your own sphere, we know that without the power to change one's school for the better, most kids will never have the opportunities we do. Enter **THE PARENT POWER INDEX**.

We developed the Parent Power Index© after talking with the producers of *Won't Back Down* who saw a need for real actionable data people can use and steps they can take to "be the power" in their own child's education. Taking all the reforms that make a difference, we evaluated what each state offers to parents, developed a formula and ranked the states. *The Top 10 states that give parents most power of their child's education*, was the title of one of our media hits. That really says it all. Within minutes of the movie's release we were getting hundreds of hits and new people joining our cause. Please check it out and spread it around. We are prepared to maintain it, grow it and ensure that millions learn what real parent power is — and how to get it.

Citizens in Idaho, Washington state and Georgia have the authority to deliver real power to parents this November as they vote on initiatives authorizing charter schools to thrive or, in the case of Idaho, raising the bar for the teaching profession. At stake are evaluations (there's that word again!) that are pegged to performance and not just seniority. This November will indeed be a big month for reform in many ways.

**THE DEBATES.** By the time you've read this, the debates will be over. During the first one I was typing like crazy to record all the comments about education they made surprisingly in the first few minutes! (Full analyses on the issue are posted at our blog **Edspresso** at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).) There is nothing fuzzy about the commitment both our candidates have to education. Both seem to recognize its critical relationship to the economic gap. How they'd solve it are, in my opinion, worlds apart. The President's tacit support of charters and evaluations is nice, but fuzzy. And frankly I grow concerned when class size is introduced as a big issue, as it was when Pres. Obama said he met a teacher with 42 kids in her class and ten year-old textbooks — which we're still trying to validate. Frankly, the issue of class size is a distraction. The research is clear — teacher quality is far more important than the size of one's class in determining outcomes.

**ANCHORS AWAY?** The modern day education reform movement has its roots in the realization that outcomes and performance trump inputs; that choice and accountability trump dollars wasted on system fixes. Those concepts are reform's anchors. But the anchors are beginning to lose their hold. We spend time trying to band-aid broken systems, convince ourselves modest evaluation measures or creating top-down accountability fixes will make schools better. Many new people have jumped into the reform movement unprepared to take the hard road that is needed to make truly substantive shifts in direction and they settle for incremental changes that will neither last nor impact our kids who need it the most. Howard Fuller says, "not all progress is progress." Keep that in mind when you evaluate what you hear.

Until next time!



Jeanne Allen  
President