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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
NO. 14**

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Dear Friends:

Welcome to the new and improved Monthly Letter to Friends. We're here to bring you all of the information you need to know about what's happening in education reform around the school yards and state houses across the country. If you are a new reader, please let us know what's going on in your community or feel free to contribute facts, anecdotes or news clippings about what's making education headlines in your local paper. We look forward to hearing from you!



**Alphabet Soup**

- "Inventive Spelling" (we kid you not) is an actual program that is used by many schools to teach reading and writing. The theory is that kids should learn to recognize words first as part of whole pieces of literature, so that they can be more excited by learning. Accurate spelling can wait until this goal is achieved, say the proponents of Inventive Spelling, many of whom are in the colleges of education, teaching prospective teachers. But thanks to a recent review of this teaching methodology, the facts are now out: Inventive Spelling *does* have children doing more reading and writing earlier, but they are doing both very poorly.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirms this analysis. Recent NAEP results found that even our children's "best" writing samples are extremely poor. And the more we ask them to do on a test above and beyond basic skills, the more poorly they do. Not surprisingly, kids who spend more time on writing instruction in class and those who do more homework emphasizing writing do much better. But even those scores are below where they should be. Of course, to hear Education Secretary Dick Riley tell it, things are just getting better and better. We wonder why his State of American Education speech early in February did not reference the NAEP results. This "everything's up to date in Kansas City" approach is not in our national interest.

- Does anyone else find it odd that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is suing the company that produces Hooked on Phonics because it allegedly misrepresents its success? Should the FTC perhaps sue the National Council of Teachers of English, who originated things like "Inventive Spelling," for failing to teach our children to read and write?

### **A View From the Blob**

- The Michigan Education Association has committed to spend \$8 million for a three year PR blitz. Members are angry that their dues have been hiked \$30 to finance this campaign, which is targeted at reviving MEA's marginal political influence in the Capitol and poor public image statewide. MEA racked up political losses in the past year in gubernatorial, senate and school finance battles. The New Jersey Education Association is also assessing each of its members \$50 over the next year for its new \$10 million Pride in Public Education campaign. This effort is devoted to hyping a more rosy picture of the schools' progress and creating a climate for more favorable collective bargaining in the future.
- The National Education Association (NEA) and the Education Commission of the States (which is supposed to represent the interests of state policymakers) convened a meeting recently to discuss improving the public's perception of unions. Each state pays \$25,000 to belong to ECS, which in effect means that taxpayers just paid for what will probably only be the first of many activities to boost the Blob's PR, despite the fact that voters in states like New Jersey, Michigan and elsewhere strongly support their Governors' efforts to curtail union power.
- One clue to what's wrong in the schools: Harvard University's Graduate School of Education is offering an all-expense paid trip for teachers to attend its Institute of Writing, Reading and Civic Education. The Institute is described as a way for high school teachers "to examine civic education in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious society." Wouldn't "how to teach your kids to live by the Golden Rule" be more to the point?

### **Revamping State Governance**

The power of good ideas can never be underestimated. Since the new year, elected officials around the country are working to change who holds the ultimate responsibility for education in their states. Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson is working to change the state's superintendency from an elected to appointed position and wants to add an appointed State Board of Education, giving the state's taxpayers a more

direct line to education policy and accountability. Wisconsin is currently the only state that does not have any form of State Board of Education.

Ohio Governor Voinovich wants to switch his state's Board of Education from an elected to an appointed body. New York's Pataki wants to eliminate the Board of Regents, now appointed by the legislature, and make the education commissioner a governor appointed post. Bi-partisan support exists, too, in North Carolina for the same change.

### **Charter School Update**

Thanks to charter school advocacy groups and innovative educators, about 140 charter schools have come into existence, are thriving and will be joined by dozens more in the coming school year. As public schools that are freed from most regulations, these charters are a diverse lot, ranging from schools serving the underprivileged to schools that focus on math and science.

Ted Kolderie, based in Minnesota, the first charter school state, writes in his new '95 update that more than 15 states, mostly centered around the Great Lakes, will consider charter legislation this year. States already with charter school statutes, but whose laws miss essential elements, will work to improve and expand them. As one of the fathers of charter schools, Ted argues that whereas conventional strategies for reform have been disappointing, the charter idea by contrast does change the basic elements of the system. His famous quote is right on target: Charters withdraw the "exclusive" franchise that a district has to offer public education, which removes the district's ability to take the state for granted.

Charter schools can infuse dynamic change into a system, already enjoy widespread, bi-partisan support, and are working to help children with many different needs. We have three new brief Action Papers about the particulars and lists of resources from throughout the county where you can get more details. Please let us know if you need any of these.

### **Elsewhere in the Land**

- Kudos to Idaho's first State Board of Education appointee this year, retired physician Thomas Dillon, who says carefully planned experiments in choice, charter schools and private management should be tried. He has an ally in newly elected state Superintendent Anne Fox, who is also looking at contracting out to private firms to manage state university programs.

• The Dallas, Texas School Board recently showed great wisdom in their vote of 4-4 to encourage legislative consideration of a school choice bill that would offer options to children in failing schools. While the resolution failed, it was supported by Dallas School Board President Sandy Kress, a Democrat. A proposal to allow up to 60 school districts to experiment with school choice for low-income children is before the legislature and will be the subject of hearings on March 15. The Senate President there has endorsed a modified version, and the Governor has added it to his list of things to include in his rewrite of the Texas Education Code. Charter schools are also up for discussion, as is a tax break for companies that make tuition contributes for poor children. However, Governor Bush's recent appointment of Mike Moses, a vocal anti-choice superintendent from Lubbock, Texas, is not a good sign, according to Texas reformers.

• As seen in Hartford, Connecticut, and elsewhere, big cities are becoming increasingly responsive to heated reform activity. Boston, Massachusetts will soon pick a new superintendent, which may be a newcomer more friendly to reform and members of Cleveland, Ohio's City Council are pushing a school choice measure.

• The Michigan Center for Charter Schools reports that a total of 25 to 30 new charter schools are expected to open there this fall, and in Arizona, where the law passed last summer will go into effect beginning this coming September, they too, expect at least two dozen new charters. Prospects for choice in Arizona are not as rosy. The senate education committee killed a modest school choice proposal. The measure has more support in the House, but its fate is unclear.

That shouldn't come as a blow to choice people; the energy expended last year produced one of the country's finest charter bills, and left virtually no time for re-building a solid choice coalition.

• Illinois scored a victory when the senate education committee passed a bill out of committee that would allow a school choice experiment with 2000 children, and permit moderately autonomous charter schools. This is a milestone for a state that has traditionally voted down every substantive reform bill that has come before it. Stay tuned.

• The District of Columbia is broke, spends nearly \$10,000 each year per student and of the 60% it graduates, most are functional illiterates. How about giving the 5,000 kids that are most troubled and in failing schools \$3,000 each to go to the school of their choice, public or private? Not only would we all save \$30 million, but we'd be doing a service to these poor kids.

- Making for strange bedfellows, Liberal California State Assemblyman Tom Hayden, best known for his anti-war rhetoric and radical politics, joins with Republicans in the Golden State in a push to break up the Los Angeles Unified School District. They are endorsed in their effort by the United Chambers of Commerce.

Within this effort is an emerging trend that finally acknowledges that SMALLER is better -- smaller schools, smaller districts, smaller gaps between the location of home and school. The California proposal sounds similar to one now being funded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, out of the Annenberg grant, aimed at creating "smaller learning communities." But in the latter case, we know of very few who have confidence that the proposed \$150 million program will result in any measurable success -- putting more money in the hands of the very folks responsible for the current system isn't the way to shake things up.

### **Surf's Up**

Business enters the fourth wave of education reform, according to a report by the New York based Conference Board. Reading between the lines, however, one would have to conclude that instead of riding the wave of reform, many CEO groups have fallen off their surf boards.

In the third wave, business leaders began to embrace efforts from school choice and charter schools to higher performance standards, which the report dismisses as quick fixes. But in this, the fourth wave, the Conference Board praises business leaders for "rolling up their sleeves" to change, rather than end-run, the system. Isn't that what they did ten years ago, with little success?

The reality, of course, is that the reforms of the so-called third wave are where the action is -- and from where the real improvements will come. Just as one tries to modify the behavior of a child with incentives and consequences for behavior, so too must the schools be challenged from the outside to continue good progress and work hard to improve.

Next month we'll let you know what other wisdom came from Conference Board participants at their two day conference in New York on March 6-7.

### **FYI**

- Forbes has done it again. A fabulous piece that responds to many readers' concerns on the state of education and the role of the National

Education Association in education policy and practice, can be found in the February issue.

- Last month we shared with editors at SEVENTEEN magazine some interesting graduation statistics and anecdotes -- among them the fact that Wendy's founder and CEO Dave Thomas just recently received his GED, and actor Michael J. Fox is reportedly working on his.

#### **You Know Its Time To Demand Real Reform When:**

- Students are not permitted to go to the bathroom by themselves because of the high level of violence. (Los Angeles Unified School District)
- Parents are forced to wait overnight on school grounds for three days to get their child into a specialized program of choice. (North Little Rock, Arkansas)
- The teachers union demands that, in exchange for a recommendation by your child's teacher for his or her college application, you must write a letter in support of their contract negotiations. (Nashua, New Hampshire)

And last but not least, you know its time for drastic action when:

- The PTA (supposedly the group most responsible for representing the interests of families) tells its 6 million members that American education does quite well for a majority of students, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. (PTA Today, Jan/Feb '95)

#### **Say Again?**

- On January 25th we were co-host to a national Education Summit that brought together educators, administrators, legislators and other school advocates to brainstorm about achieving reform. There was some discussion about the role of the federal government in education, but never did we imagine that we'd have present a living, breathing example of federal intrusion! Early in the day, a U.S. Department of Education representative showed up, uninvited, to distribute some promotional material. Despite objections, this official placed on all of the chairs glossy publications touting Goals 2000 and other "achievements" of the Administration. He also demanded to see a list of press attending the event, claiming they "needed" the info he had to offer.

I wonder how such tactics would play at Education Secretary Riley's next event? We'll let you know!

- In oral arguments on the Kansas City desegregation case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court, Missouri's assistant state attorney general said that educational success is "beyond the capacity of schools."

Huh?

- The President should be commended for his proposed "G.I. Bill for America's workers ... a voucher worth \$2,600 a year for up to two years [to spend for training at] local community colleges or wherever else they want .... Let's empower people in this way. Move it from the government directly to the workers of America." Now, read that and substitute the word "children" every time you see the word "workers." Makes sense to us.

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As spring approaches and legislators get down to the nitty-gritty in Capitols across the country, and everyone involved in the schools dig in for the last leg of the 1994-95 school year, the Center renews its promise to you folks, the real workers for education reform, to be a resource for information and guidance. Let us know how we can help. Coming next month are continued reports on state reform hearings (we'll be in several), the news from the latest education conventions, and excerpts from the newly released *School Reform Handbook*, all to help you in your reform efforts. Stay in touch!

  
Jeanne Allen

The Center for Education Reform (CER) is a national clearinghouse for action and research in education, and an active broker in providing help, support and guidance to hundreds of communities and most of these United States.

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