

Dear Friends:

The climate is heating up, despite the pleasant change in the weather. Just about every education interest group released a new report, poll, or survey (and every candidate a new program!), and, combined with the onset of new programs in many communities, Americans were treated to a pretty solid month of good media coverage of reform. (We talked to over ten mags, newspapers and networks in just one day alone). But the info you get *there* is no where near like the scoop you'll get *here*.



Giving Children a Chance

- Hoping to help children whose fates find them in failing public schools, a New York group has established A Better Choice foundation, to provide about 100 low-income people with \$1,000 scholarships. Eligible children are in poor performing schools in Albany, Troy and Schenectady, NY. The move to assist disadvantaged children brought harsh words from both the New York State United Teachers group, an AFT union, and local school officials, who believe that it is unfair to look only at test scores when they serve a very “challenging” population (or, for a more accurate depiction of what some school officials think, It’s the kid’s, stupid!) Tell that to the parents, which is of course what they’ve done, which is why so many want to leave. You see, most of us know that good schools can take the most “challenging” child and make them Princeton material.

ABC is the TK private scholarship program to be established in the U.S. since the late 1980s. Serving over 17,000 children nationwide, these programs were recently featured in USA Today.

- In Milwaukee, radio host and author of *Dumbing Down Our Children* Charles Sykes launched a radio-a-thon to raise money for the children who were enrolled in private schools awaiting a positive decision that the expanded school choice program there pass the court’s test for constitutionality. It didn’t yet, and meanwhile, these kids wanted out of the Milwaukee public schools. PAVE, the local private scholarship program that last year served nearly 2,200 (tk) children wants to help double the number of kids. Through the Sykes phone-a-thon and with advertisement run around the state, PAVE raised over \$1 million from citizens all around the country, some who scraped together enough money to send \$10, \$20 or \$50 to help children for whom they wanted to see have a real opportunity. The NEA calls that creaming. I call that compassion.

The Milwaukee choice plan has twice been ruled unconstitutional, although the TK court ruled on August TK that the non-sectarian school part of the program could continue and be expanded. The ACLU doesn't even like that non-religious aspect of the program, claiming it would have an adverse effect on integration. (we wonder if the ACLU has actually been to Milwaukee schools lately and seen the extreme busing program that puts children on buses for hours). The Wisconsin Department of Education, also long a foe, is also creating roadblocks.

An Offer only the Blob Could Refuse

The head of Saxon Publishing, one of the country's oldest creators of back-to-basics math curricula, is offering to give \$10 million worth of math books to 3,000 schools, the equivalent \$3,500 worth of math textbooks in each grade. John Saxon, the founder, says the results from his curriculum is so extreme that he wants as many schools as possible to have an incentive to trade his books for their current stock. In Houston, for example, where Saxon gave 71 schools Saxon math books for each grade 1-6, the percentage of third graders in Field Elementary School who passed the math portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in the spring of 1996 increased to 94% from 45% the previous spring. The fourth grade passing rate increased from 53% to 67%. At another school, the fifth grade rate increased from 61% to 85%. "These gains resulted from using Saxon math for only one year," he reports. "Think of what the pass rate will be like after Houston elementary students get to use Saxon math for all five years!...these test results represent a total victory for "direct instruction" over the (NCTM-advocated) "constructivist method" used for the last 20 years or so. In fact, Saxon reports amazing gains on SATs and ACTs, and in hundreds of schools nationwide using his stuff.

In fact, in ads taken out in national education publications, Saxon has argued that NCTM standards are intended to make children feel good. Quoting from NCTM's own documents: "Assessments have too often ignored differences in students' experience, physical condition, gender, ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds to be fair,...new assessment strategies and practices need to be developed that will enable teachers and others to assess student's performance in a manner that reflects the NCTM's vision for school mathematics." Saxon says that in NCTM's entire two volumes of standards, he found the word "Vision" 56 times. "I am pleased that the NCTM has "visions" but what we need are measurable gains in students' achievement..." Saxon retorts. (Note to schools: NCTM standards are the basis for most of the big publishers' math texts)

Why do I mention the Blob? Most districts haven't even responded to personalized offers of assistance.

CER Factoid Quiz (True or false)

1) ".....our schools today are graduating more students -- with higher SAT scores -- despite a broader, more diverse pool of test takers...NEA and its state affiliates are working to ensure quality schools and a quality education for every child in America. In the last decade, we have channeled some \$70 million into innovative efforts to improve the nation's public schools."

2) The NEA's 1995-96 contains \$TK for which TK is allocated to activities relating to TK

Will the wise guy who keeps sending us nuts and bolts in those nice contribution envelopes we send out each month cut out the nonsense? A union friend once told us that that's one of the "training" methods they have to upset people who they view as extreme. It's intended to run up postage, but what they don't know is that the post office will no longer deliver that which exceeds the normal postage for envelopes that size. So they share a few of these with us from time to time. But it's an interesting sophomoric prank, don't you think? (Teachers would be astounded to find out that their unions pull those kinds of antics when they don't agree with someone.)

New Efforts Underway

Education Services Council

Ideas That Work...

The Merrow Report's latest documentary on school reform previews on your local PBS channel September 6. *Early Learning* is not a piece you want to miss. Merrow visits four very distinct schools which each subscribe to one of four reform "methods:" that of James Comer, the Core Knowledge Curriculum, the Accelerated Schools Model and Roots and Wings. There's a rare glimpse into an inner city teacher who uses only sight to teach children to read. As the child makes up a story that does not even resemble the words in the book, the teacher applauds the child with "very nice," and "very good," despite the child's total inability to read. By the end of the year, the teacher is telling the children to look at pictures to identify words in a book, rather than sound them out. Merrow didn't spend enough time on Core Knowledge for my tastes, but overall, it is an uncritical look at four approaches to teaching and learning. Thought provoking. Check your local PBS station for times, or call TK for a viewer guide and information.

Some reporting and research on the Writing Road to Reading program tells of overwhelming successes in teaching children how to read.

...And some that are tried despite evidence to the contrary

New Math: has your child ever subtracted recently out loud and said 10 "take away" 2 is 8? I was amazed recently that my second grader did know the definition of minus. When working with him on adding two digit numbers together, I asked him if he could "carry over," and he said that's not the way they do things (showing me instead that they are encouraged to lay out the numbers horizontally and use a counting line to add them up). I thought it was odd, but then some things came across my desk, including a piece by Pacific Research Institute the new, new math, or fuzzy math. San Francisco's results on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills showed a significant decline from last year's scores, on which 57% of African-American second-graders were in the bottom quarter of test scores. San Francisco Super. Bill Rojas said that part of the blame could be put on "new math." According to a Department of Education study issued 20 years

ago, "direct instruction," or teaching math through rote memorization and skills, outperforms all other methods. It reduces special education numbers, increases those in advanced courses, and, can boost scores on basic skills test by as much as 50% or the equivalent of one grade or more.

The Condition of Education

As of this September, about 78,000 children will be attending 406 charter schools in 12 states. Charters sponsored by Central Michigan University alone will serve over 7,500 children this fall. According to the Hudson Institute's survey of TK schools (name of report TK, too), the children attending charters are for the most part square pegs in round holes -- children who would not normally be successful in traditional public schools. In the schools the Hudson researchers looked at, a majority of children are minority, 1 in 5 are limited English proficient, some are disabled, and about 14% would not be attending public schools if it weren't for the charters. Despite union attempts to mask their success, charters are more accountable, being compelled to lay down their own goals and standards and being held to them by a performance contract -- and the reality that if they don't succeed, parents won't choose them any more.

"Quote from EEN report card" This from the Educational Excellence Network's (another Hudson division) annual report card on American education. If you want a glimpse into the world of reform, and the progress or lack thereof of the 1995-96 school year, you'll want to get a hold of this tremendous document. Call or write...

National reports, polls and other antics

If you're not on our fax alert list, you might not know about the latest NEA poll data or the problem with the new SAT scores...

The unions have changed their tune....well, maybe not tune, but tactics. Incoming NEA president Bob Chase, who said he'll advocate a "new unionism" says that the NEA spends \$70 million on school reform, likes charter schools, and believes in TK. This is part of its new outreach effort, and cosmetic makeover. "We must either lead or be led." says Chase. The AFT also says it wants more accountability for teachers and charter schools. When asked why they spend so much money on fighting specific reform efforts in the states that do just that, they deny it, and blame bad contracts on school boards and administrators. Moreover, they say membership is voluntary, and PAC contributions require each member's consent. What they don't say is that local and state leaders ...tk

While the NEA was in San Diego courting republicans, they were churning out the President Clinton's re-election material. (in fact, outgoing NEA Head Keith Geiger is on the campaign staff, and promises to deliver Ohio for the Prez) Geiger's last speech to the NEA as president called for collective bargaining to be the vehicle for driving change and innovation in school districts...

Watching the school choice efforts in Ohio and Wisconsin really challenges one's rational thought processes. On the one hand, a judge rules in the next step in the challenge to the Milwaukee program that it violates in the Wisconsin constitution to

allow kids to go to parochial sc, but desolves the injuntion related on children in non-sectarian schools and allows them to have 100% of their school mde up of choice kids,s up to 15,000. Then, the Wisc. dept of Ed comes down and says to the courts, no way!... Meanwhile the ACLU is appealing the lifting of that injuncction, saying that it could have an adverse affect on integration. Integration? A city that now buses its black kids all around the city and beyond and makes them spend hours on buses before and after schol is better for them than their attending a ocal neighborhood school. I dont' know about you, but if I was black I'd be pretty ticked by now. In fact, thousands of Milwuakee parent are. So ticked, in fact, that the private scholarship program there that this 1st year increased its numbers to 2200 after the initial court ru ling agianst the program now has 4400 poor, mainly minority prents that are on their doorstept trying to have their childen saving by sending them to a private school.

The annual Gallop /Phi Delta Kappan poll on Public Education are out, and once again, the public still has mixed feelings about their local vs. everyone else's schools. This year, jumping on the political bandwagon, Gallop's press release leads with "vouchers and private schools are not the solutions most Americans would choose for the problems of public schools." But like most questions done with a bit of slant to them, the beliefs beyond the answers are not clear. The authors, for example, report that 61% of the public vs. 36% reject the idea of "allowing students and their parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense." When asked whether Americans support a "voucher system that would allow parents to choose a public, private or church-related school, with the government paying all or part of the tuition," the numbers drop to 54% vs. TK. The irony is, there's no difference in what they are asking. However, like the NEA pollsters, these rely heavily on the words "public expense" or "government paying" to elicit negative responses. When asked a bit more objectively, the numbers flip-flop. Support on even the PDK poll, however, has grown from 24% in 1993 to 36% today. Nonpublic school parents support the "private schools at public expense" question by a margin of 60% to 38%, up from 45% vs. 55% in 1993. And public school parents alone support the same question by a margin of %39% vs. 59%, versus 27% vs. 72% in 1993.

The PDK /Gallop Poll found the public gave high marks to their own public schools, while only 21% graded the nation's schools as a whole as As and Bs. However, "the grades awared local nonpublic schools are significantly higher than those awared local public schools: 63% A or B for local nonpublic schools versus only 43% A or B for local public schools. 57% award a grade of A or B to the nonpublic schools nationally, while only 21% give an A or a B to the nation's public schools.

Overall, PDK reports that "the public still believes in public schools." That's no surprise, and indeed they should. And thousands of reformers wouldn't be dedicated to providing positive imporvements like choice, charter schools and standards if they didn't But PDK's reports of support masks the real scoop uncovered in the good work done by Public Agenda Foundation. Their surveys delve deeper into the public's attitudes, and turns up information that confirms what thsoe ofyou working in the trenches already know -- the public is deeply frustrated by the condition of the schools and their lack ofa cocountability, and wuld join the chorus for just about any effort that sounds viable enough to correct this problem.

In July, the Arkansas Depatme t of Education spent \$25,000 (a starting teacher's salary) for another Gallup poll that turned otu roughly the same results as PDK's

annual poll, and the same frustration cited above. A majority of respondents rated the local public schools well, but 85% and 82% respectively favored higher academic standards for student promotion and graduation.

Reinventing Education

From the Reason Foundation comes a pathbreaking report that demonstrates the extent to which private schools educate special education students, and provides a glimpse into the 100,000 such-challenged students who are being educated there at the request and with the money of public school districts. It's too much to summarize here, but suffice it to say that anyone who wants to see how much public and private schools already intertwine programs should get a copy of this report (TK #)

More reinventing of the traditional lines of educational authority can be found in Milwaukee, which, among other cities, is sending an overflow of 700 students to private schools this year, with the \$2.9 million earmarked for their education. This is but one response of the school board to the increasing pressure put on them by the existence of the Milwaukee choice program, and their new-found openness to trying to educate the children they are currently unable to serve in the system. What's more is that the district had already contracted with 22 private schools to educate about 1,500 "at-risk" children with behavioral or learning problems.

According to the new Texas legislation from 1995, districts are permitted to give teaching permits to non-credentialed individuals with a bachelor's degree, unless they would be teaching vocational or technology classes. The provision was intended to allow recognized experts in a particular field to offer their experience and help expand the pool of people teaching children. It could also be a way for the increasing movement of private practice teachers to contract with schools for their fine services.

More movement to help strengthen the teaching field: Ohio legislators in July replaced the old teacher certificate with an educator license, something comparable to what doctors and lawyers get. To qualify, elementary teachers must complete 12 hours in reading instruction, including three of phonics. In addition, licenses would have to be renewed every five years and show proof of continuing education, and may be assigned mentor teachers to help with performance.

In the News

The Washington Post says the Prince George's County Educators' Association (an NEA affiliate) "deserves the scorn of everyone" for ordering members to pull back any efforts beyond the bare minimum of their 7 1/2 hours a day to show the County that their serious about their pay increase. "Urging teachers to do less than what they feel they must to give their best to the kids in the classroom is demeaning."

In North Carolina, "a third of all new teachers leave the classroom by the end of their fifth year" according to the News and Record, because of the things like the demands of classroom management (read paperwork), discipline and student behavior, and lack of parental and administrative support. Poor preparation and lack of training is one reason, experts argue. Which is why there should be more of a demand for not only better teacher education, but for more autonomy for teachers in the classroom than paperwork and miscellaneous orders.

Black parents in Waco, Tx are moving their children increasingly into private schools -- a sign of a growing trend of families who feel slighted by the public schools. According to the Rocky Mountain News, when Lester and Coque Gibson's son failed the state's basic skills test and asked for an accounting of all district test scores they found that seventy-five percent of the black students and 66% of the Hispanic students failed the test. Gibson's district blames poverty and poor parenting for the failure rates, but he and others who represent many private schools that serve black children aren't buying it. Church-based and private black academies have doubled in number to about 400 over the past 12 years. "It's a reaction to the needless ignoring of the African-American talents," says Joan Davis Ratteray, president of the Institute for Independent Education. "Integration for black people has been almost a cruel hoax."

Seattle Schools chief John Stanford delivered a compelling message to convention delegates in Chicago last week, advocating for high stakes testing, strong consequences for student and teacher performance and no excuses for the social climate in which children live as an acceptable reason for failure. He said we should find teachers -- public school, private or parochial -- and give them a hug when we get back to school, because theirs is the toughest job. Yet he endorsed Bill Clinton for re-election in the same speech, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense given his message if you look at Clinton's whole-hearted endorsement of the NEA and its agenda, which certainly does not appear to be Stanford's.

And what about the fact that Bill Clinton's catholic school upbringing is rarely raised in public during his own comments opposing school choice for other Americans? An interesting take on this -- and the progress of an inner city Catholic school to provide a safe haven for children in Chicago against all odds -- can be found in the *Tk Newsweek* commentary by Joe Klein of 'Anonymous' fame. Klein did his homework (we should know - we were one of his sources)???? and raises some critical questions that all concerned about schooling should begin to address.

Obstacles to reform are never ending. The Chicago Tribune reports that one parent, Bonnie Delaney, was paying \$30 an hour to a tutor to help her 9-year old son improve his reading. She did so, "she complained, because he is not receiving adequate instruction at Stitt School. His teachers, she contended, are more worried about recess, art and music classes and hands-on group learning than about reading, writing and arithmetic." After complaining with little success, she turned to three other mothers to create a charter school, which would be guided by traditional teaching methods. Delaney has the support of over 200 parents, mainly because they are advocating for less recess, more homework and more basics. But her district, the only authority that can sponsor under state law, is so far unwilling to commit to having \$7,000 per child leave the current system and go to Delaney's charter. A more pathetic response is that of the district's superintendent, Dorothy Weber, who told the Tribune, "We're into convinced that anything they want to do is vastly different from what we're trying to do." Trying is the key word, Dorothy.

Another anecdote about public school choice in Michigan: while only 23 of 83 Detroit area districts are participating, for some parents, it makes the crucial difference between sending their child to public versus private school. The Detroit News reports on parent Nikki Lennox, "the legislation came none too soon....I was going to send my son to private school in the fall, but now I a better-quality public school in Armada. Education

is very important to me, and I want [my son] to have the best. For us, this program was the answer." Her new superintendent is welcoming her with open arms. "We're an outstanding district, and we want to be family-friendly and customer-oriented," Elliot Burns said. Some are not so sure. Another district's school board president said he didn't like the idea, but "we made this decision [to participate] to protect ourselves from students leaving the district and none coming in."

[Editor's note: many supporters of public-private school choice find public school choice only objectionable. But the attitude of parents like Nikki Lennox should be a welcome reaction that given even the smallest bit of choice, parents feel empowered, an ability that few will be able to take away.]

Three cheers to the Wall Street Journal's John Fund for some compelling work on school reform in the opinion pages of that daily. George Magazine recently called Fund "TK"

First there was the insurance broker that got \$875,000 to start a new school for emotionally disturbed teenagers, and failed to deliver on the goods promised to the Superintendent. Then there was the yearly fire code review of public schools which unmasked horrendous violations created safety hazards, such that at least 6 public schools will still not be able to open on the time. In response, the Superintendent and school board pointed fingers, said there was no money to fix it all (despite having it allocated but spent on other areas of administration.) And now, the (you guessed it) DC public schools may very well get "taken over" by the city's control board, who along with the Washington Post and scores of DC residents, thinks the whole situation is deplorable. The unions are remaining unusually low in this debate.

"Test scores at four suburban back-to-basics charter schools released this week show higher averages in reading and math than many regular schools in their district." This from the Rocky Mountain News on July 20, which reported on four of the five Core Knowledge schools that opened in Colorado since its law was passed in TK data. All have long waiting lists, and one in particular Cherry Creek Academy, showed students averaging 41% gains in reading, a 55% gain in language arts, and a 47% gain in math. "Second and third graders showed the most improvement, with averages of 78% and 97% respectively."

A study by the Boston-based Pioneer Institute on charters in Massachusetts found that the "schools are reaching a population that is often dismissed as difficult to teach," according to the Boston Globe. "Despite fears that the state's new charter schools would steal the brightest and wealthiest students, the first major study of such schools shows they are serving a higher percentage of low-income, bilingual and minority children than traditional public school. More than half of those...were average or below average students in public school, and scored poorly on standardized tests." (Pioneer, which we've mentioned before can be reached at TK #)

A former NFL player in Florida wants to start a charter school that aims to help troubled black males, saying "we've sat round too long as minorities and waiting for other people to make it happen...We've got to come together as one," says Joe Green, profiled recently in the Sun Sentinel. Green hopes to call his school The Deion Sanders Academy, if he can convince the star to lend his name. While enrollment would be open to everyone, Green's school would be geared to at-risk students, providing a curriculum focused on academics, but strong on black history, sports and music. Girls would be welcome.

A press release from the National PTA lashes out at Republican candidate Bob Dole for his opportunity scholarship proposal. "Parents are not phantoms in the public school reform debate, nor are parents merely the passive consumers of a product," said PTA president Joan Dykstra. "To suggest teachers are to blame for problems in the system, and that parents are not aware of or part of the debate misses the point...Mr. Dole asks who speaks for the parents, I respond that the National PTA speaks for 6.5 million of them. And we don't want vouchers, we want a vital public school system supported by public dollars." Wow! Pretty potent stuff. But Dykstra is obviously not reading the polling data correctly. The Education Policy Institute recently polled PTA members, and found that 80% of parents with kids in school are solidly unaware of the active lobbying and issue positions espoused by the PTA. More than half (51%) of parents say they would be less likely to join the PTA knowing that the nation's most prominent parent-teacher organization opposes a school voucher proposal. Charlene Harr, EPI's director, said that 75% of parents who don't attend PTA meetings would do so if the meetings dealt of the PTA, with critical educational issues.

And speaking of the PTA, the Indiana group has experienced a 3,000 member decline this year. An April Washington Times article suggests why this may be happening in many states. It highlights several parents who have attempted to voice concerns to their local PTA about its policies or practices, only to be told that they could not differ from positions taken nationally (and weren't particularly interested in doing so anyway).

The Fort-Wayne Journal-Gazette, as reported by the Indiana Policy Review Foundation, recently argued in retort to the U.S. News and World report coverage of unions, that any decline in the quality of public school teaching is the responsibility of the individual school boards and not the union.

One of TK federally-funded educational laboratories, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, designed to research and assist schools with the big questions of learning, republished the following expert from something called the Oregon Girls Advocate in its quarterly magazine. HOMOPHOBIA: Discrimination and Violence Can Make "Coming Out" a Dangerous Choice. One wonders why this, and other teen-social behavior related articles are more important funding priorities than, let's say, helping children directly learn to read. We estimate that this quarterly costs roughly \$2.00 each to print, with a probable circulation of 25,000, not to mention staff time and research costs. A modest estimate of \$100,000 could buy a couple of teachers for the mid-west or help open a charter school, and that's only a tiny fraction of their multi-million dollar budget. Geez.

Chicago schools CEO Paul Vallas has been inundated with offers of help since he announced that he was turning to the Catholic Schools for a model in re-shaping his city's curriculum for next year. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Dennis Byrne says "one public school's curriculum...showed that students have a selection of 319 courses, ranging from the basics to...beginning mixed chorus, exploring Chicago, and hotel-restaurant management...Catholic schools offer about a third of those courses, and are heavily weighted toward" [the basics]. Vallas says students are allowed to cherry-pick their way out of the basics, something he did as a child and suffered for. His schools

wouldn't get rid of electives, but pre them down substantially. He picked the Catholic schools as a model because while "I'm the first to admit that they don't have all the special ed...bilingual or as many kids from at-risk communities...., to say they have none or few of those kids is basically not a statement of reality." Consensus is strong for the basics. "Children who are denied the ability to read and comprehend and reason logically (from math teaching) ...aren't simply denied an education. They're denied a life," says Byrne.

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