

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS
OF THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 36

MAY/JUNE, 1997

Dear Friends:

STOP THE PRESSES!! That's what we did, sort of, when days before our scheduled MAY MONTHLY LETTER was to go out, we were deluged with new material, new information, and must-adds that prompted us to say, "Hey, what's the hurry? Let's do a combo this time, and cover the essential points." That, of course, combined with some other delays, means we're here this month, with more pages than usual, but as a comprehensive wrap-up to the school year.

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*From Missouri to Texas and around and about, policymakers have deliberated on education issues, made some mistakes, and, in some cases, resolved some things. As usual, charter schools and school choice programs have garnered the most attention. To wrap up, **the good, the bad, the ugly...and the promising:***

The Good

- Hooray for Texas!, which in the waning days of the legislative session, strengthened the state's charter school law. The first application session saw all twenty state-approved charters granted while district-or campus-sponsored charter had barely been heard from. Yet more than 360 applications for additional charters had been requested from the trenches. Well, thanks to Texas Representative Mike Krusee, 100 more charters are now permitted at the state level, and an UNLIMITED number of charters may be started if 75 percent of students enrolled are at-risk or are drop-outs.
- A federal judge has allowed nearly 3,000 teachers to join a major "unlawful-political-spending suit against the NEA and its Washington arm, the Washington Education Association." The suit, initially filed by a phys. ed. teacher, now covers all teachers who believe they have been illegally charged for various political spending. The National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation is representing the teachers.

The Good, continued

- District of Columbia, School Choice, & The Media: First, nationally syndicated columnist Colbert King told the travesty of a DC fifth grade class that has been without a teacher since January. Next, William Raspberry, another columnist, conceded that school choice may indeed be a necessary tonic to help the children that are not acceptably educated. "I am a reluctant convert to choice...because it seems as obvious for poor children as for rich ones that one-size-fits-all education doesn't make sense." A few days later, Congress made its second attempt to provide impoverished DC school children with the option of attending a public or private school of choice. Along with leaders in the Republican majority, Democratic Congressmen Floyd Flake from New York, Chicago's William Lipinski, and Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman joined the increasingly diverse and bi-partisan call to save the children.

The Bad

- Colbert King's *Washington Post* op-ed referred to above, of Saturday, May 17, is a must-read. The fifth-grade-without-a-teacher does have a teacher's aide, one who is a self-described college drop-out, who teaches the kids "according to my own lesson plan." After taking DC school officials to task in a passionate condemnation of a system which treats children as if they cannot learn, King concludes that as far as Washington's leaders are concerned, between their photo ops and on-camera story telling, "D.C. grade school youngsters are the next best thing to having a petting zoo of your own." Beyond the recommendations and hoopla, the only thing these kids need — a simple task, one would think — is a teacher.
- Texas falls in this category as well. It failed to pass a measure that allows children in failing schools to flee to a private school of choice. Why? As explained last month, the Public Education Grant, enacted in 1995, allowed these children the opportunity to choose an alternative public school. Few districts, however, opted to participate and allow the kids to exercise choice. Despite heavy grass roots pressure and some strong bi-partisan support, the bill died in the Senate amidst what is being called the Memorial Day Massacre — when a parliamentary procedure arbitrarily killed 50 pending bills. You know what they say about law and sausage....
- Tennessee lawmakers made a modest attempt to enact charter schools, but it fell apart in the House when a subcommittee passed a move by Rep. Joe Towns to defer consideration for two-years. One local advocate suggested the next vote should be, perhaps, to defer Rep. Towns' salary for two years....

Meanwhile one of those "new unions," the Tennessee Education Association, vowed to fight any attempt at charters in the future. Its director said the TEA "tried to keep an open mind about charter schools, but this bill...says a school could turn over a public school to anyone or any group and that community would essentially lose control over that union." Wait — who would lose control — that community, or that union?

- National Tests...Voluntary...Rigorous...Driven by Experts.....The BLOB?! Skeptics of the President's national testing initiative were stunned to find that, amidst

the promises of rigor of the tests, and departure from business as usual, the National Testing Panel is made up almost entirely of what we affectionately refer to as “the BLOB,” (that is, representatives of Big Learning Organization Bureaucracies). Among them: National Association of State Boards, Council of Great City Schools, the National PTA, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the New York United Teachers. Their task is to help the Feds come up with specifications for the tests, along with the help of separate reading and math committees. Oh, and the contract for actually developing the test specifications was awarded to none other than the Council of Chief State School Officers, which, sounds BLOBBY, and, you guessed it, is.

- Many of our readers know the bad news for Cleveland’s children. On May 1, an Ohio Court of Appeals overturned a lower-court’s affirmative ruling on the Ohio School Choice Program, and declared the program unconstitutional. The appeals judges said that since most of the private schools are parochial in nature, and so few public schools opted to participate, that the program in effect offers very little choice at all. So the 1,994 children who found the program a true blessing (pun-intended) may finish the school year, but next year is uncertain. The state has asked the court to allow the program to continue during the next stage of appeals, but a decision has not yet been rendered. Why is this in our “bad” section? If you want to see pain, talk to some of Cleveland’s school children.

The Ugly

- Another charter school is running into its share of Capone-like treatment in Illinois. This one, led by a current public school teacher, is soon hoping to get approval from the local boards to which it applied. Amidst the application process, an assistant principal has been asked by someone “high-above” to call all the people who signed the petitions to see if the parents *really* are going to send their children to the charter. However, the original purpose of the petition was to indicate interest, not commitment. Apparently, parents have become the volleyball between a reticent school establishment and would-be charter school, and this is, well...ugly.

- North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is attempting to micromanage charter schools through the contract process. In documents charters are expected to sign — delivered so late that any delay or concerns can hurt their chances of opening — DPI bureaucrats have woven language saying it can impose further conditions after the contract is signed, relegating the charters to the whim of the Department. Anyone who thought our prior reviews on NC were a bit extreme needs to look into this one.

- *The Press*, in **Atlantic City, NJ**, recently reported on a stranger than life scenario in the school board arena: “An Egg Harbor Township school board member who has had a recent falling-out with a few other members is now the target of a potential recall movement...And what is the main charge being leveled at Frank Santangelo? What’s the dastardly deed that — according to an unsigned letter and recall petition being circulated around the schools — deserves to get him tossed out of office?
“He’s rumored to be considering privatization.

“Heavens.

“Now, understand that the board hasn’t seriously *studied* contracting out to the private sector for services like food and custodial services. Well, maybe it should...in fact, all school districts should be actively comparing the costs and benefits of contracting out various services to doing the work in-house...If an atmosphere exists where even looking at privatization is considered tantamount to treason, where the suggestion brings threats of recall, then something is wrong — for taxpayers.”

We’d add, for kids, too.

The Promising

- The home of the potato will take a closer look at charters this fall, having appointed long-time reform advocate Rep. Fred Tilman of Boise to head a study committee, and possibly, offer legislation next session. Idaho has made several attempts at charter legislation, but each time was stymied.
- A Philadelphia lawmaker, Rep. Dwight Evans, has stepped up to bat to help save Philly’s children from a myriad of well-intentioned but failed reform efforts. Not only is Rep. Evans, a Democrat, a co-sponsor of Governor Ridge’s charter school bill, but he has also asked the legislature to approve a plan to allow at-risk children in his city who are in schools determined to be failing, the option of attending the private school of their choice. *The New York Times* reports that less than six percent of the city’s high school students are competent in reading. And three-fourths of African-Americans in Philly favor the kind of plan Evans has introduced.
- Joining the chorus of songbirds who want their children to have equal access to good schools in the present — not ten “reform” years later — the Council of Baptist Pastors in the city of Detroit has issued their findings from a fact-finding mission in Milwaukee and Cleveland. Among their conclusions: *Our kids deserve better. Good schools make a difference. Choice gives parents power at the school house door. Choice has become a civil rights issue. The church-state argument against parental choice is a smokescreen.* Rev. Ned Adams, Jr., pastor of the True Faith Baptist Church told the *Detroit News* that “anywhere schools do not demonstrate an ability to educate students, parents ought to be able to take their children to a better school and take the money with them.”

In Other News

- In the last issue, we mentioned the growth of alternative educator associations providing services for teachers who prefer not to belong to one of the traditional (stale, political, etc., etc.) teachers unions. We were reminded that we have often overlooked the success of the **Missouri State Teachers Association**, which in the 1970s was the only state affiliate that failed to unify with the NEA. MSTA has been independent ever since. Its 39,000 members (compared to the Missouri NEA’s 27,000) are a good portion of the

nearly ten percent of teachers nationwide opting for a professional association, fighting union encroachment. Incidentally, the MSTA supported the recent charter school effort that failed in Missouri. It failed not on its merits, incidentally, but because it became attached to a controversial desegregation remedy bill.

- Connecticut joins the growing ranks of states clamping down on districts in disarray. A bi-partisan measure passed last month **abolishes the Hartford school board**, and replaces it with a state-appointed Board of Trustees. The now-defunct school board could be relied upon to have much fresher and reform-oriented ideas than most, with many of its members supportive and involved in charter schools. Yet, even they have conceded that they did not have the power to correct district mismanagement and an impervious bureaucracy that witnessed declining and dismal student achievement. Our only disappointment is that the legislature did not plug in to the equation the ability for Hartford to foster far more charter schools from amongst a wide variety of very interested, capable, yet frustrated educators and civic leaders. The Yankee State's charter law needs considerable improvement, limiting the number of schools permitted to 24, of which only 12 can be approved beyond the school boards from the state directly. It further restricts the number of children permitted to enroll amongst state-approved charters to 1,000, considerably limiting access to many children. A bill exists as we write to increase the cap to 1,500, but that's hardly enough to help the children that need it. *Let's get revolutionary, Connecticut: fix that bill!* Then you may see some real gains in Hartford and elsewhere; something, we're afraid, that has been sparse among other taken-over districts in the U.S.

- Number 3 to open in Delaware! While considered a strong law by objective standards, Delaware's charter program only permits five charters until the year 2000. Two currently operate, and the **Red Clay School Board** just approved the third, a Montessori elementary school. The school currently operates as a private school, but will close down and re-open as a public charter school next year.

- Down and out, but it's only Round 1 — The tally **for unsuccessful attempts to enact charter laws** or improve existing weak laws this year: Arkansas, Indiana, Maine, Missouri, Virginia, Washington. Jury is still out in: Connecticut, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin.

- Evidently fearing that some of their troops may go AWOL, the North Carolina School Boards Association has been asking local boards to pass resolutions **opposing school choice programs** encompassing private schools. While at least 30 have done so, according to news reports, most votes have been fairly close. Bill Cathey, a school board member from Transylvania County and a former principal, voted against his board's resolution, and said, "It concerns me that within a blanket situation, we condemn all aid that some poor grandmother might get. It may be just enough, if she's willing to sacrifice...to send her child somewhere to get a safe education."

- After reading about the happenings in Lincoln Park, NJ, where a tussle over a long-term relationship with neighboring Boonton High led to the previous school board

members' adoption of vouchers as an alternative, **a CER member from Florida** shared the following with us:

"I happen to be a Boonton High School graduate, class of 1970. I received an excellent education, but then my family was living on the economically correct side of the tracks at the time and my brothers and I were in the College Prep track. It was as I read in Diane Ravitch's book *The Schools We Deserve* that I came to an understanding of how rigid was the tracking of those days. I've often wondered about the caliber of the teaching methods implemented in the elementary schools in the poorer sections of the district; the kids in the various tracks (college, business, shop) always seemed to come from the same geographic locations. If my speculations are correct, they used to 'just' dumb down the townies. Many Lincoln Park kids were in my classes — but now they're dumbing them down, too? Are the Lake Valhalla (NJ) kids the only ones allowed to learn how to read?"

- The kiss of death: **Nevada's charter school proposal** was finally eroded so much that the head of the state's teacher's association, Debbie Cahill, told *The Las Vegas Review-Journal*, "We're comfortable with the amended bill approved by the committee. We can support it." The Senate bill would allow 25 charters to be created statewide, with a limit of no more than 12 per county. It guarantees that teachers hold a certificate to teach, and applies collective bargaining to all charters. Senator Jon Porter, a Republican, said the bill is "providing a way to make improvements to our educational system." (We're fed-exing you a summary of laws that really do that, Senator). But even this supposed charter bill is in peril if House Education Committee chair Wendell Williams has his way. He says 25 charters is too much. "I'm not going to support as high a number as they have proposed in the Senate." And, the state PTA, which acts as if it's not only the nation's premiere parent group, but IS America, apple pie and lemonade, says that the bill (yes, the one that allows so little that resembles a charter) would set up a two-tier educational system. Hello? Anyone home?
- **E.D. Hirsch is right**, says a strong majority of school board members who responded to the *American School Board Journal's* April survey. Sixty-seven percent, in fact, said the schools have dumbed down the curriculum.

Food for Thought

- A recent correspondent to CER introduced us to some conclusions from a 1988 Ford Foundation study entitled "*Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, & Our Economic Future.*" In it, the authors make the point many of us take for granted: that it is so important to give people real freedom and dignity.

"Too often we have been treating symptoms not causes. Teenage parenting, youth joblessness, and dropping out of school are closely intertwined...The results [of the Armed Forces Qualification Test, as compared to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Labor Market Experience] show an alarming, direct relationship between basic skill levels and all three of the social problems enumerated above....the lower the test

score, the higher the concentration of people experiencing a particular social problem....” And, as we all should know,

“...Achievement (basic skills) determines attainment (number of years of schooling completed) which then determines employability and earnings...”

Flash forward to 1997, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Kids Count Data Book*:

“...But the educational disadvantage of poor children goes beyond basic bricks, mortar, and books. Schools in high-poverty neighborhoods tend to have the least experienced and least prepared teachers....Perhaps the most disturbing expression of educational inequity is the low expectations we have for schools in poor neighborhoods and for the students who attend them.... Providing poor children with the same learning opportunities that more advantaged students receive is possible, but it will require a level of imagination, commitment, and collaboration that most education-reform efforts have failed to produce. The truth is, there is no easy fix to the problem of bad schools in poor neighborhoods —no one-time infusion of money, no donation of computers, and no quick influx of reading volunteers will suffice.”

One of the natural conclusions: Children not learning or exposed to good schools —particularly in poor neighborhoods but elsewhere, too — need immediate relief, not instructional fads and public relations ploys.

- **Speaking of Public Relations**....Circulating around the country through various groups, e-mail and in mentions in such publications as *U.S. News and World Report*, is an amazing report the **National Education Association** commissioned to analyze where it has gone wrong and what it can do to get back on top of their game. *An Institution at Risk, An External Communications Review of the National Education Association*, (January, 1997) is an ASTONISHING acknowledgment of the waning influence of the NEA and unions in general, and the recommendations call for not exactly a substantive change in what they do, but better PROMOTION of the programs they have and co-opting of the language of “opponents.” The authors, the Kamber Group, liken the NEA’s status today to that of Britain’s before the Battle of Britain. We offer some of their analyses:

“...it’s too easy to dismiss the attacks of the rantings of extremists. Many of their arguments are now embraced by those in the mainstream.”

“...in the face of these constant assaults — so absurd on the face of it — [NEA’s response] was frequently rambling and verbose, speaking in jargon and generalities, overly sensitive to internal political considerations, often negative, and lacking a succinct message.”

(Sеееее — we’ve said that before — and it gets *us* labeled anti-public education!)

“...To survive, much less to prevail over its critics, the NEA must shift to a crisis mode of operations.” This will be done by “...establishing itself as *the* champion of public education through a new initiative to produce *better teachers, better students, better public schools*...”

“Stake out a clear risk through a crisis strategy that seeks to win not by silencing the opposition, but by **co-opting the other side’s turf...**” (emphasis added)

And here’s the fun part:

“The campaign should be launched in a speech by President Chase in which he acknowledges the crisis,” — he did that in February at the National Press Club— “[and] says some things for their shock value to open up the audience’s minds (e.g. there are bad teachers and our job is to make them good or show the way to another career)” — he did that, too, and received media praise with new-unionism articles that took him at his word.

In sum, the NEA /Kamber report tells a tale in which the NEA has become a victim of Ronald Reagan and anti-government rhetoric, and a confused and ineffective public relations office that tries hard, but is not effective, it is not well-coordinated or large enough. And it’s in need of a public relations overhaul that changes its public perception, ranging from it’s strong political activity to the “perception” that it services members, not kids. That’s what they *say*.

- “*America Reads Stands on Thin Research Base*” — Such was the headline in the May 20 *Education Daily*. Obviously, we’re not the only ones who have questioned the concept of trying to eradicate children’s reading difficulties with volunteers. G. Reid Lyon is chief of the learning disabilities, cognitive and social development branch of NIH’s National Institution of Child Health and Human Development. Lyon recently told *The Washington Times* “The issue is ‘How can tutors do something trained teachers can’t do?’” Adding to that “thin research base,” Dr. Eldo Bergman, director of the Texas Reading Institute and a child neurologist told *The Times*, “The Clinton plan will give a million people some employment and give a bunch of kids somebody they can sit and read with, but we might want to ask why these kids are poor readers.”

Back to the concept of urgency, wouldn’t it be better to offer those children not reading the chance to attend schools proven to succeed with children?

- And speaking of success, here’s a story about a few **entrepreneurial schools** that do appear to be making a difference. Along with the Dodge-Edison Elementary School, Wichita, KS, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academy, Mt. Clemens, MI, Edison schools are achieving substantial academic gains. “Over the past 24 months, Edison students have participated in many different independent assessments,” said Edison’s chairman Benno Schmidt. “The results are uniformly positive in those studies where we can compare the achievement of Edison students to similar students in their public schools or measure the current performance of Edison students against their past achievement. We are very heartened by our students’ strong academic gains, which reflect outstanding performance by our teachers’ school leaders and staff.” Indeed, a recent visit to Edison’s Lansing School, the Mid-Michigan Public School Academy, inclines to support the study, even though this school is too new to evaluate. It’s an impressive place, and the classrooms are alive with learning. This observer was also stunned to learn, after talking with several kindergartners, that the Edison kids, many of them from poor homes, have a more challenging curriculum than her own kindergartner. Go

figure. Like any successful business, Edison appears to provide a quality product, and happy customers are a top priority. In education, it's breaking news. In business, it's required. Hopefully Edison's efforts are educating the educators.

- **The standards movement** has arrived in Pennsylvania! A draft of math, reading, and writing standards have been issued by the Governor's Advisory Commission, appointed last year to develop benchmarks in ten areas for Pennsylvania children in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. After a studious process, the reading/writing and math task forces completed their task. The governor will recommend the two sets of standards to the State Board of Education on June 16th. The commission is targeting the subsequent school year for implementation.

The good news for educators, parents, and children is that the standards are very strong, requiring a high level of learning and accomplishment by the end of the four above mentioned grade levels. Students will eventually be assessed, thereby making real accountability for learning and teaching a reality throughout the state. PA joins VA, AZ, MA, CA, and CO as the leaders of the pack among states who have recently revamped and created higher standards.

Comments

- **Customer Service....**From Phoenix, AZ, a "satisfied" customer gets a few things off his or her chest. He/She writes:

"Please go back to your Country clubs & bible meetings & quit meddling in the privatizing (sic) of public education!"

This means either A) We should leave privatization alone to flourish; B) We need to learn to play golf and drink more or C) We need more praying. I, for one, am for all of the above!

- **"...It is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."**

While taken a bit out of context, this famous line from *MacBeth* is apropos for another Arizona story. In this case, the head of the state's school board association told his National School Board Association audience *"If you have a pulse, sit upright and take nourishment, in the state of Arizona, you can start a charter school."* Jack Peterson must be a close, personal friend of Alex Molnar, a Wisconsin guy who travels from coast to coast lambasting any reform effort on any scale that doesn't just do more of the same, and finds a conspiracy under every bush. Molnar told the National PTA's legislative conference in March that the only criteria one needs for starting a charter school is an ability *"to fog on glass."*

- "How about a charter proposal that was approved by our local School Board, approved by the State Board of Education and then the contract denied (twice) by the Local School Board! Opposition? Local teachers and spouses, PTA's. Support? Local Chamber of Commerce, Senator Taylor, parents, community members, local administrators (principals, although they were told to remain 'neutral') former Governor of Alaska, present Governor of Alaska, and many more. Reason? Financial uncertainties, unwilling to enter into a binding contract. Solutions? Local School Board

member offered to take our charter and use it in a 'pilot' school setting with out contract. Motion was voted down, we are now into negotiations with a mediator. After, of course, hiring an attorney and possibly filing a complaint against the District. And the 'WAR' rages on."

The above "Tale from the Crypt" was written to us from a concerned parent from Alaska.

- **And from a mom**, a note courtesy of The Buffalo, NY-based Buffalo Inner-City Scholarship Opportunity Network, (known as the BISON Fund), which provides scholarships to children who do not normally have choices:

Joan Massel Soncini

Comment [1]:

Dear BISON Director,

I'm glad to have the opportunity to thank the BISON Program for the change in me and my son's life.

I'm a young single mother struggling through school and raising my son. It gets frustrating sometimes to find the right answers. But I think I found a solution to a few.

The previous two years, my son was in public school, he was failing, getting into violent fights, coming home with black eyes, fat lips, crying not to go back.

He was becoming withdrawn and violent. Counseling was suggested. Instead I joined the church again.

There I found out about The BISON Fund. I enrolled him in the Catholic Academy. It was the best thing I ever did for my son. He gets all A's & B's and he's reading well. He hasn't had one fight, and he cried to go to school! He has a new confidence, patience, and a smile I haven't seen in years.

Thank you so much for your program and the opportunity to better my son's life. I feel I'm really able to do something for my family.

Sincerely,
S.B.

(BISON currently serves 400 children, and has a waiting list of 1,836. Recently, the Greater Buffalo Partnership and the city council bonded together to study the concept of public vouchers, in response to an increased call for access to better schools.)

Miscellanea

- Have we mentioned before the AEPP conference for all reform-minded, strong-willed, bold and courageous educators, parents, business leaders, etc.? The **sixth annual EDVentures conference** is heading to Opryland this year, and will stage a real barn-raising in Nashville complete with how-to and informative sessions on charters, contracting technology and financial and legal issues. The date: July 31-August 2. Call Chris Yelich at AEPP at (1-800-252-3280) for more info. Operators are standing by!

- The **Education Leaders Council** has announced plans for its second annual conference, **Education Reform: A National Roundup**, September 19-20, in Dallas, Texas. Following on a spectacularly successful first conference last year, this year's reformers and topics will be no less invigorating. Plan on attending — you will hear

from U.S. Congressman Pete Hoekstra (Michigan), E.D. Hirsch, Jr., (Core Knowledge), Gayle Fallon (Houston Federation of Teachers), Marilyn Adams (Harvard University School of Education), Lynne Cheney (American Enterprise Institute), as well as the “usual reform suspects,” ELC State Commissioners Frank Brogan — Florida, Art Ellis — Michigan, Eugene Hickok — Pennsylvania, Lisa Graham Keegan — Arizona, Linda Schrenko — Georgia, and Beverly Sgro — Virginia. Call the ELC for more information at 202-822-9000.



Next month, a full legislative wrap-up, scenes from the Blob and more! Keep plugging,

Jeanne Allen