

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 40**

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Dear Friends:

As you are probably getting this issue of the **MONTHLY LETTER** near Thanksgiving, we are inspired to give thanks for a myriad of efforts underway to reform our nation's schools and, separately, to give thanks in our normal, twisted sort of way, for things that are as they should be. Finally, we direct you to the back page for splendid holiday gift giving ideas for that special someone in your life that needs the truly unique gift; the gift of giving.



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Thank God They're Gone

Such is the title of a piece co-authored by Hudson Institute fellow (and CER board member) Checker Finn and I in the current issue of *The Weekly Standard*.

Our conclusions: "Whatever the 105th Congress accomplished in other fields, in education it muddled everything it touched. The session ended with a debacle on national testing, confusion on charter schools and utter failure on school choice. The prospects for reforming American education would be brighter if House and Senate had never gone near the subject."

On testing, despite tinkering, the Secretary of Education is still in charge. On charters, the picture is opaque at best. A good attempt to target federal charter start-up money to states that have real or live charter laws became a legislative nightmare in the House, as they passed a bill that only somewhat does that, but also unwittingly prescribes a greater role for the feds in defining what it takes to be from a real charter state. The Senate has yet to act, and our hopes are pegged to the Senate in '98 to correct deficiencies.

On school choice, the best and greatest hope for a few disadvantaged children was the DC school choice pilot, proposed as part of the DC budget bill, over which Congress has complete authority. One would think that authority would give them pause to use all sorts of negotiating power. But the appropriators, in the end, won the day, and a failed DC government has its money

to continue its games, while poor school children have nothing but business as usual.

To be clear: The Senate did pass the DC choice measure, but only after they stripped it from the appropriations bill, and cut a deal with opponents that it would be passed by a voice vote, giving them little accountability. Meanwhile, the House will likely do the same sometime in '98, and it will go to the White House for an expected veto. Some believe this to be success; we believe it to be politics as usual. Congress should have never gone near this issue knowing the eventual outcome would be a presidential veto and not enough votes to override, unless they were willing to really fight. (For the real meaning of chutzpah, we refer you to Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson's showdown with his legislature.) Meanwhile, thousands of parents of those hopeful DC children are woefully disappointed, having become believers of school choice and pegging their hopes to this past legislative session.

So, **we give thanks that they've gone home** to their loved ones. May they be thankful for all they have accomplished in life, so much so that the next time they attempt to fight, they'll try harder to win.

We Give Thanks....

...that Vanity Fair Magazine is only read by a class of people who for the most part couldn't be bothered with real life trials and tribulations anyway. A few weeks ago, Vanity Fair interviewed someone named Fran Leibowitz on race relations. When asked about education, she replied that it is a "scandal" today, but so are "Republican proposal[s] for vouchers — a generally diabolical plan and one that...would surely result in the end of any sort of democratic society..."

And showing more than a patronizing attitude toward African-Americans, she continued: "...black parents are decoys, to distract your attention from what the Voucherites are doing — which is lowering taxes," (it gets stupider). "School vouchers are advantageous because they would result, ultimately, in no public school system at all..."

"Not to mention, that even among the not-so-rich white people" (obviously those who don't read Vanity Fair, right Fran?), "there is a sizable constituency for the notion that the public schools attended by poor blacks are useful only as a source of professional basketball players — so, conceivably, one such school would really be sufficient. Perhaps I am judging them too harshly and what they are really doing is at long last making good on a very old promise: 40 Lakers and a school."

We give thanks...

...that more people *don't* belong to their state and local PTAs. Sorry, friends but the more we learn, the more it becomes clear that mom, apple pie and

lemonade are hardly consistent with the initials PTA. Two similar yet totally separate stories are illustrative.

First, our Maryland hero, Sylvia Fubini, a self-described radical whose own kids' experiences in public education are nearly over, but not content to take a "my turn's over" approach, became interested in charter schools as the way to reinvigorate an institution she cherishes. Sylvia got herself appointed to a committee on the local Maryland PTA where she resides to explore charter schools. She scheduled a forum, invited speakers, and called the local paper to announce it. The paper did, and minutes into that day, the PTA president demanded her resignation for not following proper channels. The press inquired into that situation, and the following day, reported that the PTA denied Sylvia a venue for her forum. The end result was that the forum was canceled, and Sylvia is ever more determined to raise this issue at the state level. "After all," she said, "I haven't had a good sit-in since the 70s."

Farther down south, a PTA president of a North Carolina elementary school was the subject of a coup d'état. This PTA prez herself is a reformer, one that the locals had never met the likes of. She proposed the creation of a local elementary, Core Knowledge charter school. She also dared to ask the school administration — apparently the first time ever for these folks — to account for spending of PTA-raised money. While the coup failed narrowly, this parent, like the Maryland one above, has had an eye opening experience into— sorry — the blob, that will color all of her future experiences. The silver lining is that she, too, is determined to fight even harder for the local control she believes may only be attainable through charter schools.

We give thanks....

...that the subject of teaching — teacher competency, -professionalism, -unions, -preparation, teacher-everything — are so much the subject of news and research of late. Tremendous problems plague the way teachers are hired, trained and treated. These issues, however, have been long taboo, and equated with spitting on the flag, or yelling at Mom.

No longer. The problems are now prominently on the table. Schools of education have long been under scrutiny. Even in the less-reform minded '80s, teacher ed commissions observed all was not well. Nothing happened.

Tome on teaching, *continued*

Related questions have since emerged. Does quality really come from finishing courses at a school of ed whose leaders believe how you feel is more important than what you know?

The latest study by the Public Agenda Foundation explores the attitudes of professors of education. *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public*

Education, reveals that not only do ed pros believe content knowledge to be UN-important to high quality teaching, those who teach our teachers see as most essential that they be “lifelong learners and constantly updating their skills.” Those skills don’t include the basics, as only 19% of them believe it is important to stress correct spelling, grammar and punctuation to their students. At the same time, however, 75% of ed pros surveyed believe that “too many education students have trouble writing essays free of mistakes in grammar and spelling.” Over 90% of ed pros see themselves as “facilitators...or conveyers of knowledge...who enable students to learn on their own.”

Other startling insights into this institution: 63% believe education programs fail to prepare teachers well, while 82% respond that teacher education programs are often unfairly blamed for the problems facing public education (they actually believe the media is responsible). Sounds like teacher education pros don’t know what to think. Even the American Federation of Teachers calls the report “right on the mark...The disturbing connection in this report between what teachers, parents and the public want in schools and what professors of education think they should have is not surprising. Teachers always report that their college education hasn’t prepared them for the realities of the classroom.”

Still, the unions have had years and years to get angry and take action. The power and clout they exercise over numerous educational efforts would be welcomed in action to banish schools of non-content based education.

That apparently was not a thought that crossed the minds of any of the reporters who recently have praised NEA/AFT alliances as “unprecedented,” “fresh,” and “welcome news.” Education journalists are not the only ones with blinders on. Even respected columnist David Broder gushes over the seemingly new trend of the AFT and NEA in carving out a bold, new world for themselves in the world of reform. The love-in has barely begun, but yet we’re treated to stories on the dynamic duo of NEA’s Bob Chase and AFT’s Sandy Feldman, as if they were the new Lois and Clark. (And whose latest attempts to shape public opinion include very frequent editorial board meetings and school visits nationwide.)

Why be skeptical of this sudden “effort” to join forces to help make necessary changes in the teaching profession? Because neither organization, but especially NEA, has as its sole mission the creation of better schools. First, they are labor unions — institutions trying to create better working environments, that may or may not have a beneficial effect on children. While the smaller of the two deserves credit for understanding the connection between standards, discipline and learning, neither has sufficiently beat up their friends in high places to do something about it. Rather, they spend their time fighting proponents of alternative ways of doing public education, while maintaining a vision that is not focused primarily on education.

Consider: “The people of our nation must know and understand that the teachers and support personnel of the National Education Association have a vision of a nation which sees government as the sponsor of public policies that guarantee every family the right to live in a decent home in a safe neighborhood; a

neighborhood that has a school that offers programs to every child that will challenge their minds and lift their spirits, and take them to the peak of their highest potential, and provide that foundation that will prepare them for a job. A job made available because of creative economic policies that put people first and obscene profits somewhere down the line.” Denise Rockwell, NEA Executive Committee, speaking on a business trip to Hawaii.

Recently, an AFT Vice President made the statement that teacher union contracts are not responsible for rules and regulations that hamper school reform. A new study finds otherwise. Researchers at the Institute for the Transformation of Learning found the entire 174-page Milwaukee Teachers union contract (and an additional 2,000 pages of additional legal memos, policies and rulings) overly prescriptive of policies that are better left up to boards. The contract’s contents are understood by so few people that it was recommended the process of negotiating be done out in the open. Like most big-city union contracts, Milwaukee’s prescribes teacher qualifications, duties, methods of evaluation, hours and days, and even many curriculum issues.

With all this now firmly implanted (or resting?) on your brain, consider, whether the unions would even be forming “unprecedented” partnerships were it not for the pressure school reformers are creating nationwide. Were it not for the threat to their occupations, the clamor over raising the bar for teachers and students wouldn’t be nearly so big. Think about it. Every cloud has a silver lining. This one’s ours. In light of this,

We give thanks...

...for the really great teachers (wherever they may teach), who despite incredible odds from the time they begin their formative education, still convey knowledge and respect to a healthy quantity of our children.

We give thanks...

...for the work of many state-based business groups, like the Indiana Chamber of Commerce which recognizes the impact of a poorly educated workforce, and is willing to boldly join the fight to help the schools make the dramatic shift towards productivity that was necessary in American business for survival only fifteen years ago. This Chamber is devoted to seeing charters be realized in Indiana, is supportive of school choice, and was even featured by the more establishmentarian National Alliance of Business for “leading efforts to develop a grassroots network to promote legislation establishing higher standards, accountability, deregulation, charter schools and other choice measures.” We give thanks for that, too.

...for local educators like Donna Garner, who, in Texas, along with several other public school teachers, created their own alternative standards for the Lonestar State, that emphasized such content that won the praises of people such as E.D. Hirsch, but who was ridiculed and counted among the national religious right for her determination. Donna wanted to get her document

considered over the State Board's proposed version which to some, left little to be desired. In the end, Donna Garner's efforts did help raise the visibility of the standards, so much so that they were re-written by the Commissioner, and have since 'garnered' praise from far corners of the nation.

We hope that more people use this example of productive activism to challenge what most of us typically accept as a fait-accomplis.

...for standards and a testing plan like those adopted in California. While not as strenuous as some would rightfully like, California adopted a more rigorous set of benchmarks earlier this year, and has since adopted a requirement that all children in grades 2 - 11 will be tested on the Stanford 9 achievement test. Scores will be reported by class, by school and by district, and reported to parents by June 30, a huge step in accountability in a state so plagued by establishment influences.

As a brief aside, the Golden State's initial math drafts did not sit well with the California Kindergarten Association. According to the Pacific Research Institute, its director testified that "my concern is that rigorous drill so as to achieve mastery does not become all encompassing. Children at the kindergarten level need opportunities and experiences that value the enjoyment of learning and relate learning to every day occurrences. It is important to ask: 'Are the content standards essential to my life?' ...Children need opportunities that allow them to explore, justify, represent, experiment, solve, construct, investigate, describe, estimate, and verify mathematical concepts rather than drill that rewards just knowing the answer rather than understanding." Humpf.

We give thanks...

...for groups like the New York-based Coalition for Public Charter Schools, whose diverse members are working hard to bring about the fundamental change necessary to allow truly locally-driven schools to operate. Other groups working to join the rest of the charter states that deserve mention are the Charter Schools Information Center of Missouri and the Vermont Education Resource Project, to name a few.

...that teachers at the Mid-Michigan Academy in Lansing, MI, a charter school, rejected the state's first attempt at charter unionization. "We believe that we and the administration walk together to keep the interest of children first," said Christy Morrin, a first grade teacher there. "Charter schools are built on principles of teamwork and innovation. Strength comes in working together to offer children a better education."

...that voters in California next summer will be allowed to decide if bilingual education is an appropriate mandate for all children. Hispanic parents from coast to coast have been dismayed and surprised for years to find their children remaining without literacy in English. Challenging the school bureaucracy on this one is worth its weight in gold. If bilingual education works for some — as some say — let parents make that determination.

...that states like Louisiana are challenging schools to excel, by creating tough accountability requirements and giving schools incentives to improve, or face funding losses. The Governor deserves kudos for fostering the recommendations. The state's alternative teacher group, the Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana, deserves praise for their support.

...for noteworthy publications like *Headway*, a magazine devoted to representing the diverse views of African-Americans who believe that because "young people deserve the best education our school systems can muster" we should expand educational opportunities for all. (www.headwaymag.com)



We give thanks...to the thousands of supporters of educational reform and to the many more who support the Center for Education Reform, without whose help our work (I should say fun) would not be possible.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Jeanne Allen