

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 44

MAY, 1998

Dear Friends:

Well, the countdown has begun for millions of children whose last few days of school are approaching, and countless teachers and parents are counting their days until — *YIKES!*— summer break — or a version thereof —begins. Will the children lose much of what they learned? What changes will greet them in their next school term? Do they know what they should know and will they be exposed to content-rich and interesting books and lessons? If these questions aren't on the minds of people as they exit your schools, you might want to make some suggestions. You might also want to copy this issue of the MONTHLY LETTER for your friends, schools and families, so they, too, can use their much deserved and needed break to focus on what's really important in the lives of our school-aged children.



From the States

- **Dayton, Ohio** residents clashed over the district superintendent's proposal to put the Edison Project and its programs into five schools. The teachers' union voted against the decision. In the words of the *Dayton Daily News*: "...what the public will remember is that Edison proposed increasing the school day and school year and offered to pay teachers more, all of which sounds good for children, but the union said no to even negotiating about these issues. The failure to work something out worsens cynicism about public education in general and especially schools and teachers in Dayton. The damage to the union and to the community's reputation as a good place to live and do business will be long-lasting."

There's a silver lining, however: the Alliance for Education is all the more determined to start its charter school, which has been approved by the state board. The Dayton Business Committee is also starting a school, called the Dayton Academy. And, thanks to the union, more Dayton parents know there's an issue called education in which not all is peachy, and does, in fact, deserve a little ruckus from time to time.

- Three cheers to **Pennsylvania** lawmakers for having the gumption to challenge the Philadelphia educational status quo. Late last month some of Philly's leaders, most notably Reps. Dwight Evans and Anthony Williams, joined forces with Governor Tom Ridge. Their plan calls for a bold new form of governance should the current

superintendent fail to submit a balanced budget again. The Governor would gain authority to appoint a new Chief Operating Officer, who would, in turn, have full authority to implement a wide variety of programs and accountability mechanisms, including expanded choice options. We'll see what the outcome is by May 29th, when the Philly Board must vote on the city school budget.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers blasted the legislation. Its president told the *Philadelphia Daily News*, "Do the politicians really believe they will get good educators to work without collective bargaining agreements, without prep time, without input into their hours, school assignments or the number of days they work each year?" Put that way, of course, the answer is no. But then, who is asking them to do so? Maybe it's time Keystone state educators had the option individually of negotiating their own contracts and making a choice of working environment, rather than having a top-heavy bureaucracy like the PFT do it collectively for them.

- The Show-Me State has finally done it! After over a year of hard work and extensive educational efforts on the part of one group in particular, lawmakers in **Missouri** adopted charter school legislation, making it number 34. The main constraint is that it's limited to the cities of St. Louis and Kansas City. But within these two troubled areas, multiple sponsorship opportunities exist among the public and community colleges, there is no cap, schools receive 100% funding, and charter employees are free from district bargaining agreements.

Ms. Laura Friedman, founder of the Charter School Resource Center, needs to take a bow, because without her constant and unswerving efforts, there would be no law. And for their help and support we take our hats off, as well, to the Missouri State Teachers Association, one of the largest of the 26 non-union professional teacher associations in the country. Their smaller, NEA-related counterpart was also reportedly supportive of the charter bill. The latter fact reflects the different environment that is present when a state is home to several options for teachers — if one entire union doesn't dominate the political landscape, good decisions are made for the sake of good decisions, and not because someone is watching their paycheck.

- And some of the biggest news in May came out of the Wild West, where **California's** charter law went from being cumbersome, difficult to maneuver, and pretty mediocre, to one of the strongest in the land. There were two mitigating factors. First, the legislature and the Blob both knew that a statewide initiative effort headed for victory would leave them powerless to put their thumb print on any changes. Second, a band of leading high-tech companies and individuals fanned out across the state to add their clout to a growing chorus of grass roots activists.

- Why are some officials in San Antonio, **Texas** angry and irritated? It's not because their schools are failing per se, as many of them are, or because someone is standing in their way to do good. No, it's because an unprecedented new private scholarship program has been launched that offers up to 14,000 at-risk children the opportunity of a lifetime in this impoverished area — the choice over which kind of education suits them best. A \$50 million CEO America grant, widely reported across the U.S., will provide for all poor children through grade 12. So far, hundreds of calls have come in. The whole concept was like a truth serum for local AFT leader John

O'Sullivan, who complained to the press that the Horizon program "shortens the honor roll (in public schools). One of the strengths of the public school system is it puts everyone together."

Translation of O'Sullivan's words: Private scholarships entice well-educated children to leave public schools (which is like saying that satisfied customers will take their business elsewhere). Or is he saying that really good kids are already so dissatisfied with the school they're in that they're just itching to get out? Regarding public education's strengths, does O'Sullivan think it's important that "everyone" is together even if they are ill-educated, or is his point that we should coerce people to be together to make public education strong? It seems he believes that if given the choice, there would be only bad schools, and honor roll schools. Funny, but what we see in schools where people choose is just the opposite. Maybe it all depends on *where you stand*.

- One **Washington, D.C.** school official, newly-appointed superintendent Arlene Ackerman, had the right attitude toward the announcement of the availability of an additional 1,002 private scholarships here. "I see it as a challenge that we're up to. When parents are convinced they can get a quality education in all of our 146 schools, they will come and they will stay." Now that's the right attitude!

And speaking of D.C. and attitude, what a disappointment General Julius Becton was for the Nation's Capital! In an op-ed just days after his resignation as superintendent, he blasted just about any attempt to reform the system, most notably, charter schools. That's not particularly odd for many in his position, but if you compare his public statements about the issue with this last salvo, well, it's clear there never was any way children in D.C. were going to get action with Becton as their general.

- The **Illinois** State Board of Education is one of those gifts that comes around every now and again. For reformers, it is the very embodiment of everything wrong with public education, and without having to look for examples to state our case, these keep falling in our lap.

First — despite the fact that the Board is now supposed to have authority to hear charter school appeals and to approve schools whose decisions they overturn on appeal, many thought there'd be an opportunity for a few groups who have had their proposals turned down at the local level without regard for content. Well, how silly we must have been to think that such a power would actually be utilized. For example, since January 8th they've yet to act on an appeal by the Liberty Hall Charter School organizers. Inaction and lots of excuses have now made a fall opening impossible for the group.

Second— a survey released in March of the state board's employees found that "dissension and dissatisfaction are rampant." (Illinois Charter School Facs) Among the comments: "This agency has no values." "Why bother? Nothing has improved since the first survey. Nothing will come of this."

- Then there's **North Carolina**, where the importance of teaching kids is apparently not lost on policymakers. The state now requires competency tests for

teachers in failing schools. Such a test is scheduled to be administered on June 12, but a lawsuit was filed by two local school boards and the state teachers' union, objecting, apparently, to teachers in very bad schools having to sit for a general knowledge test. Rather than fight it, these groups should view the testing as a way to identify if some teachers are part of the problem, or conversely, to help factor out teacher competency as an issue. As it stands now, the union is busy lobbying legislators to alter the testing requirement, or, failing the power-pressure tactic, will attempt to get the courts to delay the test altogether pending a hearing.

(NB: *We've been asked a few times what our criteria are for measuring whether the unions are blowing smoke over their new glasnostian talk, or are for real. We point to this one major inconsistency, as an indication that at least for this state's NEA affiliate, having teachers prove their worth is not acceptable.*)

- **Maryland**, my Maryland, starts off the state song. It also seems to be the increasing cry of a new group of charter activists that are creating rumblings and want to attract others to their cause. We're particularly pleased to see such activity in a state where legislators are in desperate need of some good educational research. Consider that before they adjourned in April, a bill establishing a study committee on charters was approved. The composition of the committee is as follows: one representative from the state union, one member of a local board, one local superintendent, one principal of an *established* Maryland charter school and a parent of a Maryland public *charter school student*. Of course, the odd thing about the italicized words is that no charter schools exist in Maryland. "*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*" Act II. sc 1, Romeo and Juliet.

- **In addition:** modest improvements in the charter laws in Colorado, Florida, Georgia and Wisconsin came through this year; Rhode Islanders are in hot pursuit of the same. Idaho, Utah and Virginia joined the list of states that offer chartering authority, but don't hold your breath. All three are seriously deficient — for now.

- O.K., so was it any surprise that President Clinton vetoed the **D.C. school choice** bill, that would have provided for about 2,000 poor children to pull out of their failing schools and attend their school of choice? Of course, Congress made it so very nice and easy for him — anyone schooled in politics knows that if you *really* want something badly, you hide it in a great big omnibus bill, OR, you make something the other guy wants intricately tied to what you want, and suffer whatever political consequences occur if you get to a stalemate. Congress was willing to pass it, alright, but not with any high stakes attached. We wonder — who really got the last laugh, hmmm?

Resources *Things to know, things you may need, things we may need*

A great little handy, dandy (adjective overload) publication for teachers involved in charter schools comes courtesy of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA). *Joining a Union* provides a very balanced and informative Q&A to teachers who may be or have already been approached by a local union recruiter. Information is the key, MAPSA says. And before you make a decision, you need to have all the facts. Call (517) 373-9167 for a copy, or we'd be happy to make you some copies from here.

The Charter Schools Project at Duquesne University has published “Quality Indicators for Charter School Applications”, a very neat little booklet that provides some expert direction on how to best address all the key issues of governance, assessment, structure, etc. of your proposed charters. Ring up (412) 396-4492 for a copy, or multiple ones, which are available for a nominal cost.

For a glimpse into state standards — the best as well as an overview of the way specific subjects are treated throughout the land — check out the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation web site at <http://www.edexcellence.net/standards/best.html>.

We at the Center for Education Reform want to let you know that our Web Site now has policy analyst David DeShryver’s famous and long-awaited *Frequently Asked Questions* (or *FAQ’s* for short) to the top-most reform issues. While you’re surfing at <http://edreform.com>, you might want to note the three different awards our site has received for user friendliness, content and design. <grin>

Announcing... Los Angeles spit-fire Yvonne Chan, the principal of Vaughn Learning Center Charter School, was doing cartwheels when the district recently reported that standardized test scores at her school for ‘96-’97 were the best out of all the other schools in her cluster for the second year in a row. Check out Vaughn’s site at www.vaughn.k12.ca.us for more evidence of their success.

Great Expectations.....

In an *American School Board Journal* (3/98) review of *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition* an AFT staffer wrote: "Is it possible that these schools do a good job because they admit only kids who are academically talented? Quite the contrary [says the author]. While people in public schools generally believe that intelligence determines academic success, independent schools have always believed that students who are not smart can succeed — as long as they are willing to apply themselves...the generations of 'average' students who have been prepared by elite independent schools ... demonstrate a kind of equity at work. Public school people often like to say that 'every child can succeed.' Ironically, independent schools come closer to making it happen." Reviewer Marcia Reecer says public schools would do better to adopt the rigorous kinds of curricula that independent schools provide. "One of the greatest lessons of this book is that creating excellent schools is not rocket science. It does not require innovative programs or cutting-edge anything. The basic ingredient is ordinary enough (although certainly not easy to come by): people working hard and working together to achieve excellence."

.....And a lack thereof

Historian and scholar Diane Ravitch: "Almost every state claims it is strengthening standards for students, but the states have been strangely silent when it comes to ensuring that teachers know what they are supposed to teach...Last summer, the U.S. Department of Education reported that approximately one-third of the nation's public school teachers of academic subjects in middle school and high school were teaching 'out of field' which means they had neither an undergraduate major nor a minor in their main teaching field. The problem was particularly acute in schools where 40 percent or more of the students were from low-income homes; in these schools, nearly half the teaching staff was teaching 'out of field.'" (*The Washington Post* 2/25/98)

We're Sorry

Usually the things we hear about the MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS are positive — informative, thought-provoking, entertaining, wacky (assuming wacky is a good thing), instructive — and express a general appreciation for our monthly missive and the work of the Center. Sometimes, however, we receive comments that are not so positive. We're accused of being impolite, impolitic, intemperate and too...you name it: too critical, too acerbic, too confrontational, too EXASPERATING!

These criticisms are valid. On any given day we can be any one, or all, of those things, depending on the passions of the moment. So it's no real surprise that every now and again we stir up a few hornets and, occasionally, get stung with such comments as "How dare you?" "You should be ashamed of yourself." "You should apologize." And, "I hope you're sorry."

Sometimes we even aggravate our allies. “Why don’t you stop doing this and start doing that?” “Why don’t you focus more on the other?” “Why don’t you do more?”

Now, lesser writers would ignore such criticisms (especially from those readers who receive their newsletters for FREE). But being the patient, reflective group that we are, we have decided to respond to these critics by saying, “We’re sorry.”

We’re sorry if at times we offend some people, but we’re far sorer about the offensive system that fails to meet even the most basic educational needs of thousands of American children. We’re sorry for the children who can’t read by the end of the first, second, or even third grade. We’re sorry for the children who don’t graduate on time, don’t graduate at all, or who graduate without having received an education that reflects twelfth-grade learning.

We’re sorry that the education reform debate is so politicized that good ideas and the good works of concerned parents and teachers are vilified. We’re sorry for poor families who have no choice in where to send their children to school, and we’re sorry for the more affluent who don’t seem to care.

We’re sorry that the education establishment spends more time defending substandard programs than it does promoting meaningful change, and we’re really sorry that average parents don’t have the same big-money political clout enjoyed by the education unions.

We’re sorry that indifference or an over-inflated sense of propriety prevents some from joining our cause. But we’re sorer for those who work every day to bring about change and are either ignored or called kooks, radicals or worse.

For our allies, we’re sorry for any misunderstanding that has left you with the impression that our fight is just for a few. It’s not. We want schools to work well for all children everywhere. We’re sorry the MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS can’t be a WEEKLY LETTER TO FRIENDS. And finally, we’re sorry we can’t do more to support the people who are putting children ahead of systems...but please know that we’re trying.

And finally....

- this gem that we just had to share from *The Weekly Standard*, May 18, 1998. The “Parody” page offered *The New York Times* Book Review, Best Sellers for Children:

“MADELINE GOES TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE, by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (Free Press, \$39.95). In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines lived 12 little girls in two straight lines. The smallest one was Madeline. Unfortunately, Madeline lacked the cognitive skills to compete and Miss Clavelle expelled her.”

- My desire to see my own children exposed to lots of great technology and my reluctance to see their world taken over by a machine converged late last month when I

read the following in the *Wall Street Journal*, in a article about the world of software and pre-school. It certainly has me thinking, and I hope it gives you pause, too.

“Using computers to teach children under three ‘doesn’t make any development sense at all,’ contends David Elkind, child psychologist and author at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. Dr. Elkind says most very young children haven’t developed the ability to understand that a picture on a computer screen is a symbol for something in the real world, and therefore they can become overstimulated. He says that even among four- and five-year olds, computers can be harmful. Exposing young children to the bright, fast moving images of computers and television is the ‘most likely culprit’ causing the rise in attention disorders, he says.”

- Our hearts go out to those affected by the recent school shootings. You are in our thoughts and prayers.
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In our last issue (No. 43), we promised to bring you the Top Ten Ways to spend your budget surplus — and we haven’t forgotten, but we’ve run out of room, and are working especially hard on just the right recommendations. It’s not too late to add your suggestions, and next month, we’ll take a look back at the (school) year-in-review, and help you settle into summer with just the right attitude.

See you then!

Jeanne Allen