

Dear Friends:

On the eve of the Center's Fifth Anniversary, we thought we'd treat you to a less newsy and more insightful issue of how education groups are acting and reacting to the tide of reform, that happens to coincide nicely with the early days of the Center. Five years ago, Massachusetts and Michigan had just passed their charter school laws. There were no Virginia state standards — no end in sight to bad reading teaching in California, no choice for Cleveland's poorest. The establishment was riding high, and had everyone on the run. Today it's a different story, and we're grateful to have been part of the movement towards reform that the last five years have brought and that the wake up call of 1983, *A Nation at Risk* began. Across the country, programs and people have evolved and changed, but the central mission that unites reformers remains the same — to provide better learning opportunities for all children by expanding access, excellence and accountability in American schools.



**Incandescent Education**

I was wine and dined recently at the Edison Project's National Client conference. I wasn't alone. Some 400 educators and administrators from around the country gathered for their second-ever shindig in beautiful Colorado Springs. Only a relative handful were already Edison-aficionados, but the rest left knowing that the decision to partner with Edison was worth taking a bit more seriously than they may have done before.

Founder Chris Whittle told the audience that you first know you're in an Edison school because there's a picture of Thomas Alva Edison in every school. You also know because children are happy, teachers are purposeful and everyone is always busy and moving around. Yes, nay-sayers, lots of schools can boast the same qualities, but shouldn't we have as many as possible?

For all the policy wonks know about private companies like Edison, there's just as much they don't know. For example, Edison schools belong to a system of schools, so that they operate together, across state and local boundaries. They are supported by continually churning R&D and guidance in implementing the Edison model. In addition to the existing, challenging coursework for all grades, Edison has just introduced a junior reading curriculum to help struggling, middle schoolers, and a program in which all schools will together identify and explore top community leaders of the last century.

Lest you think a conference held in the shadow of the Rockies could turn my head, it would take much more than the sight of Pike's Peak to get my head spinning. What it takes is passion, commitment and a dedication to results. And those elements were present in large percentages throughout the group and its audience.

Does that mean that an Edison school is right for every child and that there will be no mistakes? Absolutely not. What it does mean is that as long as other models are available, Edison and its colleagues in the education industry (like Advantage, Beacon, National Heritage Academies, et al) deserve our interest, our support and our gratitude. Somehow I think Thomas Alva Edison might be saying from his picture on the wall, "I would not have dropped out of *this* school."

### **Hip-Hip Hooray**

A victory was achieved in the Continuing Saga of that lonely, would-be Illinois charter school named after our nation's third president, Thomas Jefferson (for past saga details see MONTHLY LETTER NO. 45, June 1998). Rather than explain, the following kind of says it all...

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS  
COUNTY DEPARTMENT - CHANCERY DIVISION

BOARD OF EDUCATION OF COMMUNITY  
CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 59, Plaintiff,

v.

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, Judge Thomas A. Hett et al., Defendants.

### **ORDER**

This cause coming to be heard on its Complaint for Administrative Review... IT IS HEREBY ORDERED THAT:

1. The Complaint for Administrative Review is denied for the reasons stated in open court and made a part of the record;
2. Plaintiff's motion for stay of the circuit court decision is denied; and
3. This is a final and appealable order.

Entered: September 29, 1998

By: Judge Thomas A. Hett

### **From Rhetoric to Reality: The Blob Strikes Back**

*(Warning: Supervision by a reformer is recommended while reading this. We apologize ahead of time to anyone who might not know a reformer and thus be offended by the following passage.)*

With an attitude better suited to a pit bull, the combined forces of the education establishment have struck out to strike back at the "**unfounded attacks and increasing criticism leveled at the nation's public schools,**" words from the opening salvo of a newly minted Blob coalition called the National Congress for Public Education.

Now this National Congress should neither be confused with the Learning First Coalition, another group with similar members, nor with the other coalitions that stop and start yearly in an effort to rejuvenate the forces of the status quo (although they allegedly form to promote the good in [*their version of*] public education). Neither should these new alliances be confused with the more singular efforts of the National School Boards Association and the National PTA, whose self-proclaimed “unprecedented,” “anti-voucher” campaign shares much of that same rhetoric with their Blob friends. (We’re referring to Big Learning Organization Bureaucracies, i.e. the BLOB; or, consider the movie, where Steve McQueen can’t seem to escape the gooey, seeping substance that threatens every step he takes, every part of his community. Both characterizations apply).

Then there’s that bastion of the intellectual status-quo, the purveyors of the ‘Happy Talk’ phenomenon at Phi Delta Kappa, an “honorary” society for education, which monthly treats us to rebuttals of any reform that might dare damage the status quo. The leaders there, in releasing their annual Gallup poll on education, reminded readers that “periodically the public needs to be reconvinced that public education is all important.” Nowhere did they state what should be their goal, and what also happens to be the goal of those they loathe, which is to **all the time** remind the public of what public education should be and set out to accomplish that goal, regardless of the traditional mores they might upset.

Let’s keep in mind that this new uprising is not all bad. Afterall, at one time it would have been totally out of character for these groups to even acknowledge the Threat of Reform, much less mobilize to prove opponents wrong. And underneath the childish attacks, the hyperbole and the outright lies, there is a shred of truth that few have cared to utter:

“There is a long-standing perception that schools have deteriorated over the last 30 or 40 years. I don’t buy that argument...but I believe *we have not improved schools fast enough* to deal with the change in society needs.” Paul Houston, president of the American Association of School Administrators, as told to *Education Week*, 9/23/98.

“We must accept the fact that the schools serving children in the inner cities and those serving the rural poor require immediate attention. *Poll respondents may well be ahead of us in this area.*” Lowell Rose, executive director emeritus of Phi Delta Kappa Int’l.

## Reform’s Ripple Effect

If they’re willing to admit they see a little light, we can all tolerate the knee-jerk responding. As the pundits rant and rave about the deleterious effects of school choice, the fact is that all this fussing and moaning wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for a few powerful ideas that have taken root in nearly every community nationwide. Those ideas, while they vary, are tied by one simple theory — that power in the hands of individual parents and teachers is a more effective tool for delivering public education than is power vested in and controlled at the top.

## The Vast Blob-Wing Conspiracy

After the silver lining has been torn away, however, there remains this reality: that a disparate, diffused and very disorganized group of people called reformers are chided nationwide for helping to make choice, charter schools, real accountability and the like mainstream issues. Despite the power and wealth of the combined forces of the establishment, the reformers defy the spin and typecasting.

And so the allegations of “conspiracy” have spiraled, and of course, they are delivered in politically polarizing terms. There *is* indeed a conspiracy afoot — to improve the education of all children, but that defies politics. Can you imagine a better conspiracy than hundreds of thousands of citizens coming together in an effort to better educate the children?

There is one other conspiracy that needs visiting. It is not of the left, or the right, but of the very institutions at whose feet the current system is crumbling.

Thus we’re pleased to be able to provide you with an abbreviated glossary of this vast Blob-wing conspiracy, to which the status quo owes its unending allegiance.

### National Education Association

The only news here is its new guide to the vast-right wing conspiracy which depicts anyone who’s ever fought the union stranglehold as tied to a few right-wing supporters who funnel funds through nooks and crannies of hungry, small think tanks. That “man behind the curtain” analysis decries all citizens fools. And speaking of thinking Americans the fools, the NEA is endorsing a few Republican gubernatorial candidates or Senators this year to show the world they’re not just a Democratic machine. The problem is that no reform-minded candidate in either party wants or could get their money. If a candidate’s views merit an NEA check, look again.

### National Councils of Teachers of Math, English, Social Studies & Science

These folks used to be called upon exclusively by the textbook publishers, the testing experts and the policymakers for their take on how to make teaching and learning right. While they still enjoy expert status, some other players have evolved demonstrating the folly of many of their basic tenets. The idea that perhaps all teachers of math should be grounded in math, and that reading and English teachers should do more than make children feel good is the predominant (and right) thinking today. No wonder they helped convene the National Congress of Public Education — they *need* friends!

### Americans United, People for the American Way

The walls of religious separation are crashing down upon us, but the world these folks are predicting is one of crazy, bible-toting, gingham-clad, blue-haired ladies and gentleman who want to remake public education in their own image. Why is it that we never hear of the desperate situation of poor children in crumbling schools where reading instruction is the exception and not the rule? Watch for PAW and Americans United

events in your hometown as they bring their own apostles to tell you that public education, as we know it, will perish without your contribution.

### The National Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA)

You've heard before about PTA members who fall out of step with the Nationals' dictates. There was Susan King in North Carolina who was nearly impeached by her PTA for talking charters and Sylvia Fubini in Maryland whose symposium on reform was halted by Gestapo PTA leaders. There are others. So while most parents still think their modest contribution goes to foster better schools, the PTA once again is at it and joins the NSBA (*see below*) in its crusade to derail any efforts they view as anti-public education. That includes charter schools, by the way, and on the subject of accountability and standards, the PTA has been silent. One might have expected the PTA to issue a press release decrying the failure of nearly 60% of Massachusetts teaching candidates to pass a basic-skills test this summer. Perhaps they'd like to come to the aid of NYC Mayor Rudy Guiliani, who offered his principals' union a 30% pay increase to end patronage-based principal tenure? But no, why should they? Everything's OK as it is. Woe is the soccer Mom who thinks otherwise.

### **National School Boards Association**

*This one deserves a category unto itself*

There was a time when nearly all school boards were held in the highest regard amongst their local community leaders. But that was before the election of school boards became so political, with members chosen for falling lock-step with labor unions. Now, for every earnest school board member there are probably at least three whose vision of the schools is predicated upon conventional wisdom. Thus it is no surprise that the group claiming to represent all school board members is spending membership fees on a nationwide campaign to make every school board run its own local campaign and media blitz (*conveniently scripted by NSBA*) against choice.

The package sent to school board leaders and others nationwide in September reads, in part,

"...With members of Congress expected to vote on key education issues... September is an excellent time to emphasize your support of public schools, and opposition to vouchers [*as if the two are mutually exclusive*].

"To assist you with the next steps, we have put together several items to *enhance* [*the wording is brilliant!*] the public discussion of the voucher issue and raise the opposition to vouchers by your school board. Included in this package are action steps, a sample voucher resolution, a press release, letters to the editor, a guest editorial and talking points. Be sure to use this package as a guide and customize the materials to fit your school district.

"Please be sure to provide copies of the passed resolution...to your elected officials and NSBA." [*That way, this resolute opposition to vouchers appears homespun!*]

So it was no surprise when the Black Hawk, Oklahoma school board voted on the NSBA-drafted resolution but failed to tell the reporter at the *Tulsa World* that the vote was spurred on by a Washington-area group. Rather, the reporter was given to believe that this was all in a day's work of democratic action. Up and over in Hull, Massachusetts, a similar vote was picked up by the *Patriot Ledger*.

The NSBA model press release is truly politics working overtime: **"XXX School Board Puts Vouchers to Test; Members Vote on an Anti-School Voucher Package."** A few "choice" sentences: "...The vote came after a year long [really?] national public debate on vouchers and their affect on public schools...School board members flatly opposed the siphoning of school district funds to support children who go to schools that get private funding."

This — from an organization which predicates support for any charter law on the requirement that only school boards be permitted to approve charters! This, they say, is because the school board is the only democratic institution governing public education. HAH! Talk about elitist. You don't suppose the names of people voting "no" on the resolution will be relayed to headquarters, do you?

And what of the veracity of claims in NSBA's talking points?:

"Voucher programs actually weaken the competitive edge of public schools by drawing away the best students and the most engaged parents, cutting their funding, and eroding public support..."

"Vouchers have been tried and failed."

And finally, this statement in the NSBA Sample Resolution demonstrates the sheer arrogance of it all: "Whereas, the public schools educate every child, regardless of race, ability, religion, special needs and economic circumstances..."

Oh, would that it were so! By the way, NSBA's mission reads, in part, "to foster excellence and equity in public education through school board governance." Now here's an organization that's way off mission!

*(We're told that a visit to NSBA's website – nsba.org - will yield info on how to obtain the anti-voucher resolution package. Remember, it's your tax dollars – a lot of them anyway – at work)! For a more detailed look at the internal workings of today's public education system, the Center for Education's Reform's 1995 *School Reform Handbook, How to Improve Your Schools* still applies. Call (202) 822-9000 for your copy today.*

### **More Reactions Worth Noting**

- Education Secretary Richard Riley got an uncharacteristically-cool reception from his colleagues in the two unions when he suggested that teacher pay raises might be tied to "knowledge," and be "skill based." It reminds us of that infamous quote by the Hartford Federation of Teachers in 1996 in the court brief arguing against merit bonuses for principals and teachers. "There is no correlation between test scores and teachers'

performance,” said Hartford Federation of Teachers lawyer James Ferguson. “We think [the relationship] is outrageous.”

- Mayor Guiliani’s offer (mentioned earlier) of a 30% pay raise to principals if they would join him in ending the practice of principal tenure was called “insulting” by the principals’ union. (Watch — repeating such a horror story will no doubt make us appear anti-public education by the National Congress of Public Education!)

### **A Special Poem**

You may have heard this in 1986, or since. It’s from the now retired CBS-based “Osgood File,” and it has a message that is apropos to this issue.

There once was a pretty good student,  
Who sat in a pretty good class  
And was taught by a pretty good teacher,  
Who always let pretty good pass,  
He wasn’t a whiz-bang at math,  
But for him, education was leading  
Straight down a pretty good path.

*"Pretty Good," continued*

He didn't find school too exciting,  
But he wanted to do pretty well,  
And he did have some trouble with writing,  
And nobody had taught him to spell.  
When doing arithmetic problems,  
Pretty good was regarded as fine.  
Five plus 5 needn't always add up to be 10,  
A pretty good answer was 9.  
The pretty good class that he sat in  
Was part of a pretty good school.  
And the student was not an exception,  
On the contrary, he was the rule,  
The pretty good school that he went to  
Was there in a pretty good town.  
And nobody there seemed to notice  
He could not tell a verb from a noun.  
The pretty good student in fact was  
Part of a pretty good mob.  
And the first time he knew what he lacked was  
When he looked for a pretty good job.  
It was then, when he sought a position,  
He discovered that life could be tough.  
And he soon had a sneaky suspicion  
Pretty good might not be good enough.  
The pretty good town in our story  
Was part of a pretty good state,  
Which had pretty good aspirations,  
And prayed for a pretty good fate.  
There once was a pretty good nation,  
Pretty proud of the greatness it had,  
Which learned much too late,  
If you want to be great,  
Pretty good is, in fact, pretty bad.

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It's not too late to jump in your car, in a plane, or even a cab and join us and our spectacular guests for our 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration and conference, October 28, 1998 in Washington, DC. Call us at (202) 822-9000 for details.

Jeanne Allen