

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
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Dear Friends:

Like the Center itself, this publication is about disseminating information, promoting solutions, encouraging innovation and action, and motivating people in and around public education. Sadly, too often watching public education officials in action, like Churchill once said about the law, is like seeing sausage made. As we return to "normal" from our special issue earlier this year, this issue (the only publication of its kind!), will bring you up to date on what your fellow countrymen and woman are doing to act, react and advance education in all their own unique ways. It might well be winter, but the grass roots are sizzling...

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### On School Boards

Mark Twain once said, "First God made idiots. That was just for practice. Then He created school boards." It's pretty clear that in many, many towns (not all, folks—I said many) Mark Twain's insights are right on the money. Consider:

- Why is the Morristown, NJ School Board spending upwards of \$100,000 to put Unity Charter School out of business? The school, which currently serves 60 elementary school children from 8 different communities, is no drain on Morristown. And yet, the school board there has retained attorneys and caused Trenton education officials to spend resources on their end just to dismiss their ongoing complaints. The Morristown board has tried to close down Unity Charter School on virtually every possible ground they could muster: the facility wasn't a school facility; it neighbors an establishment that serves alcohol; the curriculum isn't aligned with New Jersey's standards (is theirs??), and now, they are race-baiting.

So, the parents of Unity Charter School are asking: Why are Morristown, NJ school officials not worried about serving *all* children? In the words of one parent, why are they not spending their time tracking down every child who chooses *not* to go to their schools to find out why families made the switch?

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**What to do??** Well, we have some **answers**, and **suggestions**, from our very own open line we established in November, in which we posed a problem and asked for your suggestions to solve it.

We asked you what *you* would do about uninformed or hostile school board members. Following are some responses from fellow reformers:

*The Consensus Response:* The Board member should be encouraged to host forums in his/her district using the following agendas:

- 1) Describe the structure, function and responsibilities of the parts of the district.
- 2) Solicit input on matters coming up for vote by the board.
- 3) Solicit an agenda of issues important among constituents. Research background and possible solutions. Craft proposals for future board meetings.

*The "You can't fight city hall" response:* And a story from a few music educators "who were tired of academic, administrative protocol (long for 'can't wait two years!')

"We began a for-profit business in music education. We were tired of musical and educational decisions being made by people with little or no experience in either. On top of feeling thwarted by folks who have not been in the classroom for sometimes 10 or 15 years... (or EVER!), we would be constantly amazed that decisions affecting our day to day concerns were being made by these folks without even inviting us to the table.

"As the school begins its seventh year of operation, we have met and even surpassed the national average salary for music educators, [and benefits] oh yes... have I mentioned the best part?

"Faculty as a team make all educational decisions and hold each other accountable daily. Our work is our play and our play is our work...we count our blessings everyday but it did not happen by accident... we took a solid business approach and threw off the shackles of academic administration routines, and a failed system. In short, we took control... and you can, too!"

*The Challenge the system approach:* Approach the state legislative committee chairman — one that will listen to facts and is ready to stand up. The committee chair must call the school board association officers to appear and ask them to provide the sources for their information, and account for their behavior. If they lie, the legislature can and will with considerable prodding ban the organization from lobbying for the balance of the session.

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We'd add that the Morristown, NJ school board — and others like it — should begin to act like public servants to *all* the families of school aged children in the district. Next, we'd recommend that rather than fight an innovative charter school, it set about

the task of fixing one of the most onerous impediments to sound delivery of educational services: Collective bargaining.

The Michigan-based Mackinac Center last fall completed a survey and analysis of union contracts amidst the state's 583 school districts. Mackinac found that:

- Fewer than 10 percent of contracts permit sufficient flexibility for school administrators to appropriately match the right teachers to the right classrooms;
- Fewer than 5 percent allow a performance-based component in the determination of teacher compensation;
- And most contracts require tenured teachers to be evaluated no more frequently than one every three years.

A complete package including recommendations for action is available to willing school board members by contacting Mackinac at (517) 631-0900.

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Heads-up! all you school boards in Pennsylvania! Some states have enacted processes designed to level the playing field for struggling charter applicants. PA 's charter appeals board begins its rein shortly, and will begin hearing cases in the summer.

### **"Dave's World"**

*An occasional feature by CER senior policy analyst, Dave DeSchryver*

- ❖ Maryland is poised to do in 1999 what neighbor Virginia did in 1998 — pass a weak charter school law wherein only local school boards can approve an application. That's like Subway asking McDonald's if they can set up shop next door. Sure enough, before the close of the year the Prince William County rejected it's first charter school application. The reasons include statements that charter schools "are a Trojan horse full of surprises," and that Prince William could not benefit from charter schools. That they could not benefit from academically focused and results driven schools.
- ❖ Less than a month later Virginia education officials released the results of the state's new Standards of Learning exams. In Prince William 30% of students failed English, 57% failed math, 69% failed History, and 38% failed Science. Room for improvement?  
**"Dave's World," continued**
- ❖ In DC the Office of Inspector General will begin to audit the booking at 146 public schools after discovering that a vocational program improperly spent \$127,000 for salaries and catering, and other personal items. When that stuff happens in a few charter schools, the school boards et al get smug. And yet, clearly, the fact that this happens under the traditional system weekly in the nation's most troubled centers should make it

obvious that school boards are no magic cure for what ails public education. (Note: Dave has authored a paper on charter closures and how those efforts demonstrate one rung of charter accountability. It's available, like almost everything else we do, on the *www.edreform.com* web-site and through our good offices).

- ❖ NY Chancellor Rudy Crew says he may charter an entire district, (though the concept of anyone else being able to approve charters drew venom from his lips days before his state enacted a strong charter law), but fell short of offering the charter idea to more than a few hand-picked schools.

Crew also has his hands full with a federal inquiry into potential discriminatory practices. The Federal Education's Department's Office of Civil Rights has challenged the Schools Chancellor to show evidence that thousands of black and Hispanic students are being properly placed in special education programs. It's strongly suspected that schools are placing children in special education programs in order to improve their school testing scores. (The scores of special education students on standardized tests are not used to determine school ranking).

If this is true it is a MONUMENTAL crime against the children's futures. Only 2.3% of these kids make it back to regular classes, reported the *New York Daily News* late last year. In 1975 there were 35,000 kids in the special education classes, now the number stands at 161,000 – a 350% increase. But only 10% of the 161 thousand are severely disabled, for whom the label was created. Crew has failed to report or investigate. What would happen if one of these schools were in a chartered district?

We'd also like to know what the Chancellor's prescription is for the children in third and sixth grades whose reading scores dropped again this year, by more than ten percent.

- ❖ According to a January USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup poll education (once again) is the top issue in 1999. And as people become more aware and concerned about the issue, they are learning about the significance of school choice and the improvements they can demand when parents and communities control the resources of public education, when they can choose the school that best fits their children. For example, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation recently released a poll on education reform in the Dayton, OH area. It found that:
  - More than 60% favor charter schools (known in Ohio as "community schools") and even larger fractions would like to see some created in Dayton.

- More than 80% believe that children should be promoted to the next grade and graduated from high school only after they pass statewide proficiency tests.
  - Three-quarters favor national testing.
  - Three-fifths would end state certification of teachers (provided that teachers pass a subject matter test).
  - More than two-thirds favor merit pay for teachers whose students do well on state tests.
  - Most support equalized public school funding across the state.
  - 85% would terminate Dayton's mandatory busing for racial balance and instead allow students to attend neighborhood schools or the schools of their choice.
  - A clear majority (including three-fifths of Miami Valley public school parents and three-quarters of Dayton public school parents) support government-funded vouchers.
- ❖ Amongst the useful data collected in a special report by *Education Week* entitled it's *Quality Counts '99*: states have yet to follow through on threats to get tough when it comes to holding schools accountable for results. Teachers are out of touch with parents and employees when it comes to holding their feet to the fire (they want no part of it) and most school report cards are difficult to understand if accessible.
- ❖ Is there any reason that we should not expect smart, quality teachers? It seems like an obvious question, but there has been plenty of controversy lately. In Massachusetts, only 55 percent of the state's prospective teachers passed the certification test in October, slightly higher than the number who passed the last two exams. Among repeat test-takers, only ninety-two percent of those who retook all three parts of the exam flunked again. Kudos to the Bay State for raising the standards.

**"Dave's World,"** *continued*

It is trying to eliminate something that is all too common and that we has been reported in previous *Monthly Letters*, like this:

A new study by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) reports that, "Because of practices in teacher preparation, licensure and assignment to classrooms, too many teachers in the middle grades have too little knowledge of the subjects they teach. Teachers who never have taken advanced English courses, physics, chemistry or college algebra can teach seventh- and eighth-grade pre-algebra, algebra, physical science and English in most southern states. In SREB states, those who teach eighth-grade mathematics and science are less likely than their peers nationwide to have had college courses in their content area during the last two years.

The results are predictable: lagging student achievement in the middle grades in mathematics, science and language arts."

Maybe that's one reason that yet another international report finds us failing to keep pace with graduation rates across the globe, and finding continued poor performance amongst 8<sup>th</sup> graders in math and science, according to the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

- ❖ Concerned parents take note! Unparalleled reviews of all major elementary math textbooks in selected grades (2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) are available from that brilliant group of scientists that make up the virtual organization, [www.mathematicallycorrect.com](http://www.mathematicallycorrect.com).
- ❖ A coalition of civil rights and child advocacy organizations filed a class-action lawsuit in Tallahassee, alleging the state of Florida failed to provide an "adequate public education" to the children of 10 parents living in poor communities. Citing classroom overcrowding, a lack of an education accountability system and low-test scores in the schools named in the lawsuit, the attorneys and civil rights activists said the state failed to "provide for a literate, knowledgeable population." Well they are in luck, they want change and they'll get change; not three weeks after the new governor and his team were sworn in, the new Bush-Brogan team unveiled their plan to offer opportunity scholarships for students in low performing schools, experiment with longer schooling, and state testing for all students in grades 3-10. Those with vested interests in the current education system would do well to endorse the proposals.
- ❖ **School choice is redefining public education.** On January 17<sup>th</sup>, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* wrote: "By next fall, several innovative charter schools — a kindergarten through 12th grade science school, for example — are scheduled to be in operation. The number of students in choice schools is expected to move upward from about 6,000 involved this year to perhaps 7,500, putting many more students in religious schools than before, and some organizations such as day care centers or churches may launch choice schools. In the 100,000-plus-student Milwaukee Public Schools system, there is a gathering passion about raising performance. An advertising campaign is pushing a new "guarantee" that children who attend school regularly will be reading on grade level by the end of the second grade or will get personal tutoring. New curricula in math and science are being introduced, aimed at overturning a record of low-test scores in those areas.

"The majority of the Milwaukee School Board is up for election in April, and the results could have a bearing on questions as basic as whether the

system will continue to exist as is. If a few words can sum up all the ferment on the education scene, perhaps they are these: Provide more options. Seek better results. Find proof that we're getting them. Or make more changes in what already exists. Accountability is the word that underlies the drive for more testing and better results."

- ❖ Vote! Washington-DC choice opponents have practically set up shop in Milwaukee again, this time in an effort to unseat choice-friendly school board members. They are organizing students 18 or older and orchestrating forums on "who is for public education and who is against" to get them motivated to vote for the status quo. They'll not likely prove worthy adversaries for Milwaukee parents, a wide majority of whom support real reform.

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## From the States

In the Wild West, *Yee-hah!* Is being muttered by more than a few people at the unveiling of several proposals designed to expand choices available to all children and IMPROVE ALL OF EDUCATION (we had to cap that last phrase to remind any detractors out there that this is about public education!):

- Arizona superintendent Lisa Keegan is making an attempt this year to expand access for poor children to private schools. The state's Supreme Court just upheld the private scholarship tax credit that was enacted last year allowing people to contribute to funds created to help the poor buy private schooling.
- Colorado Governor Bill Owens spent nearly 14 pages of his State-of-the-State address on education, telling his new constituents that he wants to bring to his state real choice and accountability. Colorado's schools need to cut through "those state mandates and red tape which stifle education excellence." Owens wants to give regular public schools the same flexibility that charter schools receive. He wants to finance charter schools at the same level as district schools. And he hopes to develop school report cards that address student test results, per-pupil funding, teacher qualifications, and the dropout rate for each public school.
- And in California, Governor Gray Davis has the unions who supported his candidacy fuming over a proposal to shut down failing schools if they do not improve. "If they [the 200 worst schools in California] fail to meet their goals after one year, we'll alert the parents and the public that these are under-performing schools, allow students to attend other schools if they choose and, where appropriate, place the principal on probation. Schools that fall short of their goals but show significant improvement will continue in the program for another year. After two years, schools that meet or exceed performance goals will be eligible for a one-time cash bonus. I want to reward the pursuit of excellence and this will help us do it. But those that show no significant improvement will face serious consequences. These will include dismissal of the principal or reassignment of teachers or creation of a charter school by the parents or reorganization of the school, or even closure of the school or district."
- Texas might be getting a lot of attention for increasing student performance, but it's not big enough and fast enough for a wide variety of Texans who are looking to the state to make poor performing schools stand accountable and let children badly affected by their policies leave for other public or private alternatives.

And while the unions perfect their roar and try to figure out how to increase member dues to pay for an expected onslaught of lobbying against all of these proposals, let's remember that the roar is oftentimes flimsy, and the tiger has shown itself to be more of one made of paper at times than the real thing.

*Start your engines, New Yorkers!* The ink was barely dry on the nation's 35<sup>th</sup> charter school law when hundreds of parents, teachers and reformers-at-large were



freed from an 18 month political stalemate and given the green light to get their charters written. After a careful analysis, the Center's independent review process ranked New York's law 7<sup>th</sup> strongest among the pack nationwide, as the law permits multiple authorities to sponsor, complete legal and financial autonomy for charters from district and state rules and spending guidelines. More details are on-line at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com). And congratulations to state officials, local reformers and Governor George Pataki for building a strong coalition and holding fast to key principles in the face of union tactics.

### **On Achievement Gains**

The states of North Carolina and Texas have been widely credited — from the major media to the president — for major gains in student achievement. In both cases, “experts” are quick to point out that some mechanisms of accountability were the cause for these obvious success stories. But we wonder whether anyone really looked more closely at what else is happening in those two states. In Texas, the same time period that scores have risen on national assessments, the following things have happened:

- Over 2,200 children have left their public schools for private schools through scholarship programs
- 15,000 children have left their traditional public schools for one of the 159 operating Lone Star charter schools
- Dynamic school officials in places like Houston are taking advantage of private sector resources to alleviate overcrowding
- Districts are partnering with private providers of at-risk services to start schools that serve adjudicated and troubled youth
- A gradual end to social promotion
- High stakes testing
- And, in Texas, not one, not two, but FIVE competing teacher unions exist.

Most of these components trace back to another proven catalyst of America' success: Competition. Now let's see that one on the 6:00 news.

## In North Carolina...

The achievement gains there do not appear to trace to any one single reform or policy, but anyone in or near that state should be seriously miffed about the lack of equity being provided to about 300 of your state's most successful youngsters. Healthy Start Academy in Durham is being threatened with closure; not because it isn't educating the schools almost all minority students well, but because it is educating 300 almost all minority students only.

And another 200 poor children will be served by the newly established Carolina Educational Opportunity Fund, which like its more than 50 other private choice program colleagues will provide half-tuition scholarships up to \$1,000 to allow more children the chance to buy a better education. Vernon Robinson, the vocal NC reform catalyst, is heading the fund.

## On Unions

You can run but you can't hide! At least, that was our first reaction to NEA's announcement that the "NEA-PAC will now be called (ahemm...):

- *The NEA Fund for Children and Public Education*

Says the labor union of yet another element of the NEA's new public relations makeover: "Our new name [of the NEA's Political Action Committee] better reflects our goals and what we care about...NEA-PAC began 25 years ago...NEA member participation set a record \$2.4 million in contributions last year. These dollars helped achieve federal school funding at record levels, school lunch and breakfast programs, the Safe Schools program...Head Start, Title I...They have also boosted National Board certification (Now there's a hornet's nest!), kept vouchers at bay, (Dream on, folks!)...

"...the dollars contributed," (Don't you mean extracted?) "...by NEA members helped include in the federal budget \$1.2 billion to recruit 30,000 new teachers."

Gosh, if they did all that, how come President Clinton didn't personally thank the NEA in his State of the union, and instead chose to focus on the popular themes of accountability, closing failing schools, ending social promotion and charter schools. Where's NEA-PAC on those — hmmm?

- And for those of you who might wonder whether unions really do play politics, answer this: Why was the Michigan Education Association the place of origin for seemingly hundreds of misleading calls to voters on election day '98 – telling them to go to the wrong polling place??
- An in-depth, insightful and constructive look at "NEA Confidential" as the report is called has been produced by the Education Intelligence Agency. As stated in the intro, "...it's a lot easier to counteract criticism that's based on unfamiliarity with its

governance and structure...this little handbook is meant to act as a desk reference for anyone who wants to write about – or even think about – the National Education Association... not just how the union is designed to operate, but how it *actually* operates. Phone (916) 422-4373 for a copy or e-mail EducIntel@aol.com.

### **More on School Choice**

As states like Arizona, Florida and Texas become fertile territory for school choice, the Blob (or educational establishment as its called) is gearing up its defense of the status quo by appealing individually in newsletters and expensive advertising to all their combined members. If you are a PTA member that supports school choice like many of your colleagues, you might be off-put by the PTA bulletin you receive. Like its school board association allies in the Washington, DC area whose anti-choice efforts were profiled in the November 1998 *Monthly Letter*, many PTA state affiliates carried this message about the Milwaukee choice program to its members, which was in turn quoted throughout individual school PTA newsletters:

“The concern of PTA leaders is what happens to the children who remain in public schools. Draining money from a failing system [THEIR words, not ours] to support a private school education doesn’t make any sense at all...” [...unless, of course, you’re the child].

“Vouchers will not be defeated and public schools will not be protected without your help. Please send a letter (Samples are available at the National PTA web site [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)) to your state representatives and let them know that PTAs are opposed to vouchers...”

- On NYC Mayor Rudy Guiliani’s proposal to bring a Milwaukee-like plan to the Big Apple, UFT union boss Randi Weingarten said: “Parents should not be forced to opt for vouchers so that their kids can have what every public school should be able to provide.”

Ah, but they are being forced to leave, Randi. (Are you, too, suddenly moved to sing a verse of “Send in the Clowns??”)

## Reflections

Historians talk often about pendulum swings. The approach of reformers today represents a pendulum swing from a focus on building a system to one focussed first on how to support the education of children. In an article in the 12/16/98 *Education Week*, a Smithsonian historian is discussing his study of school artifacts and nostalgia, from books, to black boards, and so forth. The following words clearly underscore the truth behind the shift from system to child:

*...The story of children is largely untold. 'Kids have been historically neglected' in efforts to tell the nation's history.*

Here's to helping to change that picture.



And so it goes; another month nearly over, and a mountain of activity left to explore. And while we're on the subject of mountains, we offer you in parting the motto of the Fresno, California-based Mountain Home School Charter:

**"Do the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do."**

Jeanne Allen