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

We're just days away from the new millennium and we can't think of a better time to be involved in the transformation of public education in this country. As you gear up for your New Year's celebrations, we hope you'll ponder our holiday humor. Join us as well for a look back over the reform highlights of 1999 and let's resolve together to do our best to make all schools great for all children in 2000. But first, the early days of the month were noteworthy for the level of noise created by standards foes. A look at who is driving this crash-bound train and why...

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Standards and Testing and More — Oh, My!

The reaction of high level government officials in many states to the existence of high-stakes standards and tests is both pitiful and harmful and offers us an important lesson into the politics of education reform.

At least 19 states now require students to demonstrate they have the knowledge it takes to graduate. To do so, these states require passage of some form of exit test based in part or whole on the states' previously adopted standards. The results of these tests have provided parents and the public at-large with valid information about student achievement in their schools — very often for the first time. But because the results from many of these tests carry bad news, the establishment is doing the two-step retreat and urging parents to rebel as well. They should see real opportunities in this new information. They should seize the day and re-focus schools on what they have to do to help students succeed. But instead there's a large group of local and state education officials who are crying foul and attempting to put the breaks on the standards and testing train.

Who are these people and why do they make people like Governor Tommy Thompson retreat from his state's annual test? Who is it in Los Angeles that wants to escape from the hard work of educating children and instead postpone the removal of social promotion policies? Do these same people have anything to do with the 50% of L.A. children who it has been determined are really not prepared to graduate?

Pity the poor souls in New York City who upon learning that their feet would be held to the fire if their children didn't make progress, helped their children cheat on tests instead. The city's investigation found four years of these dreadful practices. Exactly whom did these hooligans think they were helping? Imagine the signal that

was sent to thousands of youngsters, many of whom have no one to teach them otherwise. We've now taught a generation of students that even adults cheat, that school doesn't matter, and that there wasn't a caring adult at school willing to make them work hard to get ahead. And some of our readers wonder why we fume, criticize and snarl at much of the conventional power structure!

But even in areas not so plagued by obvious educational corruption as New York, even in the pleasant suburbs, a vocal minority of parents and educators are crying foul when their children are offered rigorous work and expected to learn it. Not enough resources, some say. Not enough time, they argue. No fair! one hears. But rather than buckle down and work harder and smarter — as so many of our model schools across the nation have — the whining is heard and heeded by politicians in both parties.

So in Virginia and Arizona there is noise, noise, noise, noise (as the Grinch would say) about rolling back test requirements. Michigan parents have already been given the opportunity to opt out when they find it convenient. Wisconsin has punted, and the chorus of anti-testers is rising.

Meanwhile, all around us is the sound of joyous music and Christmastime preparations and anticipation are in full gear. Perhaps there is some hope that while reformers are all preoccupied with their holidays, we'll turn a blind eye towards attempts to roll back important gains. Thankfully it's hard to mask efforts to make sure all of our children from every background are offered and taught a challenging curriculum. And thank goodness the public wants our schools held accountable to see that the people we task to do the job either succeed or are moved out. But there is other mischief afoot among those content to see our children without standards. Here's just one example:

Pride and Prejudice

The following diatribe is a response from a person named Gerald Bracey, in response to someone inquiring whether or not social promotions and exit exams are designed to create a new underclass. We apologize for his profanity.

"...John Galbraith observed quite coolly, around about 1990, I think, that our culture absolutely requires larger numbers of unskilled workers which the culture refuses to acknowledge. I always think about this when I travel: There's the pilot and the navigator for whom I am thankful. But also the attendants, and the baggage handlers, and the people who wave the planes in and out of their stalls who are equally necessary. There are the taxi drivers, the bellhops, the maids, the janitors, the busboys and waiters and the people (I have no idea what they are called) who arrange the chairs and tables in the room where I will speak. Galbraith discussed this in his book 'The Culture of Contentment.'

"...It seems to be a structural necessity unless one can imagine a different structure. According to some Utopian theorists like B. F. Skinner, you can

pay the people who do the shit work much more. In the countries that I have visited where overeducation is a problem — Scandinavia, Germany, Israel, that has never been the solution. The solution is always to get more people from undereducated, underpaid countries to emigrate. As a nation of immigrants, we never have had to confront this problem.

“The other ‘solution’ is to argue that people should be the best of whatever they are. This is Anna Rosenberg's (Ayn Rand's) solution and I don't think it really works. We imagine the underclass as invisible. ‘Invisible Man’ was a great work for pointing that out.”

Gerald Bracey 11/8/99

Via list-serve

Naturally, this kind of talk shocks even the most battle-worn among us. Afterall, (as we reported in 1998) some of Bracey's first public comments (1991) are illustrative:

“In the U.S., we avoid discussing the implication of overeducation because we fear that we may reach conclusions that clash with our idea of equal opportunity for all. But until everyone owns a humanoid robot, as well as a car and a color television, some person will have to do the ‘dirty jobs.’ Until then, however, loath we are to admit it, we must continue to produce an uneducated social class...”

So the fact that education groups in Fairfax County, VA invited Bracey to speak about Virginia's standards at a forum earlier this fall is even more outrageous given where he stands. Because of his views, Bracey argues that Virginia's cut-off scores for passage on the state's new tests are too high and that these children are already doing as well as they should be according to his own, ahem, analysis.

So on top of bigotry, we've got a situation in which even reputable education groups are thrilled to give imposters like this a podium to spew forth impressive sounding statistics in the name of alleged fairness. Fairness to people like this means having enough workers to take care of their garbage.

Why devote so much space to this? Because tens of thousands of good, committed educators are exposed to this rot each year in well-funded speeches and articles. It's time they knew what they were looking at.

A Holiday Parody

And here's some holiday cheer... You know the old saying, that there's a kernel of truth in all humor. The following poem was written by a good friend and CER alumni. It was first published in our Holiday, 1996 *Monthly Letter* to a much smaller audience. And after three years, it's message still rings loud and true.

The Blob Who *Thought* It Stole Christmas

All the parents and teachers
they wanted reform.
They looked for solutions
to break from the norm.
They wanted things better,
that's why they were fighting,
to make sure their kids
would learn reading and writing
and science and math and history too
for everyone's children,
not just a few.

But the Blob and its grinches,
they hated reform.
"Imagine," they sniffed
" trying to break from the norm."
Standards, and charters,
and school choice and such
This ed-reform business is much, much
too much.

Who are they,
these people
this reform-minded crew
who think they know better than us
what to do?
We'll fix them,
We'll teach them,
We'll show them who's boss.
We'll make doubly sure that they suffer
a loss.

We'll stop all their harping and carping
and cries
we'll tell all the people their numbers
are lies.
We'll say that they're wrong
And without hesitation,
We'll say that they're out
To destroy education.

Oh, we'll offer solutions – the people
will buy it,
All we will need say is, " It won't hurt to
try it."
Whole language, new math,

And lots of things pending
(which, of course, will require more
billions in spending.)

And for those who ask questions
or say it's a waste,
with great condescension,
they'll be put in their place.

We'll stop the reformers,
we'll stop them, we will,
Because after all.
We're the kings of the Hill.

So the Blob and it's grinches
Embarked on their task
To make sure that all things reform
finished last.

But the parents and teachers and
grandparents too,
went on with their work,
they knew what to do.

The Blob might have money
and power
and might
but that didn't mean
that they knew what was right.
And no matter the odds,
or how long it might take,
the reformers were steadfast...
a difference they'd make.

They wouldn't be quiet
And they wouldn't give in
And whenever they lost,
they would just start again.
They offered suggestions
and wrote legislation
and some ran for office,
(to the Blob's consternation).

We'll stop these reformers
the Blob-grinches blustered
and what we can't stop
we will just filibuster.
We'll do all we can,
oh we've got a few tricks,
after all it's our business
to play politics.
Against our opponents we'll spend,
spend galore.
And for those who are with us,
we'll spend even more.

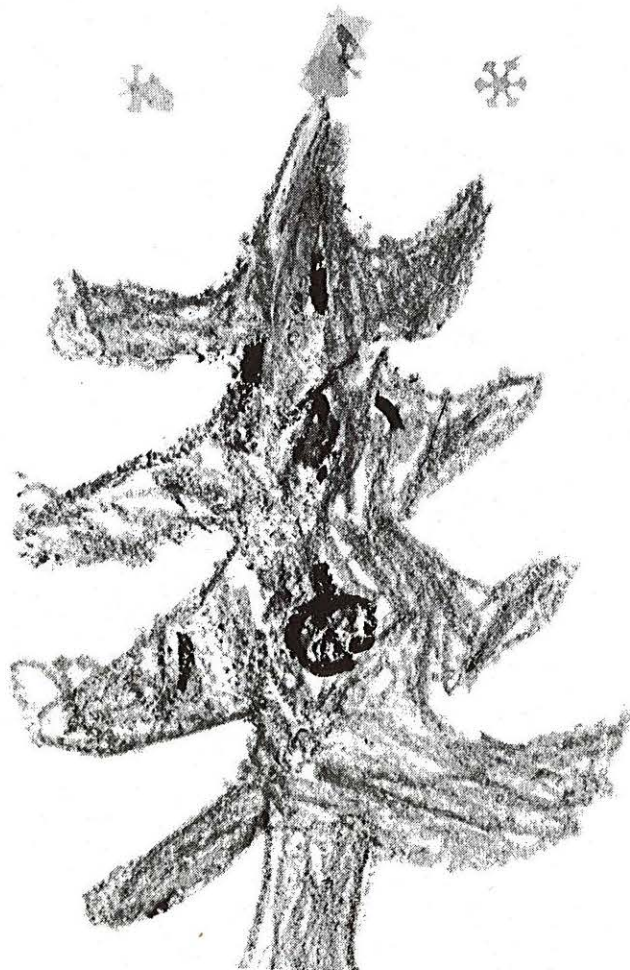
And when it was over
the Blob danced with glee
Their efforts had let to a
great victory.

They'd shown the reformers,
and now they could say
"Just take your reforms,
now take them away."
But the parents and teachers and
grandparents too,
just smiled at the Blob,
because everyone knew:

That for all of its millions
and for all of its might,
the Blob had not managed
to carry the fight.

No matter the money and time
overspent
No matter how much their support
they had lent
In state after state they had failed to
defeat
the education reformers
they said they would beat.

And when it was over the fact
remained still,
That they couldn't be really the King of
the hill.
And for all of their ranting and raving
and storm
they've really done nothing to stop ed-
reform.



The Year in Review

- **Michigan's** Mackinac Center contributed to the public's understanding of union contracts by publishing an in-depth review of the state's 583 school district contracts;
- **Pennsylvania's** charter appeals board began operating;
- A USA Today/CNN Gallup poll found **education to be the top issue** of concern once again;
- Quality Counts '99 reported that states have yet to follow through on threats to get tough when it comes to **holding schools accountable** for results;
- Massachusetts raised the **standards for teaching**, and was attacked summarily by anti-standards folks. Later, the state offers a special alternative certification program to draw more quality into the classroom from other professions;
- The Southern Regional Education Board reported 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;"
- The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported that **choice** was making a difference. They summed up the previous year's worth of response to choice and activity by Milwaukee public schools this way: "Provide more options. Seek better results. Find proof that we're getting them. Or make more changes in what already exists;"
- Reviews of selected **math textbooks** were conducted and posted on *mathematicallycorrect.com*;
- The NEA changes its political arms' name from NEA-PAC to the NEA Fund for Children and Public Education (violins, please);
- The **National PTA** gears up its anti-choice efforts and provides state affiliates with toolkits for letter writing, op-eds and more;
- The **Milwaukee School Board** defeats anti-choice candidates and despite over \$200K in spending, the union loses its effort to unseat now school board president John Gardner;
- The Nation's Report Card on **reading** reveals that only 23% of our fourth graders and 28% of our eighth graders are proficient readers;
- An assault was begun — and later curbed — on employee freedoms in California charter schools. 1999 saw an intense effort by the teachers union to restrict charter teachers' rights;

- *The National Charter School Directory*, 5th Edition, is published by the Center boasting of an unprecedented 1,400 charter schools open nationwide;
- **Florida** passes it's A+ education plan designed to rescue children from failing schools and give troubled schools the tools — and incentives — they need to improve. Opponents sue. Nearly 150 children opt-out of two failing schools;
- **Pennsylvania** tries again to bring choice to the most needy in the Keystone state, prompting more than one opponent there to declare choice is akin to supporting genocide;
- **New Jersey** courts dismiss several legal challenges to charter schools;
- **New Mexico** expands its charter bill modestly and **Oregon** and **Oklahoma** become number 36 and 37 to pass charter legislation;
- *"The Teachers We Need and How to Get More of Them,"* a manifesto calling for major changes to how teachers are trained, hired and rewarded, takes root with major signatories. By the end of the year, teacher reforms like those written about in the manifesto are taking root in more than a handful of states;
- Littleton rivets are attention to our **social obligations** and need to unite behind troubled youth, not to mention the importance of smaller schools;
- The **ripple effect** of choice and charter schools becomes apparent in several states;
- The first three **New York** Charter schools open;
- Early results of the **San Antonio Horizon Choice** Project reveals that "children who need help the most are the ones taking advantage of the program," and sparking district changes as well;
- **Thomas Jefferson Charter School** in Arlington Heights, IL opens after four years in limbo and the right of **Thurgood Marshall Charter School** in Denver, CO to exist is affirmed by that state's supreme court;
- Miami **Urban League President T. Willard Fair** endorses school choice; Colorado Springs President Willie Breazell is forced to resign after he, too joined the choice train. And civil rights leader and former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young promises to take his support for choice for the poor directly to the NAACP membership;
- The **SAT** gets tinkered with once again;
- **Content** and **Quality** are the two words that matter most as 1999 comes to a close.

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Looking Ahead

What can we expect from the first year of the new century? Here is our first in a series of predictions to come from among the nation's most active reformers:

"That some time in the new millennium, Nebraska will join the school reform movement by passing a charter school law. First we have to get past the old 'we've always done it this way and it couldn't possibly ever be any better' mode.

"Things I'd like to tell other reformers for the New Year:

"Keep giving those of us who are trying to break through something to strive for. I believe we are on the cutting edge of powerfully innovative and creative methods of providing public education which will more successfully meet the needs of all children. It is an exhilarating time to be involved in school reform issues."

Rhonda Stuberg, Director
Nebraska Charter School Coalition

The Spirit of Giving

The hearts of people involved in education efforts are enormous. Throughout the year, they give of themselves tirelessly to bring about better chances for children. So it's no surprise that when we ask for help we get it. Our call for help to support a charter school in North Carolina that had lost its property in Hurricane Floyd was heeded by hundreds of readers. So far, the Rocky Mount Charter School, through the League of Charter Schools in N.C., has received more than \$3,000 towards rebuilding. As one of our favorite principals — Dr. John Parnell of Edison-Friendship House in Washington, DC — says often to his children, "SCHMOOCHES!" to you all!!!!



Christmastime comes but once a year but know that we're grateful for your special gifts throughout. **A very Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to you all!!!!** You have our fondest wishes for a healthy, happy and successful New Year! If Santa leaves you with any excesses, and you haven't already given lately, we hope you'll move the Center for Education Reform to the top of your end-of-the-year giving list! On behalf of all of at the Center,

God Bless you all!

Jeanne Allen