



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 204 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000
Fax 202-822-5077

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

It's hard to believe it's May, the month of the May-pole, the blooming of flowers that April showers bring, and the flurry of the end of school coming closely by to our children. Speaking of April, you're probably wondering what happened (or not) to our APRIL MONTHLY LETTER. You didn't miss it, but several major events and activities at CER precluded its publication. Besides, you've probably heard from us enough this last month, so we thought we'd give you a tiny break. Here is what kept us so busy!



Celebrating Charter Schools

By the time you read this, *National Charter Schools Week* will have just ended and hopefully you'll have been reading regular news reports about fantastic open houses, high-level visits and more. That's because the nation's charter schools joined together that week to showcase their achievements and the programs that make them proud, and dignitaries, presidential hopefuls and others throughout the nation took time to applaud. There's much to celebrate, and all month we'll be profiling charter schools and their stories on our website and linking to other organizations making a difference.

New Reports: We know a lot about the elements of a successful environment for charter schools. On April 28, CER released its third consecutive analysis of charter laws and ranking. *Charter School Laws Across the States: Ranking Score Card and Legislative Analysis* was covered extensively in the media. "States trying to promote charter schools are heading the wrong way if they don't give the special public schools ample freedom and funding," read the lead sentence in the *Associated Press* report by Anjetta McQueen. Only 19 states merited good grades (As or Bs) and the rest were awarded Cs and below. Check out your state on our website and if it clearly is behind the rest of the pack, start working to change that reality.

This past year showed enormous growth in charter schools, with 521 new schools opening, a record 44% over the previous year. Those statistics and more are part of the **National Charter School Directory 2000**, CER's sixth edition of this exhaustive listing of charter schools. In compiling the directory from year to year

and in the surveys that charters have taken the time to answer, we've learned much about charter schools:

- Their average enrollment is 256, compared to a typical public school's 710 students,
- A little over half (55%) serve students in the elementary grades,
- Charters serve a disproportionate number of students who are typically under-served by the district school system, and
- Most charter schools are sponsored by a public entity *other* than the local school board.

Of course, more and more districts are using charters as a tool to join the innovative movement. Check out the details and schools by ordering your reports today via our website or by phone at 1-800-521-2118. Please note if you are a member when calling.

It's not too late to VISIT A CHARTER SCHOOL TODAY! or press local officials to pay more attention. Just let us know if you need suggestions on how to get more involved.

Choice Ripples through Florida...

A report released by several leading education groups found overwhelming evidence that public schools in Florida have worked to improve instruction and teacher training as a result of competitive pressures brought to bear by the Florida school choice program. "*Competing to Win: How Florida's A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform*," was written by award-winning journalist Carol Innerst and released by the Urban League of Greater Miami, Inc., The Collins Center for Public Policy, Floridians for School Choice, The James Madison Institute and CER. The data outlined in the report was obtained directly from school districts and makes clear that "not only have those schools with children already eligible for the Opportunity Scholarship program implemented reform, but all 15 of the districts with 'F' schools — as well as those with 'D' schools hovering on the brink of failure — have also moved swiftly to fix their failing ways."

Earlier in the month, the *New York Times* agreed with the sense of this "ripple" report and said, "the impact [of vouchers] is already apparent at the two schools...with grants from the district and state, the schools have hired more teachers, reduced class size, stretched the school year by 30 days and added afternoon tutoring."

For a copy of the report, go to http://edreform.com/school_choice/compete.htm.

...And The Program Continues

It's great news that schools are working hard to improve. More good news came last month from Judge Ralph Smith, the presiding judge in the lawsuit, who denied a motion by the plaintiffs seeking to have the Florida program eradicated that would have prevented the Opportunity Scholarship program from continuing. It's all so complicated and if you want the details of the various steps in court, we'd suggest you log onto www.ij.org, but suffice it to say that the program is safe while the court continues to consider its merits on appeal. Opening briefs in the case are May 30 and a decision is expected before the next school year.

The opponents rallying against school choice meanwhile were eerily silent on this one, while earlier in the month their trumpets were blasting. To wit:

A statement by the National School Boards Association read in part, "the rhetoric and litigation around vouchers serve only to steal time, money and attention away from solving the real issues that face public schools."

The NEA claimed that the earlier ruling against the program "puts a stake in the heart of the voucher movement." Wishful thinking, perhaps. When it comes to money, the NEA argues that the 'F' schools that lost children are actually losing money. NEA VP Reg Weaver staged a rally of sorts at the Bibbs and Dixon elementary schools early last month and lamented that the choice program was draining the schools of much needed funds.

In reality, those schools have received an additional \$1,244 and \$1,707 above and beyond the average per pupil expenditures at the A-graded schools. In other words, those schools have long received additional funds, and now receive even more thanks to the A+ program. So if schools are working harder because of the new program, and money is not the issue, what's the establishment's problem?

Think Globally, Act Locally

Taking a page from our friends of the 60s, a few examples of this saying are presented for your applause and reflection this month:

- A new scholarship program for needy children has been grown in Utah. The Utah Children's Scholarship Fund will be operated by the Sutherland Institute and brings to 72 the number of such privately based scholarship, or voucher programs. Check out www.sutherlandinstitute.org or phone (801) 281-2081.

- Similar work is coming from the live free or die state. Veteran education activist Judy Alger is part of a group of concerned parents who have created the Center for Market-Based Education, Inc. of New Hampshire to assist independent schools in delivering opportunity scholarships and to expand the knowledge base on education reform throughout the state. (603) 786-9562.

Think Globally (continued)

- Chattanooga has also joined that bandwagon, and released a survey attesting to the satisfaction of parents and children in their scholarship program. Go to www.resourcefoundation.org or phone (423) 756-0410.

- The Independent Scholarship Fund in the East Bay of Northern California is expanding and hopes to double to 200 the number of children it serves in the coming school year. ISF pays up to 75% of tuition for low and moderate-income families. For info: www.independent.org/tii/news/press000315ISF or call (510) 632-1366.

- The Million Mom March is a cause worth joining this Mother's Day, May 14. The march aims to unite Moms to ensure their children are safe through the advocacy of sensible gun laws. Though we at the Center do only butter, not guns, we thought this home-grown effort on behalf of safety warranted a plug. While there may be differences about the means, the end is a noble cause. Call (888) 989-MOMs or go to www.millionMomMarch.com.

On Politics

I. Former NY Congressman and current pastor Floyd Flake had constructive criticism for the presidential candidate he's backing. When it comes to school choice, Flake argues, Gore should do for education what his boss, Bill Clinton did for welfare. By dodging a **Newsweek** reporter's question about school choice at the primary debate in Harlem in July, and through his pandering to the unions, Gore may lose a potent constituency, Flake argued March 12 in the *New York Times*. "If Mr. Gore is going to pluck the heartstrings of the African-American community — and of middle America at large — he is going to have to answer why what is good for the Gores is not good for families with less power and wealth."

Bravo, Rev. Flake. Bravo. But it might have been a more powerful message had you said so *before* endorsing him.

II. Potential teachers for New York's summer school program lost out on a potentially enormous sum of money because of the spat the union created over how best to attract and reward these hard working folks. The city needs about 17,000 summer school teachers. Mayor Guiliani recommended giving bonuses of as much as \$4000 to each of the highest performing teachers. The union boss, Randi Weingarten said no, and wanted to give all teachers \$700. City Hall recommended \$2500, and later \$750. The union said still no dice. Because the unions and the mayor's office are at an "unofficial impasse" the school board has to fill positions for summer school under the normal union contract and cannot offer teachers who perform exceptionally well additional bonus money. Meanwhile, there's no shortage of teachers applying, but it's not clear what the quality of the pool is. It's too bad the union doesn't want to offer extra pay for those who excel.

The Curriculum Wars Revisited

It's fitting that as standardized test scores begin to be revealed in states and communities nationwide, the warring math and reading factions should be issuing new statements about how best educators should approach these two most important school elements. Here's the latest, which we hope gets reflected in our children's books for the next school year:

I. Math – The Real Thing

It appears to be a victory, albeit a tiny one, for the "Real Math" people. At its annual meeting, The National Council of Teachers of Math (NCTM) made a slight retreat from its stance that it's more important for children to have an understanding of math concepts and to like math than to master the basic skills. The result of their slight modification to its standards was to emphasize that the correct answer is indeed important, and to say that, yes, NCTM agrees as a group that mastering the various tables is important. The NCTM spokespeople of course didn't want to make it appear that they were retreating, so they said that the revisions were really just a reemphasis of what was there, perhaps less clearly, all along. However it is spun, it is a Pyrrhic victory showing that the pressure of the real math folks combined with parents can have an impact on public policy, albeit slowly.

The natural next step — barring a complete reversal of NCTM — is to advocate that parents play a direct role in deciding which approach they'd prefer. Charter schools and other choice mechanisms provide the diversity of approach that might make both sides happy. In fact, many charters offer a constructivist approach, but since parents can choose to join them, you don't see a big stink around those communities. It also may help avoid problems like the following.

- After Los Angeles school officials announced it would try to find a math program with both traditional and reform elements, a man associated with training in the district threatened a hunger strike. To keep his belly full, LA school officials compromised, and the man called off the hunger strike. But placating grownups isn't necessarily a child friendly compromise. Time will tell if LA children can master the state's rigorous math standards.

II. Reading – Phonics Rules!

After reviewing some 100,000 documents and reviewing in detail the results of major reading evaluations, the National Reading Panel said that clear cut "systematic phonics instruction provides significant benefits for children, particularly those with problems learning to read. All grade levels benefit from phonics instruction, which improves the ability of even good readers to spell, said the panel. The whole language folks should like the fact that the reading panel also emphasized guided, oral reading with children, reading aloud and offering

them lots of reading materials. The emphasis of this comprehensive analysis — conducted using measurable objectives — however, is that is that every child needs access to well-trained teachers who will ground them in phonemic awareness and phonics.

The panel conducted its work with the oversight of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, at the request of Education Secretary Richard Riley. It plans to distribute its findings far and wide. Review the report and learn about the panel at www.nationalreadingpanel.org.

Highlights

Kudos to the **Association for Educators in Private Practice (AEPP)** which is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year. AEPP is the organization that serves as an advocate for educators who also see themselves as business people, providing much needed options for education and holding themselves accountable for their entrepreneurial work. Check out www.aepp.org for information and events.

Among the public school leaders who are making a real difference, the principal of an inner city Southern California based school, which stands out among its peers, is being duly recognized. **Nancy Ichinaga of Bennett-Kew Elementary** in Inglewood was appointed to the California State Board of Education. Ichinaga took control of the school in 1974 and instituted a program called direct instruction. Within four years, Bennett-Kew students went from the third to the 50th percentile, and third graders now average in the 84th percentile in math.

Oklahoma approved its first charter school last month led by a group entitled **Parents for a New Middle School**, whose members had enough moxy and drive to help bring about the new law and become the state's charter pioneers.

Colorado charter schools rock!, according to the state's most recent test scores. Scores on the Colorado's Student Assessment program were the highest among the state's charter schools. According to the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, "two thirds to three quarters of charters also outperformed average test scores of their home school districts and schools with similar demographics." In fact, 77% of third grade students in charter schools tested proficient or above in reading, compared to the state average of 67%.

Washington State lawmakers adjourned without action on a charter school bill that came oh, so close in the final days of the session. While the bill authorizing just 40 schools enjoyed majority support in both state houses, the bill was logjammed by longtime charter opponent Rosemary McAuliffe, who chairs the Senate Education Committee. So the state's Educational Excellence Coalition is on the move again to take the issue directly to the people. Under the leadership of the Spadys and with heavy business support the initiative is now in the signature-gathering phase and is headed for the November ballot. All questions,

comments, barrels of money etc. should be directed to the Coalition at (206) 634-0589; 4426 – 2nd Ave., NE, Seattle, WA, 98105-6191.

Another 13 **charter schools for New York** were approved to open next year, and these and the existing charter schools now have an association that will help them to grow and flourish. The New York Charter Schools Association is one of handful of such groups nationwide, and is based in Albany. Ph. (518) 527-7177.

The Ultimate Ripple (i.e. impact upon public schools from charter schools) came earlier this year from **Inskter, Michigan**, a community plagued by a 10-year decline in enrollment and poor educational results. On February 15th, the Inkster Public School Board by a margin of 5 to 1 voted to hire Edison Schools, Inc. to take over its schools. Edison will have full control over the Inkster schools, including programs, personnel, etc. Edison is also the new manager at three Baltimore, MD public schools, which the State Board put out for bid because of their steady and constant decline.

Having failed to muster enough votes in March, the backers of an initiative to make it easier to **build California schools** are trying again in November. The measure would require 55% of voters, rather than two-thirds, to pass a bond measure. The same ballot initiative would also require public school districts to provide facilities for charter schools. The measure is backed by an eclectic group of Silicon Valley business people, the state's union and charter supporters.

(Editor's Note: The previous topical stories and others like them were also profiled in CER Newswires weekly in the last month. If you'd like to keep more current with the news and happenings, log onto CER's website and sign up for our weekly newswire service.)

On Report Cards

- **Colorado** Governor Bill Owens joined the pack of states that is finally using student and school achievement data to guide public policy. The concept is simple: the state's assessment will be expanded to annually test 3rd-10th graders in reading and 5th-10th graders in math. School report cards will be issued each year on how well Rocky Mountain schools are doing on the state's assessment and how they use their public monies. Academic success will attract additional state funds and failing schools will be given three years to improve or be reconstituted in a charter school arrangement.

How can a concept so simple — that student achievement should be assessed, reported on and used to evaluate school growth — be so controversial? Even the *Washington Post* says, "Don't Flinch on Standards!":

"The goals are unimpeachable: raising quality, ensuring that students learn critical skills, holding educators accountable. But now that standards are beginning to kick in — as real requirements for graduation, for example — the road to reform has gotten bumpier...In **Maryland** as in many states, the prospect

of tests with consequences has already created significant momentum for improvement. If the board pulls back now, it risks losing momentum."

- The same goes for **Virginia**, where public hearings will soon be underway to determine whether that state's widely acclaimed Standards of Learning (SOLs) should have less punch. The state of play is that too many people are complaining that it's too hard for so many children to master the SOLs. Rather than focus on high expectations and give the kids a vote of confidence, some state officials seem to want to follow Wisconsin's lead, where test requirements were dropped.

It may come as a surprise to some, but education is not supposed to be subject to popularity contests. Just as we're trying hard to keep our own children away from the perils peer pressure brings, some adults are showing that perhaps they never learned that lesson.

- **Arizona** officials are not only staying the course on their state testing requirements, but they're working hard to make sure the public actually understands how every school in the state performs. On May 10, Arizona unveils its latest effort to promote easy to understand information about schools. GreatSchools.net Arizona is a wonderful asset to the parents and the public at large. GreatSchools.net has long provided useful information about schools and education happenings for the great state of California. Now expanding to the southwest, this arrangement is a model for consumer-friendly education reform. More school officials should strive to follow suit. (N.B. CER has made several web-based links to various state "report card" websites, but most of them are almost impossible for even we experts to understand.)



As I watch another school year draw to a close for my four children, I'm constantly reminded that they're only children once! Just last year I was weeping as my last child walked down the steps for the last day of Pre-K. In a few months she'll be on her way to first grade. The bottom line is that we don't have time to dawdle, to sit and to wait. If you're not involved now, get involved. There's no excuse not to be.

Happy Spring!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeanne".

Jeanne Allen