



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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BACK-TO-SCHOOL, 2000

This month brings the normal school activity parents encounter every year, but even more in education occupies the hearts and minds of citizens everywhere. Pitched battles are being waged on everything from teachers striking to testing students to whether or not vouchers really do help those poor kids! Almost every news program discussing the election turns to education, and school choice is finding support in new and growing corners of this nation. It's a great time to be involved, and the challenge is to keep up with it. Herewith is CER's annual Back-to-School special *Monthly Letter!*

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**"Best of" at a glance ... *On Testing***

- "No one wants to be tested. We would all like to get a driver's license without answering questions about rights of way or showing that we can parallel park. Many future lawyers and doctors probably wish they could join their profession without taking exams. But tests and standards are a necessary fact of life. They protect us — most of the time — from inept drivers, hazardous products and shoddy professionals. In schools too, exams play a constructive role. They tell public officials whether new school programs are making a difference and where new investments are likely to pay off. They tell teachers what their students have learned — and have not. They tell parents how their children are doing compared with others their age. They encourage students to exert more effort." *Diane Ravitch*, author of Left Back writing in *Time*.

- Opposite Ravitch is Alfie Kohn, whose promo for his new book says that "Many of the leading tests were never intended to measure teaching or learning." I'm sure he'll reveal what they were intended to measure at some point, but thought the following excerpts from his What You Can Do to Fight Standardized Tests might be instructive and put to better use [see brackets] fighting *for* standards and tests.

"Talk to friends and neighbors at every opportunity. Help people in your community understand that if a local official boasts about rising test scores, they should consider responding, 'If that's what you're mostly concerned about, then I'm worried about the quality of my child's schooling.'

"Let parents know they can write a letter to school administrators expressing concern that test preparation is eclipsing more important learning activities," [or perhaps it's helping them learn!].

“Write to — or, better yet, get together a delegation of concerned citizens and then visit — your state legislators and other public officials. [Tell them how much parents want measurements and accountability]. Write letters to the editor — or better yet, op-eds — for your local newspaper.” [Check on CER’s website for models and facts to back up your argument that our schools and students need good measurements!]

It’s clear why Kohn wants to motivate people against tests: most parents support educational assessments. **More than 1,000 parents** of school-age children surveyed by the Association of American Publishers found that 83% believed testing provides important information. Parents value rankings, discuss test results with their children and understand much of what is evaluated on these tests.

A similar poll released this month by the Business Roundtable found that parents of all stripes favor testing and consequences associated with them, like graduation being contingent in large measure on the passage of such exams. Oh, that’s right. This survey is suspect because business sponsored it. (*July Monthly Letter*) Never mind.

- Taking a page from Kohn’s blueprint is the bellyaching over testing in pioneering **Virginia**. Opponents have created “Parents Across Virginia United to Reform SOLs” (although their definition of “reform” sounds more like “kill”), and say the SOLs are “too expensive,” “unrealistic,” “not testing the right things,” and are “unfair and inappropriate.” Yet, this month, Virginia students gained on 21 of 27 state achievement tests – and on 13 of the tests, at least 70 percent of students achieved a passing score (up from only five in 1998), demonstrating that with hard work and focus, children can achieve. The opponents view it more cynically, and say it means teachers are teaching to the test. E.D. Hirsch reasons that curriculum-based tests, “based on good content standards, are the surest and most democratic means of raising scores on competency-based tests and achieving real world competencies.” Parents in Virginia, fed up with opponents to the SOLs, have started their own website at: [pass-sol.org](http://pass-sol.org).

- **Maryland’s** performance assessment was reviewed by a group of content experts this summer and to the state superintendent’s amazement, the experts found it lacking in several areas. Rather than using the advice of Cal. State University at Northridge professor Stan Metzenberg (an expert in science), or that of Ralph A. Rami, an emeritus professor of mathematics at University of Rochester, the state schools chief Grasmick dismissed the review as ideologically “conservative.”

The expert review panel said that the Maryland test lacks credibility because it allows children to receive full credit for not demonstrating accurate responses. They said that “higher scores tend to go to those who have mastered a writing style that satisfies [assessment] reviewers” and that “content is not adequately covered.” Grasmick’s assertion that the review was ideological is insulting. Authors of the California standards were people of all political viewpoints and yet they were able to come up with the kind of programs that content specialists regard highly.

- We wonder what the Maryland officials would think of the standards just approved by **Massachusetts** commissioner David Driscoll and the State Board of

Education which is heavy on traditional math and light on the fuzzy stuff. After seeing the dismal results of the Massachusetts assessment, the board took the positive step of adopting better standards so that children have a way to succeed. The only thing ideological about that is that children might finally be taught real math.

### ...On School Choice

- “Gore on vouchers is equally insulting to one’s intelligence. He rants endlessly about voucher schemes that would ‘drain money from public schools,’ as if it weren’t a snap to design a voucher plan that would also increase funding for public schools. Then Gore concedes that if he were an inner-city parent he might be for vouchers, too. But fidelity to the union line requires him to tell urban parents they need to sit tight while he tries to fix their public schools — a delay he’d never tolerate for his own children and which mocks his party’s values.” *Matthew Miller, 9/11/00 writing for The Los Angeles Times Syndicate*

- Other notable newsmakers have demonstrated the currency of choice:

On September 5, Brian Williams of MSNBC was interviewing an editor from *Offspring Magazine*. His first question was,

*“What should parents base their choice on if they have one, indeed?”*

On September 13, Rivera Live hosted a number of pundits discussing the recent New York Senate debate and other things. Most interesting, veteran news reporter Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame — now the Executive VP of Voter.com — all but endorsed vouchers:

*“...the idea that the Republican Party is making huge headway on—on educational matters by coming out for—for vouchers, while the Democrats seem to be totally unwilling to—to acknowledge that there might be another way of handling our public education problem, while particularly for—for minorities who’s—you know, look at vouchers and say, ‘Look, I’ve got one shot for my kid, and if I can get my kid into a private school and get him a ticket out of—out of this—the circumstances in which we—we have to live, I’m going to do it.’ And I think that it’s a very dicey proposition.”*

(Translation: This is a plausible idea that they should have endorsed a long time ago!)

Finally, there’s Jesse Jackson’s illuminating comments on *This Week*, when George Will raised the issue of choice, including their own. After explaining his opposition, Jackson offered this defense as to why his own kids’ went to private school:

Will: *Mr. Jackson, we as...you and I, as fellow parents of St. Alban’s graduates will resume this conversation in the future.*

Jackson: *Well, don’t jump on that leg because Jesse Jr. went to St. Alban’s and Jonathan went to Whitney Young, then both of them went to A&T, and when they graduated, Jesse went to Illinois law school and Jonathan went to Kellogg’s School for Business.*

*What the bottom line there is that they have parents committed to educating all of their children, whether in private or public school.*

So — other kids don't have committed parents and thus shouldn't have a choice???

### ...On Unions...and their dance with reform

- If you can't beat them, join them, seems to be the motto the unions have adopted toward charter schools in some jurisdictions. It's what explains the move by the **United Teachers of Dade County, Florida** in their pursuit of a partnership with the Edison Schools, Inc. to start ten charter schools and other efforts to partner with companies across the state for as many as ten more charter schools. Said local Miami union spokesperson Annette Katz, "Charter schools are part of the landscape. If we don't take an active role in deciding what they're going to do, then *everything will happen to us* and the traditional public schools will be left out." Never mind that it took this long for the union to "get religion," and only after they sensed a threat to schools. When, oh when will they start responding simply because the kids need them to?
- That notion apparently escaped the teachers unions in **Boston, Buffalo and Philly** who had everyone in the district as school opened this year focussed on their adult needs rather than those of the kids. All three unions threatened walk outs and strikes. While by mid-September the talks seem to make progress and allay the need for formal action, only time will reveal the impact these fights will have had on the kids who more than ever need the undivided attention of their teachers and leaders.
- The **Boston union** took to the airwaves to build support for its workplace demands. In August the *Boston Globe* reported that the union had hired a new public relations firm to do TV ads pushing their need for seniority as a measure of a teacher's worth over the demands of the city, which wants to tie performance to pay. Columnist Adrian Walker says that the warnings of patronage by the union are a little overstated. "Generally, I'm sympathetic to unions," says Walker. "I belong to one. But teachers in Boston raising the specter of patronage sounds a jarring note, given the numbers in their ranks who owe their jobs to the very patronage they are now attacking."
- In **Baltimore**, another AFT affiliated union challenged the state's authority to enter into a contract with Edison Schools, Inc. as well, for the management of three schools deemed failing by the State board under their academic requirements for all schools. The court upheld the board's authority to pursue a variety of options to "correct deficiencies" of the schools, just as courts the nation over have upheld the right of legislatures and state boards to authorize charter schools, and in some cases, school choice programs. Still, that doesn't seem to matter much to the Baltimore union, in a city where only **FIFTEEN PERCENT (!)** of third and fifth graders read at a satisfactory level. They will appeal the court's decision up the ladder. It's the principle of the matter, you know.

## From the Trenches

- And speaking of the Blob, **school boards** of Philly and of tiny Verona, Wisconsin have each wreaked havoc on a charter school in their districts. Mosaica Academy Charter School this summer won the latest in its battle to get Philadelphia's school district to pay for transportation and schooling that the law requires for students who attend its much-acclaimed school. The school district apparently argued what so many others around the country have: that unless they have a hand in approving the school, they shouldn't have to pay for their students to attend the charter. Wrong, says the court. The charter has the legal standing as a public charter school and the school district is required to give it the money that the district receives to educate those kids.
- In Verona, the story is a bit different, but it still comes down to a power grab. The successful **Core Knowledge Charter School** there is up for renewal, and rather than look at its achievements and the parental satisfaction there, the district wants it to simply give up its charter and become a school of choice. So the school board has diverted the attention of the people at the charter school, who are now spending time and money to retain their charter status. Some have asked a simple question: "Why?" Those accountable school board members aren't talking.
- From former NY State Teacher of the Year and activist thinker John Taylor Gatto comes a new book about his escapades through NYC schools entitled, **Underground History of American Education: A School Teacher's Intimate Investigation of the Problem of Modern Schooling**. It's quite a "magnus opus" as he says, and definitely worth your while if you want insights into this unique industry. It is published by Oxford Village press and available for \$30 plus shipping from Gatto at 235 W. 76<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10024. Tell him you heard about it here and he'll sign your copy!
- A study by the University of California, Irvine found that **constructivism among teachers reigns supreme!** Despite the added focus in classrooms on making sure children know the basics in reading and math, teachers are being taught in school many things that clash with the accountability drive today. For example, 84 percent of teachers surveyed disagreed with the statement that teachers know a lot more than students. 62 percent disagreed that instruction should be built around problems with clear, correct answers and around ideas that students can grasp quickly. More than half disagreed with the statement that students are not ready for "meaningful learning" until they have acquired basic reading and math skills. Hmmm. Maybe it's not so bad there's a shortage of certified teachers afterall...
- Two notes from the Nation's Capital... A bill called the Neighborhood School Act has been introduced by NM Representative Heather Wilson, CO Representative Bob Schaffer and OK Representative Steve Largent. It would provide up to \$9 billion in **federal loan guarantees for charter schools'** capital projects. To be eligible for the program, charters must not have access to funding available to other public schools in their jurisdiction. And... the **DC Charter School Parents Coalition** has been founded to ensure that the parents of charter school students have the best and most updated news concerning local and national charter developments which impact their children and their children's education. Pat Jacobs, a parent from the Roots Public Charter School and Lou Steadwell of the Meridian Public Charter School are the organizers.

## Trenches, *continued*

- Some charter schools have had their share of troubles this school year. New Covenant Charter School in **Albany** reopened under new management after a rocky year with staff changes, a contract termination with Advantage Schools and internal strife. Now they've signed up with Edison Schools, Inc. and time will only tell whether this relationship is a good fit.
- Also in New York, the **Roosevelt Union Free School District** in Long Island, which has been under state oversight for five years for being unaccountable both for funds and learning, decided to sue over the charter school that Victory Schools started there. **In Syracuse, the Carpenter's Union** sued to stop renovations on the new Central NY Charter School of Math and Science because they say that the school is supposed to pay prevailing wages because it's a public works project. Of course, such union wages on a low-budget facility would sure kill any charter school. Stay tuned.
- A story with a happy ending comes to us from the **Santiam Canyon School District** in the heart of the Oregon timber communities. The last remaining public school there was about to be closed when upon uniting, two communities were able to create the Detroit Lake Charter School rather than have their children face a 36 mile round trip bus ride. The school is built around the Core Knowledge sequence. Flexibility in spending allows the purchase of part time services from the superintendent of the neighboring Scio School District and other innovations are helping them to save money in the long run and still have a school. Charter schools may be the solution to the troubles rural schools are facing all over the country.

## The Good News

- A dynamic new national coalition of African American community leaders has launched a campaign against unequal educational opportunities for low-income American parents. As one of their first steps, the **Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)** is providing a valuable service to the public in promoting the truth in reporting. Their *New Republic* ad takes issue with some reports about the recent study on the positive effects of school choice on African American children in New York, Dayton and Washington, DC. The original research reported statistically significant scores among children who used vouchers. For more in depth reading and comparisons of the truth, go to [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org).
- A deal too good to be true: **Massachusetts business leader** (and CER friend) Lovett Peters offered the 22 worst schools in the Bay state a chance to convert to charter status with the help of his Save a School Foundation and partnerships with one of a number of private management firms. He guarantees that if their scores don't rise above district averages, he'd pay them a million bucks. Peters is responding to the hue and cry from inner city parents who know their children only get one shot at a good education. But rather than take him up on it, the school establishment has mostly dismissed the offer. Good ideas do take time to catch on, though. And we're sure Mr. Peters would love to see copycats in other states. For more information, you can call the Pioneer Institute at (617) 723-2277 or email [pioneer@pioneerinstitute.org](mailto:pioneer@pioneerinstitute.org).

## Reality Check

The Urban League says blacks continue to be underrepresented in advanced placement courses and over-represented in special ed. ([www.nul.org](http://www.nul.org)) The SAT this year marked a growing black-white achievement gap, and even more advantaged children are faring less well than in years past. Amidst reports of schools being taken over from coast to coast and trend data from NAEP showing only minor gains over time, that once-esteemed organization, Phi Delta Kappa released its annual PDK/Gallup poll saying that people are content, most oppose vouchers and charters and all is right with the world. For our detailed analysis, go to 'Polls' at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).

### *You Know it's Time for Reform When...*

- ...**Pollsters** declare that more Americans than ever before support the status quo despite a 4 percent drop in the number of individuals giving their schools top grades.
- ...School superintendents in Jefferson and Shelby Counties in Kentucky argue that the cut off scores for the **teacher tests** such as PRAXIS are too high and that such test scores shouldn't be "gatekeepers." Funny, I thought that's precisely what tests were. And PRAXIS even with a higher cut off score is no major mental challenge to average educated people.
- ...Ninety-nine percent of **New York City teachers** receive a "satisfactory" rating from the boss' despite the fact that more than half of city youngsters can't read.
- **Dover, NJ** high school makes parents sign a form that says if your child has difficulties in more challenging courses he has been recommended to, that the school is absolved "from the responsibility of any difficulties my son/daughter may encounter in the program." (Principal to parent: It 'ain't' my problem!!)
- ... **Atlanta Schools Superintendent** gets a \$33,000-plus bonus for meeting 12 of 26 performance goals, including getting more students to take advanced courses, and increasing attendance. Let's get this straight; she achieved less than 50 percent of her goals, yet got almost 75 percent of the full bonus she could receive, for getting kids to take challenging courses and showing up? Gee, we thought that was what she got paid for to begin with.

### Words to the Wise

*"The last I checked, there are no Republican kids and Democratic kids,"* said David Levin of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools to *The New York Times*.

*"People do what's best for their kids. Choice is good."* -- New Orleans Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Al Davis, acknowledging he has pulled one of his two daughters out of public school and enrolled her in a private, all-girls school, quoted in the September 15 *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. (courtesy of EIA)

## Achievements

Four of the top scoring schools on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade **math** portion of the Colorado State Assessment Program were charter schools and the highest scoring was a charter called Horizons K-8 Alternative in Boulder. Other good news is Bear Creek Elementary in Jefferson County achieved the highest math scores, with 41% of its 8<sup>th</sup> graders scoring at the advanced level. The next runner up was at only 20% advanced proficiency. What explains the difference? Traditional math enthusiasts will note that Bear Creek uses Saxon math. According to the *Denver Post*, despite this success, the district requires schools to "jump through hoops in order to use Saxon math at all. And then those schools have to reapply to continue using the same texts they've already demonstrated work just fine." Maybe it's time for the district to reevaluate that process.

## Headlines We Like

"SCHOOL PUTTING CHILDREN ABOVE THE SYSTEM," (5/8/00 Baton Rouge Advocate)

... about the Children's Charter elementary school, which was faced with no staff the day that the district called off school so that teachers could lobby at the Capital for pay raises. Children's Charter chose to remain open, so parents and school officials picked up children for school, took care of snacks and lunch, and kept the school going. The Catholic schools also announced they would remain open, and operated without the normally taxpayer-provided transportation to the parochial schools that the state of Louisiana provides its private school youngsters.

"SUPERINTENDENT TRYING TO BRING ACCOUNTABILITY TO OAKLAND SCHOOLS" (8/9/00 AP story)

...about Dennis Chaconas' efforts to shake up his school district. "I guess the thing that really amazes me is how bad, how dysfunctional, the system is," Chaconas says. In his first weeks on the job, Chaconas found a dead rat that had been in a classroom for more than a week and a class missing 60 percent of its students. The four-year dropout rate is 24 percent, well above the state average of 11 percent... Only 6 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders at Chaconas' alma mater, Fremont High, read at or above the national average. "The pessimism of the adults and the lowering of the expectations for performance really eats me up," Chaconas says. The principals I changed, they really were kind of believing that they weren't responsible for student achievement."

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The other night I had a debate on *CNN.com* with Anti-Defamation League director Elizabeth Coleman about school choice. A formidable colleague deserving of respect, one of her arguments was that vouchers are a bad thing because public schools are accountable to the public and private schools are not. Yet even a glance at some of what we've covered this month demonstrates just because schools are public doesn't cause them to be accountable. Let's remember that what makes any school accountable is not process, but the drive — and demand — for results. See you!



Jeanne Allen