

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 7**

MAY 13, 1994

Dear Friends:

A clarion call: we need more of those telling statistics about American education that mean so much, yet appear so little in print. We've got some, but often are asked "just how are the schools really doing?" We'll take national stats, local or state anecdotes, and any other things you have. Just jot down your favorite stat and send or fax us. We'll announce the best, and use most of them in upcoming publications that benefit us all. Thank you!



State-Watch

- Arizona reform legislators Graham and Patterson went down fighting for school choice last month when the education reform package including a parental grant program failed in the Senate by only three votes. The good news is that the battle there is not over. With an election coming up this November, and the potential for new legislators who think differently, and with the potential for a new state superintendent of schools in the person of Lisa Graham, the good ground laid may be rich soil for next year.
- The Center led the effort in Connecticut, another hopeful choice state, to institute a solid school reform bill with local options for choice, charter schools and alternative certification. That bill was defeated by a tie vote in the wee hours of the morning on May 1. At the same time, an outcome-based education bill backed by the state's business leaders failed to make it to the floor for a vote. Supporters of the choice bill have already met with key business leaders to plan next year's effort, and believe they may be able to forge a unique alliance for a bill that includes real standards and choice. We'll be there, and we'll keep you posted.

A word about these losses: we're as close as we've ever come to enacting school choice. It is being forwarded in a variety of forms, each with its own nuances, to attract a diverse group of supporters. These strategies are proving effective, but do take time.

- Michigan's first approved charter school under the new law is the Noah Webster Academy, a home study/distance learning school. The school's directors plan to use the per pupil allotment for the home study curriculum, computers, and teachers to make home visits. The money left after these expenses will be put into a trust fund for the children. This dynamic concept in charter schools is also being pursued by two independent study/home schools in California. In the Sacramento area, "three hundred students have turned to the Home/Independent Study Charter School to design their own individual curricula," according to the Sacramento Bee.

There are lots of variations on this, but one is called Options for Youth, a program based in Los Angeles that educates dropouts at their homes through contract with the local school district. The districts love it because they are permitted to "reinvent" the student and pick up the daily allotment for a student that would otherwise go unfunded, and the students love it because it allows them the choice to make progress outside of the environment where they failed. Such new dimensions to school reform are cropping up all over the country; many of them have long existed, and we're just finding out now how many private alternatives have long been used by the public schools. (See related story below)

Kudos to the Noah Webster Academy in Michigan, which plans to deliver a "Bill Bennett-type education." Sounds good to me!

- Watch for New York City Schools Chancellor Raymond Cortines to implement tough math and science requirements for all graduates. Cortines is reportedly a fair-minded, and mildly reform-oriented educator; his efforts have been scorned by NYC bureaucrats. He is also a fan of the city's public school choice programs, which as far as our constituents in the city are concerned, the more the better. The Regents will soon be re-doing the state exams; look for Cortines to be the OBE opponent in these negotiations.

Grade Inflation

The U.S. Department of Education's research office recently validated reformers' assertions that grades do not necessarily demonstrate achievement, and that, in fact, grade inflation is rampant. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, the researchers found very skewed correlation between grades and performance on the NELS:88 test. For example, children in high poverty areas that normally receive As and Bs were far below their counterparts from more affluent schools on the objective test. "Students in high poverty schools who received mostly A's in English got about the same reading score as did the "C" and "D" students in the most affluent schools." The researchers recommend that parents be provided with more objective information than merely grades. The irony is this report

comes from the same corridors that fight state, district, and school level reporting on tests such as NAEP. Still, credit is owed where it is due.

Breaking the Conventions

The Center's "convention watchers" are hard at work evaluating education groups, for an upcoming docu-report. The following quote comes from the session on choice at the National School Boards Association annual meeting in New Orleans on April 9:

"Public education needs to be developing choice plans because it's coming." (applause)

Speaking of Which...

The State of Massachusetts is bragging about its statewide choice program. Though limited to public schools, the state reports that for the most recent academic year, 4,200 students used inter-district choice, where 75% of the per pupil cost follows the child from their resident district to their district of choice. From a list of fourteen options, 63% of parents surveyed listed academics as one reason for their choice; only 15% listed convenience. 92% were *most* or *very* satisfied with their choice school, and 99% were satisfied overall. Finally, 63% of parents reported their child's academic achievement was most or very improved in their choice school. This study validates the findings of choice states such as Minnesota and Iowa.

So much for Al Shanker's — and the Carnegie Foundation's — claim that parents in choice plans choose for all the wrong reasons!

Dispelling the Great Education Myths

The growing phenomenon of public schools contracting out EDUCATIONAL services deserves our attention. First, Goldwater's Jeff Flake discovered the little known "public voucher" that Arizona public schools use to send disruptive students to private schools. Dan McGroarty has reported extensively about the Wisconsin at-risk program that does the same. The Center has found at least ten other states where this is occurring in different doses, and we'll be following up with details in various ways over the next few months. One particularly interesting private program that is used by the public sector in California is Options for Youth, which provides educational services for dropouts, and, as mentioned above recently gained charter school status. Options for Youth (OFY) has educated about 1500 kids per year since it began in 1987 and provides a money-back guarantee to the schools; if the children do not meet their grade level criteria, OFY does not collect funds. OFY students are said to be progressing ahead of their average student counterparts in school.

OFY students are primarily minority, and teen mothers make up 40% of their enrollment. A majority of enrollees are reported to continue their education after the program and advance to higher education. John Hall is President of OFY, and can be reached by calling (213) 957-4280.

Lobbying with Child Labor

NEA Today, that organization's monthly newsletter, features an idea exchange for educators to pass on their inspirations to one another. Here's how one teacher in Norfolk, Virginia, was inspired to use class time, student labor and school resources to further her lobbying objectives:

"Rather than having my keyboarding students practice by composing standard business letters, I have them each compose a letter to the superintendent of schools or other public officials, offering their thoughts on problems in schools today. Along with the letters, the students prepare envelopes and then mail them through the school mail."

More Time and More Learning — Options for School

The federal report just issued on Time and Learning is a tremendous document that cries for more time spent in schools on core academic subjects, for extracurricular subjects such as sex education to be taught after the school day, if parents are willing, and for schools to have more flexibility in providing such options for parents. From the spin given by the Department of Education, the lay person would never know it. Instead, they'd believe that the Commission on Time and Learning believed that all schools should be open all day, year round, to accommodate working parents. This is a dangerous spin, and Education Secretary Riley should know better.

Then Again...

Secretary Riley boasted to the NSBA convention that "Education is back from the dead in Washington. Our budget is up \$1.7 billion."



On June 8, The Center is pleased to host a forum entitled "Education Reform: Where the States are Headed," with Connecticut State Representatives Tim Barth and Jim Amman, and Arizona Representative Lisa Graham. Invitations with details will be sent out shortly, so if you're in Washington or plan to be, please mark your calendar.

Hope to see you there, or perhaps elsewhere,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeannie".