

THE Center for Education Reform



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:

When reformers nationwide started back to their more intensive Back-to-School preparations, little did most know that the news media was hunting some bad meat, served up in the form of an American Federation of Teachers "study" on charter schools. By the end of the next week following the August 17 story, more than 12 million people across the country were exposed to a flawed portrayal of charters. A Michigan poll a few weeks later revealed that 55 percent of Michiganders had recently read something in their newspaper about charter schools, and for many, the impression was negative.

But reformers struck back and struck back hard. Within ten days, we had coverage of the real story on charter schools in front of more than 26 million people. The response included the development of a full page advertisement in *The New York Times* by 31 renowned researchers, rejecting the methods and assessments carried out by the AFT and promoted by the *Times*.

That event alone caused outrage from those who thought they had won the war when *The New York Times* story appeared.

And so begins this MONTHLY LETTER, and our latest communication with the *real people* in the *real world* making *real things* happen for *real kids*. When people ask why we get so excited about our work, all you need do is hand them this copy of the MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS. They'll know not only why we work hard to advance reform, but why we call "it" the BLOB, as well.

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Election Time!

Here Ye Here Ye, it's almost time to vote again! And like the town criers of old, CER's reform engines are out to make sure you know just where your candidates stand on matters of importance regarding your child's education. It's not like the old days, when you were either for 'em, or again 'em. Modern PR and polling can give candidates an edge... even when they may be on the wrong side of an issue.

So to help you determine where your local, state and national candidates stand on the issues, CER's online **Election Center** is up and running to provide you with tips on how to have that critical eye in the ballot box.

While you can't vote often (sorry Chicago!), you can vote, so get informed before you do and make sure education reform helps drives your decisions. Go to www.edreform.com and look for the Election Center. Drop us a note while you're there!



Hypocrisy

What an enormous epiphany we had when we read the outrage over the charter school community's response to the 8/17 assault! Hypocrisy is an understatement. You might recall if you've been reading this over the years that we appointed a special club several years ago using the once great musician Bobby McFerrin's catchy tune for their title. "*The Don't Worry Be Happy*" crowd was born amidst a growing amount of apologetic writings that argued that American schools have never been better and that all of the efforts to prove otherwise are just political hoopla. Great theory, but wrong facts.

The "*Don't Worry Be Happy*" crowd is made up mostly of ivory tower types that long ago wrote off most American institutions. They decry education reformers and argue that we'll always have need for garbage collectors. They have never spent time in urban areas, or talking to parents. They read about but don't attend events. And their narrow-mindedness results in scary conclusions and connections that make even the craziest among us look sane. They put a box around anyone who dares suggest schools need work, and anyone who likes the notion of choosing one's school is accused of racism, right-wingism, sexism or worse.

(Except they never think to wonder how it is that all those parents are making choices in places like Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee and Chicago, some of whom live in public housing. Oh that's right -- they've been duped because the premise is that all parents are really not very bright anyway.)

But the "*Don't Worry Be Happy*" folks don't ever question the activities or usefulness of the teachers unions, such as the AFT, whose people in Washington lead national efforts to erase any schooling options that are not consistent with collective bargaining contracts.

The AFT and NEA alone spend over 75 million dollars from dues money to do radio ads and newspaper ads touting their agenda, backing political candidates and running local organizers in targeted communities. Such spending does not reflect the enormous sums of money spent to subsidize teachers who are sent out to go door to door to attract people to their cause.... on taxpayer's time.

So when a full-page ad in *The New York Times* sought to set the record straight, founding members of the "*Don't Worry Be Happy*" crowd screamed: such an expenditure demonstrated that groups like CER are rich! Would that it were so! The NEA's \$16 million 15th street Washington, D.C. office alone would be enough to add people to set the record straight on a daily basis, let alone had we the money the unions spend on radio, television and more.

But the truth is that even with all their resources, education reform is now mainstream, and very much in vogue. Rather than grow to a few hundred, charters support more than 3,400 charters, which represent more than 6 million people -- no longer a little experiment that can be ignored. School choice is exercised by roughly 35 percent of all Americans, according to the *Picky Parents Guide* by Bryan Hassel.

Standards are helping schools be accountable. NCLB is one tool in the toolbox that policymakers and parents have to take action on schools in need of improvement. Social promotion is fast becoming a thing of the past. Teacher quality is a big issue and performance pay has traction.

These efforts all help kids. They help improve all schools. They help parents who are often too mired in their daily affairs to be able to fight city hall everyday. Black, brown or white, poor or not... people benefit from education reform.

And apparently, that's pretty hard to take in some corners.

Great Public Schools

The NEA used at least a few million of its dollars this month to launch a campaign to convince people that public support for their agenda was big and to encourage voting along their party lines.

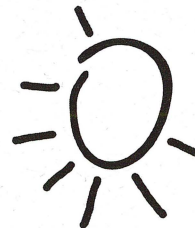
It started with a big, beautiful, glossy packet with a beautiful little boy looking up with hope. (That little boy is very popular these days. It appears that his stock photo was picked up by several organizations in recent materials -- including this one!)

Enclosed were directions on how to have a house party and a video to stimulate discussion. The video tells the audience that schools are falling apart, are overcrowded and under-nourishing kids, all because the federal government is not giving them enough money.

"Great Public Schools," NEA President Reg Weaver calls for at the end. With money? There is no talk about curriculum (except to say textbooks are overpriced and which monopoly doesn't pay too much for something??), or standards, or parent power to choose schools that meet their kids needs or teachers that maybe need more recognition than uniform pay scales allow.

We contacted a few people who we learned were having house parties around the country. We asked them if people bought the video's theme. It turns out that in most cases in our small survey, the answer is no. Not surprising, some felt the video to be insulting and simplistic.

And so goes another political season, and yet more evidence that the education establishment still does not represent the interests of people who count the most -- the parents and children and citizens for whom school excellence is an imperative -- now.



Outside the Beltway: In the trenches, it's clear the minds of people are a lot closer to where reformers stand. While the previous articles introduced some harsh realities, the following headlines are a reality check as to what most of the country was waking up to early this season. These suggest that far from marginal, the push for education reform is alive and well and very much in demand.

"Optional schools popular," 8/26, *The Deseret (UT) Mountain News*

"Charter demand rising in suburbs," 8/31, *The Pioneer Press*

"Private Schools Take New Students," 9/1, *The Washington Times*

"11 Apply To Open Charter Schools," 9/2, *The Tampa (FL) Tribune*

"More Districts Failing," 9/2, *The Arizona Republic*

"64% of schools meet federal testing goals," 9/1, *The Sacramento (CA) Bee*

"More parents to get school-choice option," 9/2, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"Three Fired Over Delay in Opening DC School," 9/2, *The Washington Post*

"Charter Schools Compare Well," 9/3, *The Honolulu Advertiser*

"Sallie Mae Gives \$28 Million to DC Charter Schools," 9/7, *The Washington Post*

Meanwhile, back at the farm... The closure of the California Charter Academy's 60 campuses left 6,000 charter students at a loss right before school started. Thanks to the intervention by the charter community itself, this charter-turned-bad apple was shut down and most (80 percent) of the students found other charter schools to attend. But the ugly and unprecedented closure raised many issues for people inside the reform world, not the least of which is, how did it happen?

The State University of New York is one of that state's most successful authorizers, and often a model for other states. Its director, James Merriman knows that every industry can have its bad eggs, and whether one or 100, it's too many. But authorizers are an important component of whether charter schools succeed. In this case, three small school districts had a financial incentive to charter, with no accountability for doing the wrong thing. California's law leaves chartering with school districts. And precisely because of problems like this, advocates argue that state universities should also be able to approve schools. Like New York and Michigan (to name the two leading states where universities may authorize), charters that come from and are monitored by these public institutions get more attention and thus more oversight of the right kind. If they don't do their job, the legislators will take it. If school boards don't properly authorize, what happens to them? No one is going to shut down a school board. California's law showed it can and will hold schools accountable. But it's time to make authorizing a point of accountability, too. For more on this, the how and why and what, go to the Golden State's premiere charter organization at www.ccsa.org.

Around the Nation

From West...

- Charters in **California** overall are actually doing better in providing strong education than conventional public schools. Sixty-four percent of charter schools achieved gains from 2003 to 2004, compared to 61.1 percent of non-charters. Charters increased their scores on the state's Academic Performance Index by 12.9 points, compared to 7.3 points for non-charters. San Diego charters made gains three times greater than conventional schools. Three of their four charter high schools made the most gains, according to reporter Daniel Weintraub of *The Sacramento Bee*.
- Speaking of achievement, Harvard University economist Caroline Hoxby produced compelling research showing **higher student achievement in charters**. A review of 99 percent of all students in charters compared to all kids in conventional public schools reveals higher performance in reading and math among charter students. The difference is most dramatic, five (5) and three (3) points respectively, when comparing charter students to the school they would have attended had they not gone to a charter. While *The New York Sun* was brave enough to pick the story up, the *Times* has yet to cover it. For details and a review of the report, check out "Recent News," at CER's Web site.
- Charters could be evergreen in **Washington State** (get it? Evergreen state??) if the Vote R-55 committee wins its quest. You may recall from years of reading CER's MONTHLY LETTER that seven years of effort finally produced a charter law. Seven years. That's more than half of all formal schooling for most, and a milestone in a marriage. That's how long it took citizens in Washington State to convince legislators to enact a law. More than a dozen groups were poised to apply, when the Goliath charged again. The Washington Education Association (WEA) put on the ballot for November a referendum to require voters to approve the new law. Charter fans are not taking the challenge lying down. They are taking their case to the people. While currently being outspent by the opponents, there is momentum. Still, the campaign needs support. People who want to contribute to the Vote R-55 effort should direct checks of any amount to Approve R-55, Improve our Public Schools, PO Box 2154, Seattle, WA 98111, Ph: 206-652-5596.

To East...

- School choice in **Florida** is once again tenuous, thanks to the NEA, ACLU and NAACP, who took the program to court to fight its existence. Now in its fifth judicial volley, the full appeals court has agreed to hear the case against the law, on the heels of a three-judge panel striking down the A+ Scholarship program.
- The Philadelphia story in educational achievement could be sub-titled "The Sky That Didn't Fall." When the district undertook to re-cast the schools there, it did so in partnership with several independent providers, both tax-paying and non-tax paying. Edison Schools, Inc. was given 20 schools, a little flexibility to achieve gains and a challenge to make progress or face contract termination. As *The Wall Street Journal* put it, the results were "remarkable: double-digit gains in reading and math proficiency and a tripling of the number of schools meeting federal No Child Left Behind standards

-- gains for Philadelphia that are nearly double those posted by the state in one of its better years." All the new providers succeeded. When the opponents — including the unions and the NAACP — screamed that the sky would fall and the district was under attack by alien forces, many grew skeptical. But this story shows that not only did reform help Philadelphia achieve its highest achievement gains yet, but it did so precisely because competition was allowed to prevail.

- Thanks to bold action by city and federal lawmakers, 1,016 children in the **District of Columbia** are in schools that parents, not systems, chose for them. Despite only seven months to get the program working, the Washington Scholarship Fund was able to pair every family that qualified with a school of choice. Fifty-three schools in the area are participating, from inner city Catholic Schools to the more prestigious Gonzaga Boys High School or even Sidwell-Friends, Chelsea Clinton's alma mater. If there were more seats, there'd be more scholarships. But until now, most parents had little option but to go to their zoned public school, good or not. The new scholarship program must stand for renewal each year in the D.C. appropriations bill. The House just passed its version. Meanwhile, local area advocates are working with parents to raise the level of awareness among D.C. parents about all of their options. Not surprisingly, many parents are in the dark, and powerless. With new choices, many charters and even improvements coming in D.C.'s conventional schools under new leadership, it may indeed be a new day in the Nation's Capital. Let's hope so.

And all around...

- **Achievement gap...still.** The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD... *and a year's worth of free publications for the first person who can tell us what OECD really does!*) says the US is "producing an alarming number of college dropouts" and verifies the long standing problem that US student achievement gets worse the longer students are in school. Meanwhile, fifteen year-olds have high opinions of themselves, but their performance is average among the 27 nations OECD evaluates. More people in American attend school at every level than other countries and thus, the U.S. has always looked better. But other countries are catching up, so the decline in American progress was alarming to OECD. For more, go to www.oecd.org.

- Teachers continue to value their choices in education, according to recent research by Denis Doyle and associates, commissioned by the Fordham Foundation. This update of 1995 data published by CER shows that **teachers are more likely to use private schools** than your average citizen. While 17.5 percent of all families that live in urban areas send their children private schools, 21.5 percent of public school teachers in urban areas do the same. It's not a matter of being more affluent either. The more poor the teacher, the more likely they chose private. Details at www.edexcellence.net.

- The Martha Factor? The U.S. Department of Labor is still reviewing allegations that the **NEA may be illegally withholding** information about its political operations. The Landmark Legal Foundation uncovered evidence since the 90's that the NEA significantly underreports its political spending. The Labor Department agreed in 2002 to investigate, but no additional action has been taken. Two years? It only took the feds a few months to nail Martha Stewart on lesser charges. Why is a major national organization that affects children not held to the same standards as Martha?

- Here's one for lawmakers -- Did you know that the more choice and accountability that exists, the more likely it is that your state can overcome "**teachability**" problems? The Manhattan Institute came up with a clever research tool to gauge whether or not a state is doing well teaching disadvantaged children. It measures factors that pose challenges to learning and how well a state addresses those issues. Such research should provide ample evidence that states that allow school choices can expect big results from disadvantaged kids.

- **Polls** are often used to persuade policymakers this way or that. A recent bevy of them shows that people are much more inclined to support education reform because they believe -- and see first hand -- that all schools are not good enough yet. Here's two:

- * An August poll sponsored by the Friedman Foundation reports that 64 percent of Americans support using tax dollars to help parents pay for the school of their choice. In the same poll, 60 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate supporting school choice.

- * Sponsored by the Oklahoma Council for Public Affairs, a poll this spring found that 58 percent of parents in Oklahoma would choose a private school for their kids if given a voucher. Only 39 percent would choose a traditional public school.

- **More money was the mantra** of the 80's by those who bought the conventional wisdom. Years of study and evidence, however, showed that it wasn't necessarily more, but how the money was spent that was the critical thing. In this election year politicking, we've been struck by how much the money issue is coming back. The reality is that it makes little difference, according to both research and common sense — take a school that doesn't have the right leader or the right books or the right philosophy, or standards and all the money in the world won't help. But the facts also tell the real story. Recently Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner wrote for *Perspective* that since 1965 federal money spent on education has quadrupled, while those for whom the money was most intended are still the least served.

- Two towns in Minnesota have embarked on a great prescription for teachers. Helping teachers grow and thrive with rewards and incentives that you find in non-teacher professions, the **Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)** is now in nine states and districts. TAP eschews the traditional, tenure driven, top down, uniform pay scales. Instead, after teachers approve this program (which they did by more than 70 percent), TAP puts teachers in charge, paying them more for increased responsibility and increased test scores, and giving them a variety of different coaching and leadership positions to help breed experience throughout their ranks. Districts pay for it with local, state and federal teacher quality funds. For more go to www.mff.org/tap.

For Parents

Things have come along way since, as a young mother, I sat at my kitchen table putting together a list of people who could come to aid of those parents who felt helpless in the hands of an educational bureaucracy. Today, there are a number of top-rate resources for parents beginning their own journey to take control of their child's education. Below are just a few of my favorite resources:

- For our friends **Down South**, there is The Parents Network for Better Education (PNBE) – a dedicated group of professionals working with parents whose children are struggling in low-performing schools in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. PNBE representatives provide parents with the information and tools they need to make smart decisions for their families. For more information, call 1-877-881-9800 or visit www.theparentsnetwork.org.
- Parent Power Works puts the power of partnerships to work for parents in **Baltimore and the District**. They provide coaching to parents, as well as connect them to community resources such as career centers and youth development groups. They can be reached at 1-888-ASK-PPWK or www.BeThePower.org
- There are over 77 schools in Indiana who have a spot on the state's "in need of improvement" list. The GEO Foundation is at work in **Indiana communities** ensuring that parents who have kids enrolled in these failing schools know that they do, indeed, have options. To contact the GEO-PIRC call 1-317-524-3770 or visit www.geofoundation.org.
- A recent Pew Hispanic Center poll found that over 75 percent of Hispanics who have an opinion on school choice favor it. That's thanks in large part to the work that Hispanic CREO is doing every day to educate and empower **Hispanic families** through parental choice in education. For more information, contact Hispanic CREO by calling toll-free at 1-877-888-2736 or visit www.hreo.org.



Fall is a great time of year. Kids back to school, beautiful weather, batteries recharged and a New Year in sight. All children deserve a great education...help us make sure they get it.


Jeanne Allen