

THE Center for Education Reform



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

Who are we; what is the Center for Education Reform? And what is the *Monthly Letter*? Hopefully only a few of our readers are asking these questions. With 94 such communications under our belt in sixteen years, we hope most of you recognize our old flagship monthly (or occasional monthly) "letter." It started only a few months after CER did, caught on like wildfire with insights and thoughts you wouldn't get elsewhere, and sparked a generation of reformers. Really. We have proof. But then electronic media got the best of us and we were writing our stuff so often via the CER weekly *Newswire* that we dropped this important content piece and only revisited it every year or so. But we're back. And we'll be back monthly — or close to it. Because lots of people still like to get their news in the mail, and lots of people still like to take their time reading what they receive, rather than clicking off every email that comes into their box. We hope you agree, and we hope you'll take time to comment via any means necessary — mail, phone, email — or stop by one of our offices.

As we return to share a few important — no, critical — events that are taking place in our history with regard to this all important thing we do called education reform, please join us in finding ways to put all the talk into practice. We will be doing the same.

For the newbies getting this for the first time, it may be because we gave you information, you signed up to receive it, or you made your own major education gains and we found you. However you came to receive this, please know you can read a whole archive of *Monthly Letters to Friends* on our website at www.edreform.com. If nothing else, they will remind you that *everything old is new again*.



Teacher Quality Starts At Home.

Some of us have been talking about teacher quality for years but we haven't gotten this kind of accolades! I'm talking about President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who seem to have endorsed the age-old wisdom of the first education reformers on the planet (circa 1985) in calling into question the way teachers are hired, rewarded, maintained, and yes, rarely fired.

I could write pages on what I've seen in the sixteen years since CER was born. I could write pages on what occurred before. From Bill Bennett (who called out education schools during his tenure as secretary of education) to Arnold Schwarzenegger (who saw his ballot initiatives to end iron clad teacher tenure completely trounced with a \$14 million attack by the California Teachers' Union), we've seen elected and appointed leaders push for change. Even Bill Clinton himself noted that education needed reform. In January of 1996, the prez said, "We must do more to make sure education meets the needs of our children and the demands of the future... Teachers must also demonstrate competence, and we should be prepared to reward the best ones, and remove those who don't measure up, fairly and expeditiously." But he kept his education secretary, Richard Riley, silent on the issue.



Those of us in the trenches who have said the same have been decried as anti-public education fanatics, right-wingers, and all sorts of other mean things — simply because we said something very simple: that teachers should only be teachers if they prove they can teach, if they add value to the education of children, if they succeed. And when they help kids succeed, they should get buckets of money to do the work they do. But until then and unless, they should not.

But, my mom taught me early never to look back and instead, to keep focused on what great opportunities we are given. And so to wit, I'm so pleased to report that the relatively new Education Secretary recently visited the proverbial inmates at the asylum (Teachers College, Columbia University) to announce that he was calling on all of higher education to reform colleges of education. Duncan said:

- America's university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change - not evolutionary tinkering.
- A majority of education programs are doing a mediocre job of prepping teachers, and are educating more than half of teachers today.
- The next generation of teachers must be student achievement focused and ready to deliver on day one.

We'll take that and raise him. We'd humbly suggest Duncan back up his rhetoric with strong provisions regarding teacher quality at the federal level. We're not centralized planners, but we do know the power of money, and indeed the Race to the Top — which has dangled billions of new dollars to education — has been like manna to the people who act like they have starved for years. Suddenly, armed with new stimulus funds, the Administration is actually getting some states' attention (not all - more on that later). They are saying, "Sure we'll do that, we've always been about quality first." Let's see, we say. Let's hold them to account, right from the start, with not just the carrot, but the stick, too.

The reality is that the \$4.3 billion federal Race to the Top funding plan could be wasted if the U.S. Department of Education doesn't refuse to fund school districts that enshrine anti-reform provisions in their policies and contracts.

States should be encouraged to be as innovative and creative as possible with Race to the Top funds. At the same time, taxpayer money must not be wasted by districts that refuse to embrace reforms that work and initiatives that place the needs of children first. All too often, school districts insert anti-reform provisions in collective bargaining agreements, making these districts virtually immune from real reform. We cannot and should not send a dime to these districts.

We also believe that a greater emphasis must be placed on alternative teacher certification, on promoting meaningful and data-driven performance pay models, on encouraging alternate models of teacher tenure, and on embracing teacher paycheck protection to ensure that educators take home more of their hard-earned money.



Do you agree? Here are our **“5 Principles for Racing to Teacher Quality.”** Use them, spread them around, demand them, and let's help education truly benefit from our teaching force.

1) The federal government should issue guidance to states barring anti-reform school districts from receiving any Race to the Top funds. In some school districts, it doesn't matter whether federal and state law *encourages* reforms such as performance pay, because teacher collective bargaining agreements in those districts *forbid* reform. States should not be permitted to funnel a single dime of Race to the Top funds to Districts that have collective bargaining agreements prohibiting, for example, the use of student performance in evaluating teachers. To send money to these districts would be to condone the 'adults first, kids second' mentality that has decimated learning in far too many schools.

2) The federal government should reward states that provide multiple pathways to teacher licensure. Tying Race to the Top funds to a dynamic, highly talented, and evolving teacher force can yield positive changes for students. The federal government should reward states that utilize all good teacher certification options available — including true alternative certification programs that require high levels of teacher content knowledge. Studies show that well-designed alternative certification programs produce teachers who boost student achievement at faster rates. States that refuse to accept new pathways to certification are denying students access to great teachers.

3) The federal government should reward states that develop genuine, data-driven pay-for-performance systems. Many bureaucrats claim that linking student and teacher data is impossible, but the modern workforce in almost every other industry teaches us otherwise. The federal government should demand that states use data-driven models — not half-measures like teacher portfolios — to reward effective teachers. States that develop and use comprehensive data collection systems to reward teachers who best improve student achievement — whether through statewide models or pilot programs — should get priority for Race to the Top funding.

4) The federal government should reward states that encourage Districts to adopt alternative tenure models. Alternative tenure models — such as the ones championed by DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee — have the potential to revolutionize teaching. Under Rhee's plan, teachers who are willing to defer tenure will receive major financial benefits. Delaying tenure for a modest amount of time can prevent situations like New York City's notorious “rubber rooms,” where thousands of bad teachers are prohibited from teaching but remain on the district's payroll, costing taxpayers millions of dollars every year.

5) The federal government should reward states that protect teacher paychecks. So-called “paycheck protection” is a hot-button issue, but we must revisit it. Teacher's unions complain — and often rightfully so — about the low pay afforded to first year teachers. But these unions, with their high dues structure and expensive political work, contribute to lower take home pay. Consider California, where some teachers pay in excess of \$1,100 in union dues and first year teachers make \$39,000. Reducing deducted dues could yield immediate money for cash-strapped educators.



Race to the Top for Charter Schools — Myth or Reality?

The Obama Administration has jumped on board the charter school bandwagon and in doing so, is also telling states they must do better and create or fix laws in order to compete for those big, new bucks. But the rhetoric doesn't always match the reality.

If you live in Connecticut, where your charter law is the sixth weakest, you might be surprised to find out about the praise your state is getting for lifting restrictive caps on the number of schools you have.

In fact, many states are getting credit for doing...well... not very much, in hundreds of citations in newspapers, Administration press releases and oft-repeated blogs.

"Since President Obama took office, numerous states have adopted reforms that would have been almost unthinkable a year ago," Duncan wrote in July in *The Washington Post*. "...Tennessee, Rhode Island, Indiana, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Colorado and Illinois have lifted restrictions on charter school growth."

Even reform-minded legislators have bought into the spin. Ohio's former Speaker of the House Jon Husted said in pushing his own new bill as a member of the Ohio Senate, "seven other states... have revoked their limits on charter schools."

Lifting caps is the Administration's signature reform for charters, and while this is good, we'd argue (and will in a few sentences) that there are much more important components to growing great charter schools. If caps were the only issue, we'd be praising Virginia, which has the dubious distinction of having one of the very worst laws in the country. No cap there, but school boards control whether charters ever see light, which out of apathy, ignorance or fear, rarely happens.

If these assertions were accurate, I'd be thrilled. But no state has done what is being reported, at least not in the way it's being reported. Here are the facts:

- No state cited in this popular mythology has *revoked* limits on the number of charter allowed to open this year. **Illinois** raised its cap on schools, allowing 30 more schools to open (and that's a good thing). In Illinois, passing a weak charter law was considered a victory for a state where unions control everything from the distribution of bagels to the fixing of salaries and benefits. Since 1996, the Land of Lincoln has gradually increased its allowable number of charters permitted to operate from 30, then 45, then 60, and now 90 — but most remain fixed on Chicago and political tradeoffs abound as a result.
- **Tennessee's** law is only marginally better. The law was capped at 50 schools and it restricted attendance to children in failing schools or those who failed on proficiency tests. The overall cap has been raised to 90 statewide (35 of which go to Memphis), and has expanded eligibility to children in districts with at least 14,000 students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, with a preference given to students from failing schools. We're grateful this happened in June after years of trying, but the law is still a stinker overall, with school boards in control and no real equity for schools.
- What about **Connecticut**? This past spring, Connecticut raised its incredibly restrictive student enrollment cap by just a small percentage to allow charters there to grow in size. It addressed no other deficiencies in its weak law, whether it be fiscal equity, the lack of truly independent authorizers or autonomy so that high quality schools can grow and improve.

- Also in June, **Rhode Island** faced the possibility that a small innovation passed a year earlier — Mayoral Academies — may not have had their first two approved schools funded by the proposed budget package. Some good PR and footwork on the part of local advocates put comments Arne Duncan made about Rhode Island legislators needing to be concerned about equity on the front pages, which was what their Speaker of the House had demanded as political cover in order to restore funds that had once been in the budget. Good move for sure, but restoring funds that were promised in the first place is hardly “unthinkable progress.”
- **Colorado** is cited as one of the states that has made progress and is already engaged in “The Race.” Colorado's relatively strong charter law has always received high marks, but action to improve some technical aspects of the law this summer was just tinkering around the edges.

In reality, most of the 40 charter laws will need dramatic legislative changes to develop robust charter laws that actually qualify them for any meaningful Race to the Top that aims to raise the bar for what American children need and deserve from all of us. They deserve laws that are inviting and supportive of great, new high quality schools and that hold all public schools accountable — or force them to close and let kids find a real education elsewhere.

We want to see states get bold and adopt strong charter laws, which everyone knows how to do, but often lack the courage to buck the status quo, the unions, and even ignorance of what precisely a charter school is.

We suggest three steps that Secretary Duncan can take to reverse these misconceptions:

First, encourage states to look north — to New York — for an example of excellent charter policy.

In New York, a variety of public and publicly accountable entities and individuals may authorize the creation of charter schools, which in turn, are held to a high standard for entry and a high standard for renewal. This has led charter school students in New York to outperform their comparable public school peers by more than 30 points in math.

It didn't take Race to the Top for New York to get to this point, but it could certainly help lead the way for other states.

Second, aim high and reject the mythology.

Secretary Duncan should make a bold statement about what does and doesn't constitute real action on charter policy for Race to the Top. And reformers must avoid their rush to bask in the glow of reported success when their modest action — or lack of inaction — may have been mistaken for success.

Third, push strong laws.

To be successful, Secretary Duncan must keep pushing states to change their laws in meaningful ways. The Secretary must caution state legislators to remain on guard, because charter enemies — teacher's unions chief among them — will slowly chip away at state laws under the guise of “compromise,” stripping schools of the ability to improve, innovate, and operate with freedom.

Despite the misinformation that his overzealous press shop may have promoted, it's not too late for Secretary Duncan to use his considerable popularity and experience to set the record straight. He must fully accept the reality that bold change is possible and that charter laws can change quickly and dramatically in a state.

If Secretary Duncan does transform his view of charter success and stops declaring victory before Race to the Top participants have even reached the gate, we'll be mightily impressed. More important, the children will benefit.

Everything's Up To Date In Kansas City? Why Some States Aren't There Yet...

Some states just aren't there yet; meaning, they just don't get the Race to the Top "thing." We were surprised to learn recently at a Kansas City panel we hosted to explore the local, state and federal role that the new state education chief in the Show Me State was planning *not* to apply at all, at least not in the first round. Lt. Governor Peter Kinder, a stalwart reformer from the days he first helped the state pass its charter law and bring new accountability back to schools reported to us recently that Missouri isn't even applying. "It seems to me that going through the exercise of preparing an application would be a good exercise. Even if we were unsuccessful in the first round, we might learn something about succeeding in round two and three. And for our new Commissioner of Education - to not even insist that we apply, I take that on the depressing side of the ledger," he says.

While Kinder is resolved to do whatever he can to persuade them otherwise, a state's bureaucrats are not always as malleable as Washington might think. Just look at those in Washington, DC, Florida and South Carolina whose staff and leadership — despite Washington weighing in — have recently withheld funding for charter schools blaming red tape for the problems rather than admit their unwillingness to be innovative. (*Note: At press time the MO state super seemed to be reconsidering her opposition...*)

Unions Are Our friends? Yeah. No. There's Something Behind Those Smiles...

Never start a sentence with "so", the teachers tell us. So 😊, it seems that the unions are just as antagonistic as they always were on reform, but they've finally learned (in some cases) to mute their anger to keep them on the guest list at the policy tables.

The American Federation of Teachers seems to be getting the most credit lately for allegedly supporting charter schools or being open to performance pay. The AFT president herself — Randi Weingarten, whose battles with the NY City Mayor and Chancellor are legion for their rancor — was the Education Secretary's guest at a forum about Race to the Top in St. Louis in late August. All smiles and laughter, Weingarten was there to say nice things about reform. Meanwhile, up in New York, the affiliate she still largely controls was sending double agents into charters to whip up discontent and secure union control of the otherwise independent public schools. This isn't an anomaly. It happens daily. The union pays ACORN to protest Harlem Success Academy Charter. Why? Its real success is a side note for them. What's really important is that it's founder is former NYC City Councilwoman Eva Moskowitz, who investigated the "rubber rooms" (and other insane union demands) where teachers who are dismissed go to sit, fully paid, doing nothing, because they are protected by contracts.

And what about tenure? In DC, Chancellor Michelle Rhee has tried for two years to negotiate a contract that would allow teachers to exchange performance pay — lots of it — for tenure. The local union support was actually pretty firm at one point — until the national convention convened and, some

say, the local president was threatened with losing his position by lock step, union leaders. Now they are attacking the notion of improving teacher quality in DC, head-on, with protests and lawsuits.

National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel was all smiles on the MSNBC special called "About Our Children" hosted by Michelle Bernard and Bill Cosby, when he had to face off with New Jersey's leading grassroots rebel, Derrell Bradford, an African-American Democrat school choice supporter (African-American Democrats actually make up the majority of choice supporters these days, by the way!) Van Roekel dodged ever-hard questions about evaluating teachers, and his reasoning was noticeably out of step and not accepted by the panel, including Bill Cosby. After the show, even *Hardballs'* Chris Matthews commented to Bradford that, "You should have taken down that guy from the NEA. He was motor mouthing you."

Even the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* reported, "The NEA says the initiative has an 'unhealthy focus on standardized tests' and argues that 'it is inappropriate to require that states be able to link data on student achievement to individual teachers for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation.'" *The Washington Post* added that the union equates Race to the Top with "yet another layer of federal mandates that have little or no research base of success and that usurp state and local government's responsibilities for public education."

Back to the self-proclaimed reformist AFT; here's what the Kansas City affiliate's own website says about performance pay to its members:

Dear Union Colleagues:

Unfortunately, the new Performance-Based Teacher Assessment Tool is being used to threaten and intimidate teachers in some buildings. There seems to be particular concern about the self-evaluation narrative. This section was intended to give teachers a voice in their evaluation. It was not meant to be punitive, but, as usual, some principals are interpreting it that way. To alleviate this concern, Union member, Karol Howard, will be holding four workshops on "How to Write the Self-Evaluation Narrative."

Really? You're going to train teachers to "alleviate" the notion of performance in their self-evaluation? Wow.

Then there's the real naïveté, like when the producer of a major conservative talk radio show (who we'll keep unnamed in hopes we can get coverage for our issues!) calls to ask who could best get into a debate about charters and we suggested that he get a union leader in the opposing position. He said, "Really? I thought unions were pretty good on the issue now, right?" Wrong.

Here's what the NEA's annual meeting produced on charters:

NEA shall oppose any initiative to greatly expand the growth of charter schools and assist its state affiliates in identifying any effective practices incubated therein that could subsequently be implemented in our traditional public schools. By no means should this effort conflict with the ongoing and necessary work of organizing charter school teachers, nor should it conflict with charter schools that meet NEA guidelines.

As we go to press, at least two more charter schools had called in their reports of union coercion tactics in their schools. Meanwhile, the public relations machines spin, but it's never what it sounds like. There's always something behind the union boss' smiles.

Save Opportunity!



There is more to real education reform than robust accountability systems for teachers, states and schools. There is the very fundamental notion of the freedom that all parents should have the right to exercise when it comes to their babies, their offspring; their kids. No where is the need and demand for that right more clear than in Washington, DC, where a small, highly successful program to allow poor children in failing schools the opportunity to attend a private school of choice has been a central battle in local and national politics since the Obama Administration arrived in Washington.

The very bipartisan DC Opportunity Scholarship Program serves 2,000 students, almost all from neighborhoods that given a choice, you wouldn't choose to visit. Their lifeline to opportunity through this program was up for renewal, but quickly rejected by Senate Democrats who said "no dice" unless and until they "see evidence" of local support. After showing just that and more, they invented more issues, and then more issues and finally even more issues, until it was all but lost. As you would expect, families waited with a great deal of anxiety as the senators discovered their issues. "I won't let her go back to that school in our community," one parent said of her daughter. "If I have to take three jobs to keep her at [her school] I will. But then my other children will never see me." Indeed we logged hundreds of such quotes and thousands of signatures to **save opportunity** for these children.

And then, after many groups spent money, time and energy fighting back, the sun began to peek through the clouds. A confluence of issues seemed to bring together Senator Durbin (D-IL) and his allies, who had earlier fought to keep other senators — most notably Senators Lieberman (I-CT) and Collins (R-ME) — from having their reauthorization bill heard. First, there is demand and there is need. The case has been made loud and clear. Second, the DC school system can't absorb the kids in the program without considerable cost (the program is \$7,500/yr vs. \$13,000 for regular DC public school students) and personnel shifts would have to be made. Finally, the political writing is on the wall and smart politicians are beginning to realize that helping poor kids is not anathema to good education policy, regardless of what the unions say. (And, oh by the way, they have said a lot, including writing threatening letters telling the senators they'll be watching them on this and sending their representatives to scream through loud bullhorns in the faces of low-income five year olds at a peaceful pro-school choice vigil their parents held outside the US Department of Education.)

If you haven't made your voice heard, you need to write or call on this issue TODAY. Senator Durbin needs to hear from you, and your own senators need to hear as well.

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Exactly sixteen years later, we're still going strong, helping parents, policymakers, educators and the grassroots build and sustain reforms that make schools work better for all kids. In this latest issue of our *Monthly Letter*, we've hit our four core pillars of reform, deliberately and a bit not so deliberately. It turns out that those four most important things we can do in education today — fix teacher quality, grow great charter schools, bring more choices to parents, and ensure accountability — are all in vogue right now. We'd like to think (and we do) we've had more than a little to do with that. So take a minute, open the envelope that was enclosed in this mailing, and just send us whatever you can — whatever fits into your budget — whatever you don't want Uncle Sam to get — and help us get the word out, pressure lawmakers, fix accountability and build a system of great schools that are the envy of all the world.

Thank you for reading, and God Bless you.


Jeanne Allen