



## Back-to-School Bulletin #2

*CER's Back-to-School Bulletins are designed to provide you the real news behind the headlines, giving you the information you need to improve education for America's school children, and your own.*

### **SAME DEMANDS SHOW FEW RESULTS .... PBS' 'SCHOOL' DISCREDITS REFORM**

**(Washington, DC 9/4/01)** This week we look at how the debate on improving schools has suddenly turned back the clock to demands for more inputs, and how such efforts to spin the problems in education today are even being pushed on PBS.

- **MONEY:** Everything old is new again, and the latest fad is a familiar mantra beginning to take over much of the public debate over education – that somehow the state of education can only be improved by spending more money – federal, state, and local.

As Congress goes back to work today on the big education package that is intended to reform how federal money is spent on programs, one side's solution is to spend more (nearly doubling the federal expenditure). The other seeks to raise education's appropriation by almost \$5 billion but to also ensure accountability in those expenditures.

School administrators who should be most concerned with and dedicated to turning around failing schools are instead receiving advice from the American Association of School Administrators, based right outside of Washington, that a child's happiness trumps tests in terms of sparking academic achievement. From a letter to all their members:

"As the school year opens, each of you is under tremendous pressure to raise test scores... Superintendents understand the importance of standards and AASA members have embraced increased school accountability ... But our schools cannot focus all their attention on an end-of-the-year test. That's not what parents want and it's not what their children need.

"AASA recently conducted a national poll to determine what the public believes are the best indicators that schools are providing a high quality education.

"According to the poll, conducted by professional pollsters, the American public believes that 'high parental involvement' is the best indicator that a school is providing a high quality education. 'Children who are happy and like school' was the second best indicator. 'High scores on statewide tests' was selected as the best indicator by only 18.8 percent."

Of course, no testing advocates are advocating working toward one single end of the year test. Instead, tests are supposed to measure work done the whole year through.

The Administrator's group is one of those pushing for higher spending today, in the absence of concrete accountability. If it were simply a matter of money – rather than how it is spent and who decides – US children would be at the head of the pack. Instead:

- Spending more than \$1 billion per year for three years on class size reduction, the state of California tried to lower class sizes for all students. Scores continued to drop, and only recent curricular and textbook changes have begun to reverse the slide.

- In Kansas City, Missouri, the district spent more money per pupil than any other of the largest 280 school districts in the country. Test scores did not rise and the minority student achievement gap stayed the same. Up to 60 percent of its students perform “below proficiency” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
- Nationally, the level of all education spending per pupil (federal, state and local) has increased 82 percent in constant dollars in the last 30 years. But, as measured by the NAEP, student achievement has remained flat.
- Of the five states with the highest increase in per pupil expenditures between 1977 and 1997, four were below the national average increase on SAT scores. Despite larger numbers of children taking the SAT, actual scores for lower and higher achieving students have declined.
- Where does increased spending go in public schools? Normally it’s not on the kids but on administrative bloat that the money is spent. Between 1960 and 1997, the number of guidance counselors increased more than 500 percent, the number of support staff by 170 percent, and the number of teachers by 103 percent.
- **PBS REVISES HISTORY THIS WEEK:** Speaking of money, Washington spent more than a million dollars on a so-called documentary entitled “School: The Story of American Public Education” that started last night. After viewing it, you’ll probably agree that one million dollars could have been better spent on:
  - Performance-based, substantial salaries for 27 teachers
  - 350 scholarships for children seeking a better education
  - 20 charter school start-up grants

Instead, it was used to tell a story of American education – sort of – from the perspective of Sarah Mondale, niece of former Vice President Walter Mondale and a filmmaker with some familial ties to the unions to boot.

The four-part PBS special casts aspersions on reform efforts throughout the program, but it is the last segment, covering the 1980s through today, that devotes almost all of its time to condemning modern education reform efforts.

Like most films seeking to invoke emotions, this one used the tricks of the filmmaking trade to cleverly invoke responses in its viewers: ominous music vs. cheery tunes; shots making some speakers look very small vs. open shots making other speakers look friendly; and language leading you down the path to a predetermined conclusion.

In the piece, reform ideas are regularly refuted, while untruthful or unproven claims by advocates of the status quo go unchallenged.

But perhaps its best to give you the play-by-play directly. To find out why we, and many others, paint such a disastrous picture of “School,” go to: <http://www.edreform.com>.

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*The Center for Education Reform is a national, independent, non-profit advocacy organization providing support and guidance to individuals, community and civic groups, policymakers and others who are working to bring fundamental reforms to their schools. For further information, please call (202) 822-9000 or visit our website at <http://edreform.com>.*