



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

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* **PARENTING:** More than usual, at times of great stress, children need to know their parents are with them and, parents need to be their children's advocates. Everywhere we turn, parents are encouraged to be more responsible for their children's education. Most educators would agree, minimally, that this means sending our children to school ready to learn, with a good night's rest, and a belly full of breakfast. Being responsible for our children's education also means advocating for them when a problem occurs at school. To read more of the lead article from the BACK-TO-SCHOOL issue of PARENT POWER!, [click here](#).

* **CHARTERS:** In Missouri, new state Education Department guidelines recommend disapproving charters that aren't "innovative." In Pennsylvania, the School Boards Association is fighting against charters that ARE innovative and has filed separate lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of virtual charter schools.

But as former U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett (now chairman of the internet-based elementary and secondary education company K12) recently noted in a Philadelphia Inquirer commentary, "Lessons learned in virtual charter schools will be available for all to see: about the value of self-paced and individualized instruction, multimedia presentation of instructional material, the flexibility of learning anytime and anywhere, and the ability to track academic progress and see exactly when (and in what subject) a child needs help."

The benchmark question is: "What's best for kids?" Bennett's commentary concludes that "American children desperately need access to a compelling and academically rich education to prepare for tomorrow's world. Schools that can meet the challenge - virtual, charter, or otherwise - should be celebrated and supported."

* **TEACHING:** In the wake of reports that more than 5,000 Illinois teachers failed the state's basic skills exams, columnist Nat Hentoff has called for building teacher accountability programs, including the use of merit pay. The Illinois exposé by the Chicago Sun Times revealed that the poorest children in the worst performing schools are five times as likely to have a teacher who failed the test. The "worst teacher-test flunker" failed 24 of 25 teacher tests, including 11 of 12 Basic Skills tests on teaching learning-disabled children. That teacher was assigned to teach learning-disabled children in Chicago, and legislators are now looking at disclosing test results during the hiring process.

Hentoff's column Monday looked at the history of merit pay efforts in New York City, noting that

teacher licenses "should be renewable, depending on an evaluation of how well that teacher's students have been learning."

Yet, licensed and certified teachers are not the most important attribute of a good teacher. Traditional public schools have relied heavily on certified teachers and many systems have resisted uncertified teachers from Teach for America, an organization created to provide a domestic "Peace Corps" for college graduates willing to teach for two years in the nation's neediest urban and rural public schools. Opponents have charged for years that TFA teachers are not "as qualified as those that teach elsewhere."

But an evaluation of 200 TFA corps members in the Houston Independent School District showed that TFA teachers are at least as effective as conventionally-trained teachers. In fact, the analysis of Texas Assessment of Academic Skills scores showed that TFA corps member generally provided greater student value-added. To see the study, [click here](#).

* **CHOICE:** And yet another study of the Cleveland Scholarship Program, this one a three-year examination by the Indiana Center for Evaluation, compares children in the Cleveland scholarship program with those who were not. The findings? "Students enrolled in the Scholarship Program for the full three years continue to perform slightly, but statistically significantly, higher." To see a copy of the study, [click here](#).

* **CHARTERS, II:** In Washington, DC, the city public School Board - after ignoring the schools for two years - voted to yank the charter of New Vistas Preparatory Public Charter School, despite impassioned pleas from students and parents. "You all put children first all over everything," noted one ninth-grader. "You all are not putting us first by taking away our school." Another high school junior declared, "I learn more in math at New Vistas ... than at any D.C. public school."

In Kansas City, Central Missouri State University is trying to revoke the charter of Benjamin Banneker charter school as a result of administrative violations of its charter - despite the school's improved scores and the board's admission that the school is making headway in cleaning up its administrative mess. A stay of revocation has been granted and a hearing is scheduled for tomorrow. If the revocation is upheld, the university plans to shut down the school immediately, despite state law that says charters can only be closed at the end of a school year.

VOICES FROM THE FRONT:

"You people are responsible when my child's not learning. You and the principal and her teachers. When you fail, when everybody fails my child, what happens? Nothing. Nobody gets fired. Nothing happens to nobody - except my child."

-- An unidentified black NYC father, who dropped out of school to take a factory job, speaking before the New York City school board



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