



the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

**NEW LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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Dear Friend:

As I sat training to New York City this month to tape a segment of the John Stossel show on the unintended consequences (which aired December 6th on Fox Business), I began to take stock of the state of the movement. I had reached out to Stossel about an idea — one that frankly gives me a heavy heart — and he immediately invited me to come talk about it. I told him on the show that, “Even the charter movement is so afraid to make a mistake. It fears risk because they are so afraid that if they don't show themselves to be the very, very best, then they will go out of business. But the reality is, risk is in every great innovative business. It's what makes America tick. And so when you want high quality, you want to take a risk on someone who wants to start a school.”

This risk-adverse behavior what now has created the “Charter Blob.” Remember the Blob? This was the term first coined by former Education Secretary William J. Bennett, author and media host, that we borrowed and put to more public use, who described the education establishment as a scene from the movie with Steve McQueen. The Blob — it grows itself, shows up everywhere. We described it years later to clarify the term, to teach more people about it...

“The term ‘Blob’ cropped up years ago when reformers began trying to work with the education establishment and ran smack into the more than 200 groups, associations, federations, alliances, departments, offices, administrations, councils, boards, commissions, panels, organizations, herds, flocks and coveys, that make up the education industrial complex.

“Taken individually they were frustrating enough, with their own agendas, bureaucracies, and power over education. But taken as a whole they were (and are) maddening in their resistance to change. Not really a wall — they always talk about change — but rather more like quicksand, or a tar pit where ideas slowly sink out of sight leaving everything just as it had been.”

And education reform activists, then, were the farthest thing from the Blob.

When conservative activists began creating unique alliances with inner city, African-American leaders over empowerment back in the early 1980s — on tenant management and housing and school vouchers — no one ever envisioned that someday, we'd have a movement that is nearly choking itself to death. It was readily acknowledged and understood then that rules and regulations that aimed to hold people accountable really just stood in the way of real empowerment and freedom for people to live lives full of integrity. Public housing tenants wanted the authority to make their housing like a home, to be able to service their own needs, to develop a sense of ownership and pride. Public education parents wanted the authority to shop for the kinds of schools one often (allegedly) found in the suburbs, or where more advantaged folks lived.

The empowerment crusade of the 80s influenced the school choice movement of the 90s, and gave birth to the Ed Reform movement we have now, but with much less clarity and much more confusion than ever before.

HAVE BUREAUCRATS CORRUPTED THE ED REFORM MOVEMENT?

Arizona. So it is that charter schools in Arizona must do data input into a system created by the often-scorned WestEd. ALEAT is used by all schools in Arizona must use to apply for Race to the Top or any other federal funds. The Superintendent of Public Instruction in Arizona sits on the WestEd Board. That same superintendent, elected, served in the state legislature before and was a champion of charter schools.

Ironically, ALEAT was supposed to “streamline” things. Only in a Kafka novel would this be called streamlining. The system requires schools to use the predetermined formats, though many fields are nonsensical, and/or don't apply. There is never an option to say “not applicable.” You have to enter SOMETHING, even if it is totally irrelevant to your application. There is not one place where schools can add text for clarity. And many fields must be entered multiple times. To give an idea of the madness, a charter operator in a remote, rural area of Arizona had a broken scanner. She could not scan a document that needed to be uploaded to the ALEAT system. Could she mail it? No! They wouldn't allow that. In the middle of a hectic school day, she had to drive 45 minutes to the closest Kinko's to have it scanned.

Oh well, that was the end of it, right? Nope; she had scanned multiple pages at the same time in one large PDF. They wouldn't accept that either. She had to drive BACK to Kinko's and scan them each separately. How is this helping Arizona children get a great education?

Regulatory Creep. A **Colorado** activist and pioneer wrote me back in 2009: “...the schools seem to feel there is too much regulation, and it is getting worse. I would think some effort in a Colorado state study or a CDE survey might want to explore this issue here as well. One might ask: to what extent charter schools in this state feel Colorado and /or their districts provide a healthy balance between the freedom and flexibility these schools sought in the first place, while requiring appropriate steps that maintain accountability for results? Clearly the landscape has changed since 1993, for we have added new laws, requirements re CSAP, accreditation, etc. - I would think an appropriate question might be to what extent these changes, since the law passed in 1993, have proved to help or hinder charter schools in their ability to successfully achieve their mission and carry out the initial intent of the law?”

Good for the Goose. After one child in one REGULAR public school in **Washington, DC** was unable to get a Diabetes shot when the nurse was out, the federal government required every school district and charter school in America to sign an affidavit saying they would never do anything like that! That means all charter schools must involve and pay lawyers to draft a legal statement in response to something that happened at a TRADITIONAL public school, no less!

Brotherly Love? Philadelphia school officials created a performance appraisal system to monitor all schools. Rather than track the growth of kids' achievement, the Philly system averages two years of achievement. So when Boys Latin enrolls its 9th grader, they normally arrive with a 6th grade education. The boys in 9th grade register around the 40th percentile and two years later, the school often has reached 80%. It doesn't matter, though. By averaging two years, the school appears to only have a D-level on achievement, when in actuality, this charter grew student achievement by 40 percent in one year! Similarly, let's say a school starts at 80% and drops to 40%. It, too, has a 60% achievement level. This is hardly a way to measure growth in

student achievement. Yet, Governor Corbett's administration has no problem using this flawed method to measure charter schools.

Blended Learning. The latest innovation in schooling is Blended Learning. From Former NYC Chancellor Joel Klein, to Bill Gates, to hoards of people in between, there is widespread consensus that we must extend more opportunities for these hybrid-schooling arrangements that use technology in smart ways to deliver content while improving the teacher-student relationships as well. So why is it that opening the door to blended learning is micro-managed by stupid process restrictions by entities that are supposedly part of advancing the goal? This is from an applicant for charters with Blended learning:

- I recently had to spend a solid 72 hours re-gathering original signatures for 11 Founding Group members for whom we already had (color, showing blue ink!) scanned signed docs for a charter app. Very few businesses in the real world require "wet" signatures anymore.
- For an innovative two-shift blended high school program, where half the students come to school from 1-5 pm, the authorizer is requiring the school to provide both breakfast and lunch to all students (without any indication that students want either)...and to build/staff a kitchen to do so.

Fairness. Meg Palisoc of Synergy Academies reports "for one school, we have to complete the same paperwork that a large school district has to complete. For example, the entire LAUSD completes one LEA plan and one Technology Plan for its entire district of over 800 schools. We have to complete each of these documents for each of our schools."

At the Center for Education Reform we've collected literally hundreds of these "horror" stories since we began back in 1993. It used to be these stories were exclusively about the traditional education establishment, exposing the behaviors of everyone from school board members to unions to lawmakers, judges and zoning boards trying to thwart progress.

Today those stories are still out there, but there beginning to get matched by the stories of obstacles created by supposed "reform" structures, or even just plain old reformers.

Who knew that empowering parents and freeing schools from rules and regulations would feel so liberating that some would need to create new rules to govern the new system.

Madison's Federalist #51 argued that government, albeit limited, was necessary to ensure that we protect our shared as well as self-interests. "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and **in the next place oblige it to control itself.** A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions." That bit about the controlling itself is particularly apt today.

Don't Know Much About History. Lots happened before -- and since. And if this year's election season reminded us of anything, it's that we have today generations of Americans who don't know much about history, why fighting for one's beliefs is how politics should ensue, and that having real differences doesn't make one stubborn, it makes one real. Our nation's founding, it's moral fiber, it's backbone, the uniqueness of its economic and political systems -- how many younger adults and students really know any of this anymore?

The next generation of education reformers must take on the education establishment and the reform status quo. If the 1980s was Chapter I or I.0, today should be the beginning of the Grande Finale or 4.0. The past is prologue. It's time we all learned.

And Now for the Good News. Thankfully there is a group that has a memory, an anchor in this movement, and has amassed the largest single stockpile of education reform history under its "roof" and on its technology "servers." Not the Library of Congress of reform, but something more akin to a lengthy diary, The Center for Education Reform has launched an unprecedented project to take reformers back to school, and take Americans forward in their learning about what really makes good schools happen.

Education Reform University, the nation's 1st and only effort to inform, educate and activate students who don't know much about history -- at least not the history of the EdReform movement.

"Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it."

Never has such a statement struck a more important warning bell for educators, reformers, funders and policymakers. Unprecedented potential at national state and local levels require reformers to have a thorough command of what has transpired in the education arena before they can make a productive dent in enacting significant changes.

The need for a real history lesson has been made clear time and time again in our work. We realize that the single largest impediment to real, lasting substantive, structural educational improvement, even beyond the opponents of common sense standards, quality options and accountability, is the lack of common knowledge of the people, the ideas, their progress, the players and more. To arm the next generation of reformers as we age, we have to do more than wait for people to come to our offices, join our staffs, or run for office.

The Center is thus creating a program to close the knowledge gap, to create the "cultural literacy" of reform, that of the innovators, that of the history, and that of where we've been, and who was there.

Thus, the idea of building an Education Reform University was borne. It starts with a massive and unprecedented library of the history of the movement, will soon begin to provide online as well as occasional in-person coursework and eventually, will deliver fully accredited coursework through partnership colleges and universities.

Stay Tuned!


Jeanne Allen
President