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MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 11

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Dear Friends:

It's been a whirlwind month, with a surge in interest about education in the media and in the towns, some new reports released, a charter school law struck down, and of course, a monumental election that does more for education reform in one-fell-swoop than anyone might have imagined possible. We can't possibly cover it all, but read on for some important highlights.



Election Wrap-Up

- All of you pessimists who believe that we can't change the education world until the NEA is stopped dead in their tracks, I'm happy to say, can now safely join the side of the optimists. Not only did the union and its allies fail to seat their own candidates in a majority of elections, but their "stealth tactics" failed to defeat a number of overtly choice-minded people, such as:

Lisa Graham, State Superintendent, Arizona: Lisa's opponent ran ads that openly pronounced Lisa pro-voucher; no one denied it, and she won with 59% of the vote. Governor Fife Symington was also targeted by the blob, and prevailed.

Frank Brogan, State Superintendent, Florida: Brogan says money is not the answer, and plans to remove mandates, push charter schools, and pilot school choice. Pro-school choice Jeb Bush and his running mate, legislator Tom Feeney, did not make it, but with Brogan, reform may prevail.

Anne Fox, State Superintendent, Idaho: Says an NEA member, "The Idaho Education Association-backed candidates took a beating... The election of Dr. Fox is a catastrophe of the highest proportions!"

Linda Shrenko, State Superintendent, Georgia: As the Wall Street Journal pointed out, she's a former public school teacher who "stunned the education establishment by spending only \$20,000 and ousting a six-year incumbent."

Of the new Governors, Pennsylvania's Ridge, Connecticut's Rowland and Texas' Bush are big charter fans. All could endorse and push school choice pilot projects that are being mulled right now in those states. South Carolina's Beasley says "anything the NEA supports, we oppose." And, we hope that Wisconsin's Governor Thompson is buoyed by his reelection numbers, enough to aggressively push the expansion of the Milwaukee choice program that the business community there has endorsed. New York Governor-elect Pataki wants to break up the Regents, and may be sympathetic to choice and charters, making the NY-NJ-CT tri-state area ripe for comprehensive reform (Hey, how about cross-state choice?? Just a thought.)

Another wonderful result of the election is the infusion of at least a few new and reform-minded State Board of Education members. Appointments by new Governors are worth watching for.

A View From the Blob

We thought the following comments by the NEA post election day were particularly fascinating and worth sharing:

"We had some notable successes, and we had some setbacks. But our agenda is not changed by the outcome of these elections. (What does that tell you?)"

"Our state affiliates and members were better prepared, more energized, started earlier, and in many ways, were more effective than ever before. Now the real work begins."

"Our opponents are right about one thing: They claim that the NEA and its 2.2 million members are the only thing standing in the way of the far right agenda. We are the only organization in the United States with a nationwide, broad-based pool of education advocates in every precinct."

"We have a strong membership committed to fighting vouchers, establishing fair taxes and protecting collective bargaining rights...We must redouble our efforts to elect friends of education (F.O.E.s?) in future elections."

"In 1994 NEA and its affiliates employed new tools and strategies, such as using survey research, developing and targeting messages to our members and key voters, experimenting with new methods of contacting voters, and using professional techniques of all kinds."

Sarcasm aside, these ARE fighting words, as never before. Those in the states and in national groups hoping to win battles must not overlook the importance of more sophisticated, broad-based and visible, grassroots support for reform. With the blob stepping up its assaults, even the new Governors

could moderate and delay reforms they promoted during the campaign. Don't leave it to chance or to the fact that these folks won on good ideas. Good ideas can help win campaigns, but they'll only get implemented if they are actively --"take-no-prisoners" -- pushed.

- Speaking of the blob, you might recall last month we discussed the Bracey Report and his and his allies' inclinations to paint a rosy picture of our failing educational system. Well, the American Association of School Administrators is following suit. November's issue of *The School Administrator*, due out any day now, will take "a look at the long-running hoax about America's school ills." We'll let you know what it says next month.

From the "It Couldn't Happen Here" Corner:

- From New Jersey: The President of the local American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees has endorsed Mayor Bret Schundler's effort, and in so doing, incurred the wrath of the other major employee unions.

- When few were looking, a Michigan Circuit Court judge struck down the state's charter school law, arguing that charter schools are not really public schools and cannot, therefore, be funded. To remedy this, the state is obviously appealing, and legislative leaders plan to push through a bill in the lame duck session that would make these schools permissible. In the meantime, the charters are on shaky ground, and an interested business community there is working on how best to help them. Whatever happens has great significance for efforts elsewhere.

- Friends in Indianapolis have shared with us some reports from a committee tasked with looking at education reform there. A group made up of state legislators, administrators and educators, and reform-friendly think tankers heard testimony in support of limited school choice programs and charter schools. But when the final report was issued, the committee declined to make *any* recommendation concerning school choice or charter schools. They did agree, however, to make final recommendations concerning increasing expenditures in the classroom, instituting a longer school year, and redefining county boundaries. Pathbreaking, no? Meanwhile, residents will no doubt assume that the experts have spoken. Committees like this gain currency when our people are invited to sit on them. We should boycott them completely, and not give even the slightest impression that they are somehow representing all points of view.

Elsewhere in the Land of Reform


- The Public Agenda Foundation, a polling group based in New York, says parents are suspicious of education reform schemes and teaching techniques that are warm and fuzzy. Parents want their schools to focus on ending violence, increasing discipline and mastering the basics. The poll confirms about parents some of our deepest held suspicions. That is, if parents were given the option, they'd pick schools that were strong on academic basics, void of social engineering, and hard on teachers and other employees who don't do their job. This poll got some attention, but not nearly enough. For more information, please call the Center.
- Another poll, this one taken in California, recently assessed citizens there on their proclivity towards future school choice initiatives. Sponsored by the Claremont Institute, the poll found many, many interesting things out about how Californians view choice, but among the more important findings were: 1) vouchers are viewed worse now than they were before proposition 174 was launched 2) there is popular support for tying some strings to private schools that participate in a school choice program, and 3) there is a lot of interest in holding teachers more accountable. Few of those surveyed know what a charter school is, and once they know, they're not overwhelmed with joy. This data makes clear that a lot of education has to happen -- not just in California but beyond -- before any sweeping choice measures can be enacted.

And Some Miscellanea

- An interesting array of education materials is available from the Arizona State University College of Education's Gold Files, which provide the 60-100 pages of clippings and information about nearly 700 topics. Most of these have a definite "blob" leaning quality about them, but it is fascinating for a number of uses. The titles available cover curriculum trends, teaching methods, reform ideas -- you name it. There are Gold Files about Death Education, Outcome-based education, Mastery Learning, Vouchers, etc. For more information, call 1(800)-624-2347. The files are about \$20.00.
- The Manhattan Institute's Center for Educational Innovation has substantial news to report in its new newsletter about good things happening with public school choice districts and alternative schools. For a copy, please call (212) 599-7000.

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The School Reform Handbook will be in your hands in January. It's worth waiting for, I'm pleased to say.

Happy Thanksgiving! from all of us here at the Center,


Jeanne Allen