



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 920 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000
Fax 202-822-5077

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 13**

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Dear Friends:

There's a lot of different reforming going on out there, from the modest creation of alternative schools in places like Washington, DC to the more radical turning over of schools to private firms in places like Wilkesburg, PA. It seems like wherever you go these days, everything is possible. A small glimpse follows in this first communique of the New Year!



Piloting into New Territory

In Boston, Massachusetts, this past October, the school committee approved an experiment launching six new pilot schools free from red tape. The unions, running scared from the more autonomous charter schools, have consented to allow these schools to hire outside the district, and without regard for seniority. The planned schools include an evening high school for working teens, an academy for the performing arts and a math and science elementary. The schools will be smaller, involving parents in every facet of school administration. While a step in the right direction, this can hardly be considered radical. Still Joan First of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students said that these schools would likely attract "something other than your average cut of kids." Addressing the topic of freeing schools from bureaucracy, First told the Boston Globe: "The fact that people are free to make decisions doesn't mean they will make the right decisions."

Maybe Joan needs a civics lesson.

State Watch

•*Texas*: Friends are gearing up for a 1995 legislative session in which education reform promises to be the major issue. On the docket are support for charter schools, the reintroduction of a low-income school choice pilot project in 60 school districts, and changes throughout the Texas school code giving schools more freedom with textbook selection and curriculum. The new Governor is apparently on board for all of these, but has not been as

enthusiastic for school choice as some would like. Still, a broad band of supporters is trying to move the issue along, including the Texas Public Policy Foundation, who is holding a statewide conference in Austin on February 9 to air all sides of the issues. For more information, contact Mike Watson at (210) 614-0080.

•*North Carolina:* The state of this state is looking better every day. Republicans in the majority there plan to scale back drastically the Department of Public Instruction, and to look closely at teacher tenure and other outmoded personnel policies. Of course, that didn't stop the still-blob oriented legislature from passing an enormous pay raise in the last days of the lame duck session.

•*Florida:* You've heard from us about Florida's new chief of schools, Frank Brogan. School choice supporters there will be pleased by an informal survey in which Orlando Sentinel readers were asked whether they believed in private school choice. Of the 6,003 callers, 4,619 (or roughly 77%) said they did, while only 1,384 callers rejected the notion.

•*Wisconsin:* Wisconsin reform opponents will soon be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, as Governor Tommy Thompson has now said unconditionally that he will weave an expansion of the Milwaukee choice program into his budget. That, coupled with key components that exist in Ohio -- strong grassroots, strong think power and strong policymakers -- will make for a very likely success very soon.

Stuck in a Rut?

Despite the positive changes taking place in statehouses around the country, many of the old, stalwart education organizations are still tenaciously holding on to their turf. California, for example, is continuing in its contract with the Education Commission of the States (ECS) to restructure its schools. Essentially, the state hired ECS to come up with a totally new plan, including curriculum frameworks, charter schools, a new teacher certification process, and other school models. An early draft apparently also supported CLAS, which has since been sent back to the drawing board. On the surface, all of these ideas are good ones: the problem is that ECS has never been known to be very bold on most fronts, often preferring conciliation over substance. And given ECS's cozy relationship with the establishment, bold reform would come as a surprise.

Still, there may be hope. As newly elected Chairman of the National Governors Association, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson will also have jurisdiction over ECS. And since the tide has changed so drastically for education reform nationwide, perhaps ECS will not be so easily swayed by education pressure groups in the future. At least we can hope.

Hero of the Hour

Cleveland, Ohio, Councilwoman Fannie Lewis is a dream come true! A Democrat, Ms. Lewis is working hard to get school choice enacted, with the support of leaders of the local black community. She's taking 11 buses of inner city resident to Columbus to march later this month, and from all accounts, this woman may very well pull the choice effort together in Ohio. She's not alone, of course. Hope for Ohio's Children has been hard at work, along with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Studies. And then there's the outstanding State Senator and Education Committee chair Cooper Snyder who's long been pushing school choice. Senator Snyder has also made it clear that private contracting will be welcome in the Buckeye state. Ohio has the four key elements in place that I've long advocated are necessary for success: a lively, organized grassroots, a well-placed think tank or research arm, active minority support, and at least a few dedicated legislators. In the parlance of the race track, They're off!

Taking on the Monopoly in Washington State

As further proof that the reform movement continues to blossom and diversify, people-wise and idea-wise, an interesting initiative was launched January 9 in Washington State. Fawn and Jim Spady, neophytes to the cause of reform but not to education and its problems, have launched an impressive initiative to make every public school in Washington State completely autonomous and to allow those schools to become independent if they wish, like a charter. Public schools would become "public school partnerships" where teachers would control the school and its budgeting, including being able to distribute profits, if any. An independent public school, or charter, could be created by state certified teachers only and would also by-pass the district and receive funds directly from the state. Both concepts are unique for an initiative, and have appeared to garner some interesting and diverse support in the state. The Spadys have decided to go the initiative route given the impediments in the legislative process there. Call Fawn or Jim at (206) 789-8776.

The Proganda Machine Hard at Work

Courtesy of Pennsylvania Leadership Council's Sean Duffy, here are a few insights into the unions' strategies to defeat reform in 1995:

- Prey on senior citizens: make them fear for their pocketbooks (pensions?);
- Spin Like Crazy: the teachers unions have taken up the "don't worry, be happy" banner by telling everyone, everywhere that everything's okay in the schools;
- Hide the Money: The unions are setting up a number of front groups to

conceal their driving influence in local anti-reform activity, to make the establishment look like the grass roots;

- Label Opponents Lunatics: We've seen this tactic first hand before, but the NEA's reform opposition is working this tactic with renewed vigor, telling its members recently at a strategy session that it must label its opponents not only lunatics, but elitist (i.e. white, rich, pro-private school, un-democratic).
- Reformers hate public education and teachers: Although it would seem obvious to most that reformers have just the opposite inclination, there is nonetheless an all out attempt to label us anti-education.

Contract for America's Kids

- Some say a real revolution is brewing in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, an area plagued by conditions that in many cases are worse than in neighboring Pittsburgh. The school district there has decided to turn over the operations of at least one school to a private company, Alternative Public Schools Inc., of Nashville, Tennessee. This one school, the Turner School Initiative, is perhaps the first of many to come. Said one of the school's directors, this action is indicative of one "community's struggle to use new forms of power and leverage to remedy a set of problems that have become commonplace in US public education."

- Education Alternatives Inc. has only just begun to manage Hartford, CT schools, but given the ongoing criticism of this company and the whole idea of contracting out, we offer you the following anecdote as at least one not so minor reason why this kind of effort has great potential for improving the schools:

As part of its contract, EAI has begun to make some minor and major capital repairs. But it took EAI's coming to Hartford to get some burned out lightbulbs replaced in a classroom despite continual complaints by teachers. That might sound minor to most, but something as simple as light has a strong effect on a child's learning environment and attitude. Bright lights, happy pictures, merry and meaningful signs: these are the things you find in school buildings that produce winners. When one considers that Washington, DC, had to spend \$8 millions to meet fire codes before the court would allow schools to open last fall, such basic environmental improvements can be a critical aspect of reform. And often it takes a private contractor to get them done in a time- and cost-efficient manner. There are many more stories, drawn from the experiences of private contractors, that illustrate the importance of the need to freshen up education's face, and they should be used regularly to sell our message.

The National Goals Go Out of Bounds

For the second year in a row, the infamous but oblique National Goals

Panel has issued its report on how well the nation is progressing toward the goals. The report provides indicators that it says states and policymakers should use (and that the Goals Panel itself uses) to assess our progress toward those beloved goals. Once again, I am pleased to report that the Goals Panel has determined that my family is at-risk, which, of course, means I will someday qualify for federal aid (unless the new Congress turns the programs around!) What do I mean? Well, the first goal, which is "All children will start school ready to learn," includes six conditions, any one of which indicates that your child is "at risk" health- and learning-wise. Last year, I was stunned to find I qualified for two of the six: apparently, more than three siblings can put a child at-risk; and having siblings spaced closer than 18 months apart puts them at risk. I'll let you come to your own conclusions about this social engineering document -- but perhaps you parents who thought you had a happy, healthy family should apply for federal counseling. One thing is sure: funding for the National Goals reporting should be seriously considered for termination.

More Views From the Blob

- Secretary of Labor Robert Reich is proposing \$3,000 "skills grants" to bolster federal employment and training systems. Says Reich "...this represents a radical shift from programs to purchasing power. Instead of feeding the budgets of bureaucracies, federal or state, we'll channel the resources directly into the pockets of ordinary Americans, so they can get the skills they need -- at the time, in the place, in the way that makes sense for them."

We find it incredibly interesting that these "vouchers" for job training, and those proposed for the poor as housing subsidies, are being received as mainstream, while similar support for K-12 education opportunities is being denied to these same ordinary Americans by the current Administration and its allies.

By the way, Reich also said that competition keeps tuition in check. A funny thought.

- Meanwhile, we're finding a new camaraderie among education special interests and conservative leaders on Capitol Hill. It seems that groups like the National School Boards Association are quick to trumpet the benefits of eliminating unfunded mandates. Strange bedfellows!

Information Tid-bits

- How's this for an obvious headline: *Academics is the Key to Curbing Delinquency, Study Suggests* (Education Daily, December 22, 1994).

- The National Catholic Education Association has new statistics available about catholic education, its costs and characteristics. For a copy call (202) 337-6232.
- Another interesting factoid, from Education Week: "precollegiate and higher education [employees] account for more than half of all local government employees and nearly half of all state government workers."

Groups to Look For

- Welcome to the Committee to Review National Standards, headed by Lynn Cheney at the American Enterprise Institute. Dr. Cheney kicked up a fuss over the "proposed" American history standards, and if you haven't seen them, both U.S. News and World Report commentator John Leo and American Enterprise Fellow Ben Wattenberg have done excellent pieces on the standards. John Fonte will be helping Lynn Cheney in her new endeavor as the Executive Director of this new Committee. John is a former U.S. Department of Education staffer that has toiled long and hard for the right approaches to accountability and learning. His number is (202) 862-5919.

- There's been an unusually high amount of talk lately about character education. Many of the calls we get here at the Center are requests for good character education programs, and a number of state legislators have expressed interest in somehow introducing this concept into the schools. If this is a topic that interests you, I recommend to you the Jefferson Center for Character Education in Pasadena, CA. Since its inception, the Jefferson Center has been a leader in providing good, substantial and non-ideological character education programs to schools, with particular success in the inner cities. One of their basic premises, for examples, is that "Good character is not formed automatically; it is developed over time through a sustained process of teaching, example, learning and practice." Like Jefferson himself, the Jefferson Center recognizes the critical role of families, communities, churches and other important civic institutions in the formation of a child's character --- rather than relying on some "expert" that has devised a new definition for sharing or critical thinking. To reach Center President David Brooks, call (818) 792-8130.

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As the new legislatures sign in across the country, keep us posted on the promises and the politics shaping education in your state.

Jeanne
Jeanne Allen