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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 20**

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Dear Friends:

Formation of the Education Leaders Council late last month is an enormous boost for reform. You'll learn more about ELC in this month's issue, as well as about some new proposals, new schools and other efforts that kept many busy this September. With new findings that most people don't think schools are doing as well as they should, and wanting more basics, we start with some tidbits on what many are doing to turn things around.



Challenging Conventional Wisdom

You're in for a treat if you visit one of the nation's newest charter schools, Boston Renaissance. Located in the midst of the city, the charter is operated on contract by the Edison Project. The school's extended-day schedule and concentration on teaching children early and often, is mind-boggling. Its teachers, overseen by Headmaster Barbara Wager, are dynamic and enthusiastic people, many of whom left more comfortable jobs for this exciting work. In short, there is order and discipline in the halls; it is bright, challenging, and inviting. The parents, mostly from poor, inner city homes, are committed and consider themselves fortunate to be among the 600 chosen by lottery from 2,000 applications.

Holy Redeemer School, in inner-city Milwaukee, and countless schools like it nationwide, would prove equally impressive. Nearly half the children attending this private Christian school are there because of the PAVE matching scholarship program, which helps needy children attend the private school of their choosing. In addition, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) contracts with Holy Redeemer to provide education services to 60 of the city's most troubled youths, for which Holy Redeemer claims great success.* As with Boston Renaissance, this school also has a committed faculty, an atmosphere of order, and, not surprisingly, a waiting list. *(CER Note: an estimated 100,000 special education children, across the U.S., are in private schools that are contracted by their school districts, according to Janet Beales of the Reason Foundation).

- *Food for Thought:* Back at MPS, September 29 was Pizza Day, held to make sure as many children as possible showed up to be counted when attendance is taken to determine MPS's share of state and federal funding. The cost must be worth it since it is on the basis of these numbers that MPS's whole take is calculated, no matter if the kids come back tomorrow, or ever. The schools we visited, and thousands like them around the country, don't have to buy pizza to get kids to come to school.

In the Trenches

- Trying to make sense of the **DC Public Schools**, one of DC's I Have a Dream Foundation sponsors, Chris White, has moved fourteen of his "sponsored" children to an inner-city private school, citing the trouble they had learning and the lack of motivation their public school provided. Stats from DC's Office of Educational Accountability, Assessment & Information bear him out. As of May, 1994, only 5 of 17 senior highs met or exceeded the national norm of the California Test of Basic Skills. White, a local businessman, remains committed to funding his children through college, but says he can't wait for the schools to shape up to give these kids what they need to succeed. White makes our Hero of the Month list. (Page 8)

- One of the most productive and, in a way, inspiring reports on school reform comes this month from the **Public Agenda Foundation**, a New York-based survey and educational research firm. *Assignment Incomplete*, which takes the pulse of the nation, paints a realistic picture of how Americans view the state of our schools. Among the findings:

- Several of the questions found that Americans believe private schools are doing a better job instituting higher standards and maintaining order and discipline.
- Nearly six parents in ten would send their children to private schools if they could afford it.
- Nine in ten Americans say teaching the basics is "absolutely essential," although half do not believe that a high school diploma, from their own local public high school, guarantees mastery of those basics.

The group really struck a chord. Their analysis that the public is talking at each other and not to each other is also on the mark. All too often, the nation's leaders think they are going to the communities when they tap local leaders to sit on this or that commission. But only a fraction of the public's views are represented by these so-called leaders. To really understand what is

happening in our schools, one must tap the real people, who live work and struggle daily in their communities. It sounds like that's what Public Agenda did. Call (212) 686-6610 to get the study.

- AFT President Albert Shanker is taking hits from colleagues over his recent **push for high standards**. Though his prescription for standards doesn't fit ours, AFT's leadership in voicing the reality that schools are not holding our children to high enough standards is good for the cause. That's not, however, the feeling of the Great City Schools group, reports *Education Week*. They, like many in the establishment, believe schools' problems stem not from ineffective policies, but from society. The "ability-group tracking" Shanker endorses is undemocratic, they say. In reality, good ability-grouping allows students to fluctuate as they master material, and does not forever relegate them to low-level classes. There are pros and cons on both sides, but it is clear that the way it is being done now does not work for all children, and that most successful programs do take into account the current level at which a child is performing. (Case in point: the John Hopkins *Success for All* Reading program is being used by many schools, including Boston Renaissance.)

- Waterloo. Battles rage in **Wilkesburg, PA and Hartford, CT** over hotly contested school board seats with grass roots reformers up against savvy, union politicians. Both sets of reform slates believe in shaking up the status-quo, and support public-private partnerships to address some of their problems. In the other corner, (as they say in the movies) weighing 500 pounds and looking as mean as a gorilla, are the union-backed candidates -- twenty running in Hartford for five open seats, and a dozen or so in Wilkesburg for four seats held by incumbents. Hartford's primary is October 17. We'll let you know the fallout next month. In the meantime, if you want to help, call Thelma Dickerson, Hartford Board President at (203) 525-6008, or Brian Magan, Wilkesburg School Board Vice President (412) 242-2670.

- A great piece on the **negative impact the textbook industry** has on education comes from the summer edition of the Harvard (yes, Harvard!) Education Letter, and is entirely consistent with what reformers have said for years — that many textbooks are rife with inaccuracies, are neither comprehensive nor sound, and should not be relied upon for providing as much as 75% of the curriculum. And this from William Bennetta, editor of the Textbook Letter out of Sausalito, CA: While there's always political pressure from warring factions who believe not enough or too much has been written about one thing or another, by and large the textbook industry is "determined to alienate no one and please all."

The solution? Well, one option is to abandon most of the state-wide adoption methods and allow school districts as much as 80% leeway in deciding what books they'll use, or how they will teach. Many of the newer, innovative charter schools and some alternative schools do not even use regular textbooks

for every subject. Many do, however, assign classics, or other reading, history or science materials. If we believe in the strength of the local community, we should make that one more piece in the process. Without a truly democratic process, where parents can make some choices about the programs their kids need, this wouldn't always work. But a political battle fought locally is a heck of a lot more productive than one waged in the boardrooms of these publications.

More On Standards

The **Council for Basic Education** has advised UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools (the lead author of the infamous report on national history standards) to take out the bias, revamp the teacher guides, and encourage student-thinking based more on historical fact than on social conjecture. CBE also suggests the impression that these are *national* standards be corrected, to ensure that locales and states understand they are the proper conduit for devising and implementing standards, perhaps using this document and others as a guide, but not as mandate.

A View from the Blob

- In an uncharacteristically anti-establishment speech, the head of the **Washington State Teachers Association** recently scolded members for being out of touch with teachers, and overly concerned with non-academic issues. In a speech earlier this year, C.T. Purdom told his 900-member union that their typical wails blaming poor schools on inadequate funding didn't cut it. "You may be angry," he said. "You may be insulted. You may refuse to admit you are an obstacle to change. But to borrow a line from a former President...the buck stops here."
- The National PTA's summer convention played host to one of the more questionable experts in education policy, Robert M. Huelskamp whose claim to fame is **The Sandia Report**, developed by researchers at the Energy Department's New Mexico Sandia Laboratory (rather an odd place to start an education report). To make a long story short, in the late '80s Huelskamp et al. "proved" the government was suppressing information on the actual progress of schools. This notion eventually caught the attention of the blob which, ever since, has fed on the Sandia report for moral sustenance and confirmation that all is right in American education. Consequently, anyone who supports the Sandia findings winds up as a speaker at conventions and forums, and are regularly quoted by promoters of the status quo.

What a shame the PTA could not find a speaker to more accurately portray the state of American education. In this Monthly Letter, there are half-a-

dozen candidates, including the Public Agenda Foundation, which could give a riveting presentation on the real challenges facing schools.

From the States

- Scaling back **bureaucracy**: Many state education chiefs are eliminating unneeded positions to route more money to the classroom. **Arizona's** Department of Public Instruction has cut 106 positions, roughly 25% of its staff, **Georgia** is down by 65 positions, or 20%, and **Virginia** is undergoing a 48% staff reduction. And in **Pennsylvania** a study committee will be recommending the undoing of many mandates that control school boards. As is found when nearly any top heavy organization is cut down to size, there are no complaints of fewer services, or less efficiency. In fact, chiefs report that their streamlined organizations are more focused than ever before.
- On a similar **decentralization** front, legislation to restore local control to school districts will be a hot topic when legislatures reconvene in '96. When we get a solid tally, we'll let you know where the efforts to boost local district autonomy are most prominent. But if you think this is something your state should be doing, there are plenty of models available, from **Illinois** to **South Dakota**. And as far as reform efforts go, there are few that command as much support from educators as those to help bring accountability to their schools and districts.
- Governor Fob James is sending back **Alabama's** \$1.4 million in Goals 2000 money, citing "potential federal intrusion" into state and local affairs. Governor Pete Wilson may also return **California's** money after public hearings held earlier this year by the legislature turned out thousands of teachers and parents opposed to federal involvement in the state. President Clinton, on the other hand, considers Goals 2000 "one of the principle engines of grass-roots reform" which could benefit "85,000 schools serving 44 million students." Obviously, many states don't agree. Well into two years of grants being distributed, many are beginning to ask what makes Goals 2000 different from other federal money sources.
- How come Cordia Booth can't get the **Denver, CO School Board** to approve her proposed Thurgood Marshall Charter School, but Rex Brown, former Education Commission of the States official got his off the ground with no problem? Brown, a reputable 24-year veteran of ECS will no doubt do a bang-up job at his new P.S. 1. But so would Booth, whose two-year struggle *Education Week* found interesting enough to profile in its 10/4 issue. The Colorado State Board ordered Denver to give Booth's school a chance, but the district says it doesn't have to. Thankfully the dynamic Booth has enough friends and attorneys to continue her good fight. While she does, she remains a teacher at Roscoe C. Hill Middle School. It's struggles like this which remind us that a real

revolution is underway in American education, and as with all wars, there are opposing sides. Which is why the *Cincinnati Enquirer* recently called charter schools "at least a hairline crack in the bureaucratic bunker."

Of course, a lot is strange in **Colorado** these days. A charter schools commission, set up to help the state board work out problems with people who are getting rejected, is packed with officials who oppose charters. Among them, OBE king Bill Spady.

- Speaking of charters, the father of the movement, **Minnesota's** Ted Kolderie, has issued his annual report and forecast on where charters are headed, who's in the way, and what is needed to continue the momentum. If you'd like copy, we'll save Ted the trouble and send it to you for the cost of postage and handling. (\$2.00)
- **Washington, DC** School Superintendent Franklin Smith got his way on September 20 when the board finally voted to allow DC schools to contract out for instructional services. Early this summer, Smith received a vote of 'no confidence' from the local union, but vowed to continue his fight. "[The union] is not going to deter me one iota in my plans," Smith said. "If they resist performance measures, that's a very strong message to the community that they don't have any intention of educating the children. And the whole city should be concerned." 'Nuf said.
- **Words from the Northwest:** A terrific paper by Cascade Policy Institute, a leader in **Oregon's** charter movement, casts the effort in terms of *Monopoly*. Despite the fact that Oregon's DOE opposed charter legislation last session, they now "have their hand out to the federal government" for \$1.5 million in charter school funds, which allows quasi-private schools that still must follow the state's reform plan, thereby playing "the same old game of monopoly.... Oregon... wants to collect \$200 (and then some) but won't let the kids pass go. In monopoly, when one player gets a lot of hotels and motels, it's pretty much over. It's unlikely that player will pass out money to any real competitors. To win... requires upsetting the board, starting a whole new game. That's what charter schools are about -- a new game with new rules. This fall, Oregon kids may collect their \$200, but they will remain jailed by the old system." Cascade's Bridgit Barton reports the feds did pay the money to the DOE at the 11th hour.
- **Miss America Drafted?** Some are questioning the appropriateness of the newly crowned Miss America, **Oklahoman** Shawntel Smith's recent endorsement of the Administration's school-to-work effort. Among those concerned over the apparently political move are her Congressman, a Republican, Rep. Jim Inhofe.

We've got a solution -- for a real look at how school-to-work should operate, how about sending Shawntel on a tour of a dozen or so effective school

systems and charter schools, which have no problem preparing children for a productive adult life? We could save the taxpayers millions by replicating those successes. Any takers?

- Last month we reported on the growing interest by **California** school districts in a new law allowing mandatory uniform policies. We've waited with anticipation for the ACLU to sue, and they finally have, in Long Beach, on behalf of families who claim the policy discriminates against the poor. District officials deny the charge and report they spent \$100,000 on uniforms for needy students. A court date is pending.

- **Arizona's** Superintendent of Public Instruction, Lisa Graham, continues to give the blob fits, this time by proposing a plan to give local schools control over their own funding and programs. The proposal would increase accountability by creating local parent-involved school boards and give schools the ability to hire and fire teachers directly. Graham says the decline of public education tracks directly with the increase in centralization of authority. To respond to the demand for increased local control and greater financial equity she has devised a plan for a uniform tax system to fund, not districts, but individual students, allowing money to follow them to the public or charter school of their choice. "It's a radical program, but I think it can work," says Graham.

Resources *Things to know, things you may need, things we may need*

E-Mail Alert: If you want to contact us via e-mail, we can be reached at cerdc@aol.com. Or check out our new Web Site by going to <http://edreform.com>.

Wanted: Educators or school board members interested in speaking at education forums and conferences. We often are asked for names of people from the trenches who can give an overview of what's happening in the schools and what works and what doesn't. If you'd like to build your resume or share your stories with reform-minded audiences, drop us a line and let us know of your interest.

Wanted: Reform-minded school superintendent, Phoenixville, PA. West of Philly, this district educates 3100 students in four elementary schools and a middle and a high school. The board emphasizes a core curriculum of traditional academics, and seeks a super who will demonstrate leadership through strong decision-making, school code knowledge and organizational skills. Salary competitive. Write to: Superintendent Search, Box 792, Southeastern, PA 19399, by January 12, 1996.

FYI: HOPE for Cleveland's Children is distributing information and pre-application forms for the pilot voucher program to begin September, 1996.

Vouchers will be available to children enrolled in grades K-3. One grade will be added each year, to eventually include grade eight. For information, contact HOPE at (216) 391-4673.

Upcoming Conferences: A forum on competitive contracting for school services, November 17-18, 1995, in Santa Barbara, sponsored by the Reason Foundation. Keynote speakers include Peter Hutchinson, Superintendent in Minneapolis and President, Public Strategies Group; and Doug Becker, President of Sylvan Learning Systems. For information or to register, call Annie Chang at (310) 391-2245.

Heroes of the Month

As you read this issue, you'll find two people who stand out for their commitment to children: Chris White, a Washington, DC businessman and Cordia Booth, a Denver educator. Our gratitude, and thanks goes out to them. We should be inspired by their efforts, and hold them up as role models.

A Personal Anecdote

If you ever wondered about the fitness of Washington insiders to make education policy, you'll love this story. Recently, I was with Deputy Education Secretary Madeleine Kunin on a TV program. We had a lively debate on whether education was good, getting better, or was actually quite bad. She was "astonished" when I insisted there was little to suggest improvement nationwide, and scoffed at the notion that perhaps politics played a role in her saying things were better. After the show, I tried to talk to the Secretary further, but she was impervious and, rather than converse, was miffed I would even try.

When someone is getting a little big for their britches, we say perhaps "they're beginning to believe their own press clips." Lately, we've been deluged with glossy newsletters, and crowing press releases from the Education Department reporting on how much the ED is doing to help schools, without regard to what is really happening at the local level. This smugness is at play throughout education bureaucracies: the "we know best" attitude. Thankfully, Americans are not buying it. As good reforms progress, and more citizens are empowered locally to run the schools, it is clear that the strength of ideas is can be found locally.

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CER will be briefing legislators in several states this fall, meeting with school reform groups throughout the country and responding to your abundant requests for information. Keep us informed. Happy Halloween!

Jeanne
Jeanne Allen