

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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Dear Friends:

As promised last month, we bring you up-to-date coverage during this (finally) glorious spring season of charter school progress, local efforts to disburse authority and decentralize, some notes on standards and more. Our only problem is where to begin and where to end; it's been an incredibly busy thirty days; we're worn out just watching all of you, let alone trying to get work done ourselves. Enjoy!



Charters, Charters, Charters

- **Ohio** is still abuzz, lo these many months, with charter talk, albeit no final action. The Ohio Education Assn. endorsed a bill (believe it or not) that would have allowed for 200 new and 200 conversion schools, yet restrict only conversion schools to collective bargaining controls. The rest of the education establishment cried that the OEA had turned their backs on them. "We thought we were all on the same page," a school boards official remarked (it's called group-think, normally). The state administrators association joined the school boards association in demanding that no funding leave their districts; and in giving school boards sole authority to approve charters. The bill was thus amended further. limiting the number to 200 in total, and leaving local tax dollars in the district if the new charter was not approved there. Even that didn't pass, with those who felt appealed not exactly crusading in favor. The Senate is three votes shy of passage. Word is that the authors will go back to the drawing board to replace passages they negotiated away. It may be the end of May before all is said and done. Looks like a challenge for Ohio Gov. George Voinovich.
- **Massachusetts** gave birth to three more charters: another SABIS school will focus on English and math in Somerville, the Lynn Community Charter is an extended day school, and the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts School in Hadley. Six others are still hanging while the state considers lifting the 25-limit cap, pending the state's budget resolution with is now being debated.
- And in the category of best performing saga in a charter school, the Oscar goes to Baobab Charter School, which has been approved by the **Boulder, CO**, Valley School District -- sort of. Baobab offers a high school program with intensive after school programs of mentoring and intervention, for children at-risk. The district said Baobab could not serve at-risk youth on its own. So in its conditional approval of Baobab, it says

the new charter cannot offer any programs beyond the regular school day, and requires the school to “cooperate” with district administrative staff for any programs to serve at-risk children. The district board also limited the contract to 3 years, and stated it could not open until 1997-98.

It gets better. The Baobab organizers were not asked if these conditions were acceptable. The conditional approval states that the district will charge the school \$40,000 for the cost of educating special ed and ESL students, with only \$408 per child going to the school for each of its 92 at-risk students. That amounts to just the federal government’s 7% share of educating these students. As best said by Dr. Canel Analucindo Jaramillo, one of Baobab’s organizers, the Boulder Valley school district was “asking us to pay them for services that are free, by law, to all students in public schools. And they were asking us to do this on 93% less revenue than other schools.”

It just so happens that the person in charge of these requirements for the district superintendent, a Dr. Lydia Swize, is married to Myron Swize, who runs the state’s special education office. Organizers see a conflict of interest. Baobab may appeal the decision to the State board if the local is not willing to rectify their approval. But they are hopeful for passage of legislation that will strengthen a charter school’s hand in dealing with less-than-friendly district officials.

- **New Hampshire** activity is starting to build, with final regulations for the state’s new charter law done, and several school districts beginning to look at proposals. In the state that most relishes its local control, New Hampshire must first approve the concept locally, before groups can submit plans to the school board. Once each town gives the green light to charters, the school board must act. The State board then decides, and if approved, the charter goes back to the people of the district for final approval. So far, Londonberry is exploring the creation of a charter, having voted yea for a school that would emphasize mathematics, foreign languages and technology. The town of Oyster River voted no, after a contentious meeting where many supporters walked out, leaving the teacher union and its allies the majority vote.

- **Louisiana’s** recently elected Governor, Mike Foster, is proposing the creation of 50 special schools that would be free from most regulation. These new charter schools would have to be approved by the state board. The fact that he’s willing to expand the state’s fairly new law so soon is a good sign. Up to eight districts are permitted to start an unlimited number of charters. Twenty groups have already expressed interest. The new expanded charters would receive only state funds, not local monies. So there’s little to fret about on the part of locals who fear massive funding losses -- but they’re fretting anyway. (N.B. Charter authority Louann Berlein is now working for the Governor. We wish her well.) In the meantime, leaders in the Jefferson Parish of New Orleans are looking to open the first. They want to provide an alternative school for 110 expelled students, believing the freedom permitted will allow them to get these kids on sound footing.

- **Connecticut** took another run at both school choice and charters this year, having gotten very close to both in years gone by. A strong piece of charter legislation is pending. Both unions are lobbying heavily for restrictions to the bill, including collective bargaining and a ban on employing for-profit firms to operate schools. State Senator Kevin B. Sullivan (D-West Hartford) is not wowed by their arguments. He said the union “is only supporting change which would contribute to weak and ineffectual legislation... The issue

is the ability of this to be truly grass roots and not part of the existing bureaucracy." An effort to expand a public school choice program in Hartford to private schools is also under consideration.

- **Florida's** legislature has been hot on the education trail, but very divided about what to do about reform. Pending are a charter bill that would permit a wide variety of new and conversion schools, yet limited to school board approval (*Monthly Letter* #24), an open enrollment bill to require school districts to offer parents options, a bill to make it easier to get disruptive kids booted, and some attempts to re-focus lottery money on extras, not the basics. The Senate Education Committee also passed voucher legislation, but the House has refused to take it up.
- Charter End Notes: **Washington state** did not pass charter legislation by the time the legislature recessed, giving voters the option in November to decide on I-177 for themselves. **Oregon** enthusiasts have filed initiative 64, which would authorize up to 35 charter schools through next year and an unlimited number thereafter. Schools can be approved by districts or community colleges, with appeals to the state. Signatures are being gathered to meet a July 5 deadline. Call Dick Meinhard at 3957 East Burnside, Portland, 97214. Ph. (503) 234-4600 for info.

Mistakes: Yes, we know we make them... Thanks to the reader who pointed out our incorrect usage of the word less rather than fewer, and apologies go out for the wrong tense and grammar on occasion.....One important correction was just discovered from *November's Letter* (# 21): on spending, we reported that the OECD's rank of US spending, when accounting for purchasing power parity against other countries, is \$6,984. That is actually the figure for higher ed. For K-12, it is \$4,909, in 91-92 dollars, ahead of all G-7 nations except Canada... Finally, the Wisconsin-based PRESS (Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools) group can be reached at (414) 453-8116. Burn the other number if you have it; the local bagel guy is going nuts with all your calls!

A Word to the Wise

"Tell me if there is another bill out there that does more than this to bring the public back into education." Rep. Bryan Sullivant, Colorado, referring to House passage of a bill to create five charter districts.

"Reform efforts are very hard to come by with an establishment." Tom Cammeret, Marblehead Charter (a school that saw 500 applicants for 7 teaching slots, leading Tom to remark that the only creaming going on in charters is that of teachers.)

Union Diatribes

Much has been said lately about the power of unions to dictate school policy far beyond basic employment rights. News reports are blowing the whistle on counterproductive labor policies, with union responses ranging from the AFT's cries of "yellow-journalism," to the NEA calling a U.S. News piece "the equivalent of a drive-by shooting." The public is rightly confused. But the press must be on to something. NEA prez Keith Geiger's weekly column of 4/14 responds to public criticism of tenure by suggesting that the union helps get more bad people out of the classroom by encouraging

them to leave long before expensive proceedings are necessary. Tenure, he says, is the way to protect good teacher who fall prey to parental allegations of unfair grading, or other nonsense. (Not mentioned are the cases in which unions spend huge sums to defend those deemed incompetent.)

So to clear up some of the confusion, we offer this, from Cleveland. Like many beleaguered school districts, Cleveland has its problems -- more than 20 different board members and 10 superintendents in 10 years, it is nearly bankrupt. A state auditor's report says it could have a \$1.4 billion deficit in eight years. Yet Cleveland's teachers are among the highest paid in the state, at about \$41,000, with "generous benefits and work rules," adding to it, according to the *Columbus Dispatch*. The same union contracts that guard these benefits (which are well-deserved by some), also bans district use of private firms, meaning maintenance workers can make as much as \$52,000, roughly 50% more than most. Yet teacher turnover there is low, and insiders tell us that few principals dare attempt teacher dismissals because the union has proven they are about as effective at getting them off the hook as Robert Shapiro.

If collective bargaining were such an innocent process, Washington state teachers would not have to wonder why their dues money was extracted for political purposes, despite a 1994 law forbidding it. The Evergreen Freedom Foundation reported that the WEA loaned \$162,255 to the PAC after a law was enacted forbidding automatic payroll deductions for political purposes. The membership in the WEA-PAC dropped from 45,000 to 8,900, resulting in the PAC's inability to pay back the loan. Thus WEA instituted a new \$12 fee for a "Community Outreach Program," to fund locales to carry out "politically-related activities in local communities." The \$12 is identical to the political check-off previously banned, thus they did an end run around the law -- without member approval. Upon reporting this, the WEA attacked Evergreen for being anti-public education.

Julia Steiny, a columnist in Providence, RI and a former school board member says it this way: "Teachers would argue that the bad apples are tolerated because the administration doesn't do its job. They're right. However, in Providence, the methods for dismissing a poorly performing teacher are so cumbersome to execute, so hopeless in arbitration, few bother. Of course, they should make the effort anyway. But the truth is, the system protects poor administrators, too."

In the Trenches

- Too many UFO sitings? **Bangor, Maine** school committee vice-chairman, and a big wig in the state school boards group, Phyllis Shubert, recently "flamed" in an op-ed that the idea that public school choice will send children "flocking from one school system to another in search of a better education... is naive. It hasn't happened anywhere else." (Never mind Minnesota, where 15% of children choose, or Florida where last month, an unprecedented 7,826 students applied for 2,154 slots in 20 magnet schools, a 25% increase from 1995). Shubert says charter school programs do nothing but require allegiance to "... the segregation inherent in charter schools." Remember the Twilight Zone theme? Couldn't help but hum it when I heard this one.

- We haven't looked in on Chicago lately, where there now seems to be a whole lot of shakin' goin' on. The state House has approved a bill to allow the **Chicago school board** to approve new alternative schools, and tighten up the requirements for becoming a principal, in order to avoid hiring anyone with a bad track record. Both measures are being fought in the Senate, where passage is questionable. Back at the ranch, elections for the local school councils will take place soon, yet there has been a precipitous drop in the number of resident interested, from 17,000 in 1989, to 9,000 in 1993, to only about 1,500 now, for 4,200 open seats. There's still time to file, but there's no question that the lack of interest reflect what many know about Chicago's much heralded school reform act: there's little power for councils, lots of infighting with unions and in short, little respect for common people helping to advise schools. Unless real mandate relief comes quick, and real accountability is assigned to go along, the democratic process is not apt to improve.
- But Texas hasn't heard, and school officials are struggling to **revamp advisory councils** that were mandated in 1991. The problem appears to be the balance of power, but even after that is addressed, people are coming together not necessarily because they share a vision for a school, but because their children happen to be going to that school and they had best get involved. For some real fun, look at New York City's supposedly decentralized community school districts, where there is considerable authority, but machine politics on the district councils still run rampant, making it tough for new comers to break through. Combine that with all sorts of iron clad union contracts, and you lose the real meaning of decentralization.
- The Hartford, CT school board, dominated by reformers, has implemented a path-breaking policy guiding **principal contracts**. That city is the only place where principals will be meritoriously compensated based on the results of students' standardized test scores. A bonus pool will be divided accordingly. Principals' contracts have been modified to reflect the new "merit pay" plan. The unions there balked, and the head of the principals' association called it an "insult."
- Higher education is **rethinking remedial education**. The University of Mass. and its affiliates have picked up the trend set by Florida, Virginia, and California, stating it will severely restrict courses in high school math, reading and writing. Only 10% of freshmen would be permitted to enroll in such courses next year, and 5% the following, subject to periodic review. Nationally, 75% of colleges offer remedial work, and about one-third of freshmen take the courses, according to the *Boston Globe*, whose expose sparked MA officials to act. Asked if this would hurt students, the state chancellor said, "We're channeling students into what will be a better opportunity. Students needing ... remediation will be encouraged to apply to community colleges... you may not reduce remediation, but you will improve the strength of the system."
- Detroit is disposing of "**social promotions**," a procedure where children have been passed on to the next grade regardless of readiness. Starting next year, students will have to pass tests to determine their mobility. It's a good move, but as with the subject of standards at the National Education Summit, the best standards cannot alone change the overall character of the school unless the delivery system is changed to allow the school -- and the students -- to respond to the results.
- **Wilkinsburg** school officials got good news from the Commonwealth Court's March decision that the teacher's union was not "aggrieved" by the Secretary of

Education's decision to approve an alternative education plan, opening the way for teachers to be furloughed and Alternative Public Schools Inc. to run Turner Elementary. The union had petitioned the court for the right to participate in the Secretary's decision. A court date to hear arguments on the broader issue of whether privatization is permissible under PA law is pending.

- Sherry Cormier-Kuhn of Royal Oak, Michigan is campaigning for legislation requiring that annual **school elections** be combined with general municipal elections. Of course, regardless of when an election is held, no concerned citizen should ignore the responsibility to vote, no matter the inconvenience. But that does not deny that oddly-scheduled elections obscure the public focus on important issues and result in low voter turnout. Nor does it deny the fact that far too many special interests rely on quirky elections to keep their candidates in. Combine them.

- Belated applause to **Oxbridge, MA Superintendent** Michael Ronan, who was featured in a *New York Times* piece in January, titled "*The Ramparts of a Little Revolution:*" "Mr. Ronan is changing the role of the town's schools [by] shaping programs to meet families' needs," such as providing vouchers to parents to arrange tutoring for their children as an option to district services, and for home school parents to pay for books and other supplies. "I understand the policy implications," Michael said, "and I understand why it's threatening the bureaucracy. But... it's important to be open to change." I agree. That's why I'm changing our applause to a standing ovation complete with whoops, foot-stomping and flag waving.

- **And on the school choice front:**

The Wisconsin Supreme Court voted 3-3 on the **Milwaukee Choice Program**, and sent it back to a lower court for a decision. Meanwhile, oral arguments on the challenge to **Cleveland's school choice plan** are scheduled for June 24, in Columbus.

Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke has gotten fed up, and is committed to finding ways to make the schools more responsive to his city's children, more quickly. If that means permitting children to have choices among private schools, he's prepared to do it. Schmoke, who has shown his reform stripes more than a few times, with innovations like the Barclay school and support for the EAI venture to name two, has appointed a school choice task force. A report is due in June.

And Some Miscellany

Just when you thought you'd seen everything, we noticed this for sale: The **Bullying** Prevention Handbook: A Guide for Teachers, Principals, and Counselors. "A comprehensive, step-by-step bullying intervention model...assessment and evaluation tools for your anti-bullying efforts...ways to involve the families of bullies and scapegoats in resolving conflicts..."

Students who choose, do better. That was the summation of an evaluation of the **Educational Choice Charitable Trust** program, an Indianapolis effort providing private scholarships to low-income children which sparked the nationwide movement to more of

the kind. The Hudson Institute compared current Indianapolis public school (IPS) students in the area, with children who left to make a choice. While all the usual things were confirmed: more parental involvement, higher satisfaction, higher attendance; most impressive were the achievement findings: reading and language scores for IPS students showed a steady decline between grades 3-8, and a steady decline in math from grades 2-8. Private school students in the Choice program experienced steady increases in scores in all three subjects grades 2-8. Most of the participants earn less than \$20,000 a year, and single-parent homes are over-represented.

For those reformers interested in the choice movement -- public or private, Stanford University professor Terry Moe's book, *Private Vouchers*, synthesizes the evaluations of the four largest, best-established such programs, and sheds new light on the question of equity on the poor. You won't find a more accurate accounting of the children and the effects of their choices than in Terry's book. (Contact Hoover Institution Press, (415) 723-3373 for info).

How's this for irony? The National Education Summit (which is not commented on this month because: a. you've probably heard enough already, and, b. we're happy it happened but waiting to see the results) was held at the end of March, and a sound policy statement regarding standards adopted. The emphasis was on state, not national standards, and nothing was said about **Goals 2000**, even by the President. Thus it was amazing to discover that one of the many follow-up meetings was being funded by a Goal 2000 planning grant. That's right: a program (which received a couple of million dollars) went to a coalition of the BLOB: including the CCSSO, NASBE, and the NGA. Of course, most of these were the most vociferous in their lobbying for Goals 2000, presumably because it really helped jump-start standards-setting. Try this one on for size: could it be their support came in return for money, and the opportunity to be players? It is those folks who will be meeting in Milwaukee in mid-May to discuss follow-up and implementation strategies.

Beating back bureaucracy: Hooray for charter star Yvonne Chan, principal of East LA's Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, for her support of a proposition that would restrict **LA central bureaucracy** spending to 5% of total per-pupil spending, ensuring more money flows to instructional activities. Chan knows bureaucracy well; her most recent woes involve the school district trying to withhold federal school lunch money on the grounds that she wants to spend it differently. That same district is trying to penalize her for saving money, by reducing other reimbursements, arguing that cost savings at Vaughn should offset what the children would normally get. After this Children's Rights 2000 initiative is behind voters in November, the next one should be an effort to ensure that direct accountability for spending and achievement begins and ends and the schoolhouse door.

There are over 60,000 students attending charter schools nationwide! So says the Center's new **National Charter School Directory**, the most exhaustive list of its kind, with brief descriptions of most of the nation's 271 charter schools in operation since 1995, and others that have been approved but not yet opened. The directory is available free to charter school operators (1 each, please), and \$9.95 plus shipping and handling for the general audience. (Of course, if you're a CER sponsor or patron, you'll receive this as one of your membership benefits at no cost). Call our help-line at 1-800-521-2118 to obtain a copy.

And finally...

....the Don't Worry, Be Happy Hall of Fame is proud to announce the induction of two new members: Cynthia Patrick (a writer) and Robert Calfee (a Stanford U. professor of ed.) whose recent writings make nearly identical claims about the condition of education a current hall-of-famers Berliner, Bracey, and Biddle; they just say it with a few more statistics, and argue that it's not that we're doing any worse, it's just that our standards have risen. Would that it were so!



MARK YOUR CALENDARS! The Education Leaders Council national education reform conference will be held September 15-17 in Boston, MA. Details will be forthcoming. See you next month!!!

Jeanne Allen