

Dear Friends:

Since the beginning of the school year, we've been more inundated than ever with calls for help, and stories of efforts that hold great promise. It's clear that people from all walks are motivated and getting involved in reform's quest. This month we look closely at the rhetoric in the school reform wars, and ask your help in solving a few mysteries. We know you have solutions we've never thought of!



#### A Comment on the Culture

- It's hard to believe that small children's affections could be so damned by school officials; kissing girls is sexual harassment, a stunning all-girls school in New York City is discriminatory toward boys, says the ACLU, and midol is a drug. Wow! Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* had a wonderful commentary on the whole thing. Taking off on the basal readers of old, he presented the following spoof;

**See Dick and Jane....See Dick kiss Jane....See Jane hire an attorney...  
Run, Dick, Run!**

#### Speaking of Sad Commentaries...

- There's good reason why parents and educators continue to be frustrated by the lack of high expectations placed on students. Jeff Flake, head of an Arizona think tank, took his frustration to paper upon receiving a flyer in his kindergarten daughter's backpack, entitled "**When Do You Teach Reading?**" It goes like this:

- *"When a child has the chance to hear poetry and one good story after another, day after day...**They are being taught to read!***

- *When their year is a series of mind stretching, eye-opening, eye-filling trips...helping them know more solidly about their world...**They are being taught to read!***

- *When a child hears good adult language; when they have the fullest, freest chance to use their own language...**They are being taught to read!***

- *When they create with blocks; communicate with paint...use their body freely as a means of expression...**They are being taught to read!***

- *When a child stares - fascinated at a picture or looks ever so carefully at a scale in a store or at the life in his aquarium...**They are being taught to read!***

- *When they hammer ever so carefully at the workbench, fashioning their battleship...They are being taught to read!*
- *When they use their whole body; two eyes, two hands, two arms, two legs, and knees and feet to pull themselves [sic] up a scary slanted climbing board...They are being taught to read!"*

Here's an offer: Let's have our own cooperative project to come up with ways in which parents can judge whether their child is truly *being taught to read*. Send us your one-line suggestions and we'll send them to Jeff for his school, and to anyone else who needs a refresher. We'll start you off:

*When a child has the chance to identify the beginning and ending sounds of his or her favorite words...They are being taught to read!*

- **Remember the *Screwtape Letters*?** Perhaps one of our greatest contemporary authors, C.S. Lewis, gave a glimpse through *Screwtape* long ago of what some think has already happened in American public education. Charles Hosler of Fearington Village, NC, wrote that "Lewis' 1950 essay titled, 'Screwtape Proposes a Toast,' provides a forecast of our public education system that, unfortunately, has been realized in recent decades. Hosler goes on to quote Lewis:

*What I want to fix your attention on is the vast overall movement toward the discrediting, and finally the elimination of every kind of human excellence — moral, cultural, social or intellectual. And is it not pretty to notice how 'democracy' (in the incantatory sense) is now doing for us the work that was once done by the most ancient Dictatorships, and by the same methods?*

*...The basic principle of the new education is to be that dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious pupils. That would be 'undemocratic' ...Children who are fit to proceed to a higher class may be artificially kept back, because the others would get trauma... being left behind. The bright pupil thus remains democratically fettered to his own age group throughout his school career, and a boy who could be capable of tackling Aeschylus or Dante sits listening to his coeval's attempts to spell out A CAT SAT ON A MAT.*

*In a word, we may reasonably hope for the virtual abolition of education. When 'I'm as good as you' has fully had its way all incentives to learn and all penalties for not learning will vanish...We shall no longer have to plan and toil to spread imperturbable conceit and incurable ignorance among men. The little vermin themselves will do it for us.*

With this in mind, please ponder the following vignettes of education trends in '96:

- First the SAT was re-centered; now the PSAT is being changed to accommodate perceived inequities among test takers, namely girls, who don't score as well in math. Complaints by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing and the US D.o.E's Office of Civil Rights led the College Board to make the test more gender-fair. We wonder if OCR ever pressured the publishers and the NCTM to demand more exacting standards of all children.
- The ill-conceived policy of social promotion is alive and well in America, forcing many unwilling teachers to pass children who don't deserve to be passed. *The Los Angeles Times* reported one case at a Ukiah, CA high school, where 40% of incoming freshman failed at least one course, leading 75 teachers to publicly decry "the problem...of some schools to set and enforce academic and disciplinary standards." Teachers surveyed by the American Federation of

Teachers said that 20% of their students should not have been promoted to their class, and nearly half of urban teachers said they had students who had been socially promoted.

- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that America does rank above every other industrialized country in one unique aspect of education: 58% of public school employees don't teach.
- A Maryland commission found roughly half of all its college students take at least one remedial class. This is consistent with nearly 75% of higher education. According to State Board of Ed. President, Christopher T. Cross, "Kids in high poverty schools are getting A grades...These kids are getting hoodwinked into believing they deserve A's and B's, and then they get to college and have to take remedial classes."

### ... and Back to the Real Issues

- The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future says (based on startling conclusions on the lack of preparedness of the vast majority of teachers) that key to a **better teaching corps** is more stringent certification by national boards and councils, not more encouragement and accountability on a local level for rewarding good teaching. Recommendations include adopting more rigorous accreditation for schools of ed., and requiring teachers to meet standards developed by an Orwellian-sounding Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium to receive a license. There was scant attention paid to the success of alternative certification programs in states like New Jersey, where high caliber professionals who do not hold standard teaching certificates, take limited pedagogy courses, do an apprenticeship, and with their bachelors degree become certified to teach. To its credit, the commission did say that teachers' undergraduate training be concentrated in their field of teaching in order to gain certification. But exactly what else the new definition of certification will entail remains to be seen, particularly if responsibility is placed in the hands of the inmates running the asylum.
- One who has prepared to become a teacher at a Michigan University recently wrote a revealing piece in the *Detroit News* (9/29/96). Andrew Titus says his "**Introduction to Teaching**" course was full of testimonials of life in the public schools by teachers, rather than the "objective and...scientific aspects of teaching." Students were asked to make a "collage of their feelings on an aspect of education." They also take, as a prerequisite to acceptance in the program, an oral 'Teacher Perceiver Test.' It asks questions that are rated by what "good" teachers' answers have been, such as 'Are you organized?' "...the questions require a highly developed knowledge of 'correct' classroom procedure or agreement with a certain pedagogy." Titus asked 15 of his classmates if this personality test was a good barometer of how one would be as a teacher. The answers he got suggested otherwise; you just have to go "through the motions" to pass, said one. "You just have to lie," said another. Such requirements to get into the program are nonsense. His advice? "Scrap the personality test, raise the grade point average required for admission, stop imposing content-free courses...and let them take meat and potatoes courses in their fields of specialization." Hardly what the commission referenced above concluded.

...and

- Is **school choice** really the antithesis of public education? The opponents lately remind us of chicken little. Yes, robust dialogue and debate are healthy for democracy. But can we have a little balance, please?

The place: *Cleveland*. The time: *one of growing dissatisfaction with public schools*. The issue: *school choice*. Nearly 1,800 poor children began the year in private schools of their choice, for about \$2,500 and less. Nearly 7,000 actually wanted to, because they didn't feel they were getting a good education where they were. If you're an opponent of that, put that aside for a moment and consider the following "statements" by the head of the American Civil Liberties Union:

*Private schools "tend to avoid students with the most problems, a luxury public schools do not have...the notion that under a voucher system, parents will be able to choose 'the best school' ... is a fantasy if 'the best school' can refuse ... the child."*

*"No voucher system that has been passed or proposed pays the entire tuition at private schools."*

*"The voucher movement is a cynical attempt to grab tax dollars for the relatively wealthy and for church schools at the expense of public-school budgets."*

Keep in mind this guy apparently has a staff of smart attorneys, embroiled in suing states that enact programs like Cleveland's. So where does he get the idea that only the best and brightest are picked? Take a look at pieces done by ABC, NBC and CBS on parochial schools and you'll see the opposite—that is, schools that are helping the most disadvantaged. And what of his tuition claims? Milwaukee parents would be intrigued to learn they supposedly paid more. As for being wealthy, I'm sure they'd like to know where their money is stashed so they can go out and buy a steak for a change.

- Speaking of school choice, we'd be remiss if we didn't tell you about **our own poll**, conducted for the Center by Int'l. Communications Research (ICR), in Media, Pennsylvania. The spate of polls toward summer's end proclaiming that indeed the public is happy and they don't want substantive reform efforts to come their way left us suspicious, particularly when we looked at the questions. So we did a poll and found that indeed, people are overwhelmingly concerned about the quality of education in their own and others' schools; 75 percent said they did not think children were receiving the education they need and 93 percent said the quality of their public schools could be improved somewhat (49%) or a great deal (44%).

Charter schools were supported by 66 percent of the 1,017 individuals we polled, 71 percent said the feds should have a minor or no role in making decisions for schools, and, no matter how you ask it (and we asked it three different ways) the public favors allowing parents to send their children to the school of their choice, with 73 percent favoring "allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted for their child's education and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing." This just goes to show you that you can't take all the polls you read *too seriously*...

- The Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association (PMA) and the Urban League of Philadelphia have partnered in a **private scholarship program for low-income**

**children.** Says Urban League president Robert Sorrell, "We believe this program will allow urban families to select the educational program that best meets the needs of their children, and affords them equal access to educational opportunities." At the other end of the state, PMA has created the Pittsburgh Urban Scholarship Help (PUSH), hoping the program will continue to grow far into the future.

- Taking a page from auto company history, **Chrysler president and CEO Robert Lutz** told residents of Michigan last month he believes in competition among schools. He argues, "Unfair competition forced the company to face certain realities and make certain changes that it would never have done so on its own. Failure is a great teacher and motivator; success has little to teach you...A major goal of education reform must be to enhance the stature of teachers. It should do more to empower and reward them. For reasons that I can't fathom... there is a myth abroad in the land that competition is a threat to teachers...When we shield teachers from competition, we shield them from opportunity...They deserve the same chance other professionals have -- to be able to offer their services to the highest bidder." Lutz is a rare breed among the large, stoic corporations that seek peace at any price.

### **From the Trenches**

- Headline of the Month: DC SCHOOL NUMBERS A MYSTERY.(10/4/96, *The Washington Post*)  
"The new chief financial officer for the DC school system said yesterday that he does not know how many people it employs and does not know how to find out because its records are in such disarray...[Superintendent] Smith ...said he also had not been able to make an accurate count in more than five years as a superintendent."
- The race is on in Seattle for voters' affections to Proposition 177, The Charter Schools Initiative, which would allow parents and teachers to free their public schools, and to start new charter-like schools. The anti-177 campaign is in full tilt now, with opponents, like the ACLU, arguing that schools able to attract parents by choice, and able to exist only by choice would, well, you've heard it all before... do those destructive things to public education. Where 177 differs from most charter laws is that there is no contract by which sponsors hold these independent public schools accountable. There is however, a yearly licensure requirement that the schools prove they are meeting minimum standards. And there are the parents, who if dissatisfied, can remove their children and put the school out of business. Support is growing, and between that and another ballot proposal to establish vouchers, the voters are going to have their heads full with media wars by the time they reach the polls. The ideas in 177 are good ones. While some charter enthusiasts think it goes a bit too far, they haven't been as privy to politics in Washington state where getting a strong charter law passed has been derailed by one or two legislative "leaders" beholden to unions. We'll watch with great interest.
- Missoula, Montana's NEA union affiliate shows how low some of the public discourse has become on issues surrounding reform. The head of a better government group in Montana, Rob Natelson, who supports school choice among other things, is a frequent target of their efforts. In encouraging members to attend their Educators' Conference last year, they spoofed David Letterman's top ten Reasons. Number ten

was 'NEWT won't be there.' Number 1? 'You can toilet paper Rob Natelson's house.' Unbelievable.

- Does your school district ask for your health insurance information so they may bill services to the carrier? If you're not sure, you may want to ask. Parents in Riverside, CA were fuming recently over a memo sent home outlining the district's new policy of requiring the school to bill private insurance carriers for services first, in order to qualify for Medicaid. The consent document authorizes the insurance carrier to directly communicate with the school district for payment. If there were none, the district would seek reimbursement from Medicaid. Riverside expects "little revenue to be gained from private insurance." (How much is 'little'?)

Would some, kind school official please explain what happened to the nurses that we are told are running up the cost of education because they are now nearly universally provided? Has Medicaid billing been a long-standing practice? And what of the school clinic that does things not authorized by parents, and bills for insurance anyway? Are we overreacting? Help!

- Houston's Superintendent Rod Paige is taking some grief for making some practical moves toward solving a severe overcrowding problem. Paige announced during the summer that he would move to contract with private entities, and did so, by sending 200 children to Varnett School, at a cost less than not only the per pupil expenditure by a few hundred dollars (\$3,575 vs. \$4,677) but also by avoiding capital construction costs that the district does not have.

## On Charters

A spate of activity surrounding charter school efforts around the country paints a broad picture of exciting reform activity. Here's a run-down of the last month or so around the country:

- A group of **Florida** parents and educators approached the Winter Springs district about turning a huge, new high school into a charter school with four separate campuses. Don McCammon, president of Florida Charter Schools, Inc. argued that the break up of the school would be a deterrent to crime, and a spur to more parental involvement and higher achievement. With a variety of day and night programs that include parents in decision-making, the concept sounds terrific. Unfortunately, the Board is unable to see how a charter school fits into a high growth area without sacrificing something. How 'bout trying *more* charters?
- **Alaska** has six groups interested in charter schools, ranging from one focused on phonics and direct instruction, to another based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Alaskans for Educational Choice held a forum profiling successes and remarks of enthusiasts. They are working to lift the cap on charters, create a board for charter schools, and guarantee equal funding for charters. To show you just how hard some people will work to obtain education alternatives, one organizer, Linda Sharp, has bided the last four years on a waiting list for her daughters to get in an optional program in the Anchorage School District, written some 60

published letters, and crusaded extensively around the state to see her dreams of a charter realized.

- **Texas'** law allows for the state to approve 20 open-enrollment charter schools that operate outside of districts, and gives school districts unlimited authority to approve campus charters. So it is with baited breath than many have waited for the first district there to approve a charter (the state already gave the go-ahead to all 20 that it could sponsor). Thus the approval by Dallas officials of Prairie Creek Academy is welcome news. The new charter plans to open as soon as January '97. Its founder is Cindy Oliphant, a teacher looking for release from years of bureaucracy. The school will target children who score at the low-end of tests, are limited-English speaking or are from poorer homes. Prairie Creek will run three weeks longer, and have only 15 children per teacher. Said one school board member, "we are very willing to admit that there are children whose needs are not being met in overcrowded conditions."

- As **North Carolina's** deadline for charter applications draws near, there are dozens of applications in the works, and dozens of roadblocks being calculated at the same time. Most startling of all was the move by UNC system president C.D. Spangler to forbid all of his schools to approve charters, something that has taken people aback. Then there's the North Carolina State Board of Education, who issued a dictum not found in the legislation that in order to qualify for consideration, charter proposers must seek a "statement of impact" from the local superintendent telling what kind of financial and other impact the new school would have on them. (Has anyone asked you lately to provide a statement of impact that the school district bureaucracy has on your kids?) The Department of Education dragged its heels in even releasing the 800 charter applications it eventually mailed on September 9, setting people's planning back considerably. Maybe this political maneuvering is another reason why they call it the Tar Heel state!

- **Pennsylvania** is a flurry of activity, with charter forums scheduled across the state. They've begun accepting applications for \$25,000 planning grants from funds the state allocated last year despite its failure to pass a charter bill. There's still a weak one brewing, but legislators are apparently close now to realizing the merits of strong charters. As we've seen elsewhere, the number and quality of interested parties is overwhelming. One gentleman from the Amish country has jumped at the chance to save his neighborhood school in what looked to be its final hour, by proposing it become a charter school and remain open. What a wonderful way to not only keep the school, but tailor it to the needs of children in that community!

- If you ever find yourself asked to specify exactly how the unions impede reform, try this one on for size: The **Milwaukee Teachers union** says the district's approval of Highland Community charter school is unconstitutional because the district gained its power from a budget bill, rather than a separate education bill (read: the union doesn't have much power with the finance committees, so it must be illegal). The union is also protesting the district's decision to expand its contracting with private schools of at-risk children to include those not at-risk, to help curb overcrowding. The union approved of the effort to get at-risk kids out of the classroom, but now it's balking. The NEA's new president Bob Chase says the union is so involved in school reform efforts that it has spent \$70 million over the last ten years on school improvement. You mean like this lawsuit, Bob?

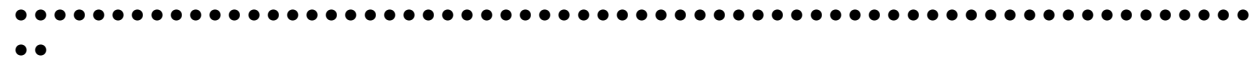
- **New Jersey** has over 28 pre-applicants ready to start a charter school. It's law permits 135 to begin over a four-year period. The Commissioner has final approval. Most of the interest is coming from urban areas, like Newark and Jersey City, with healthy interest in the suburbs, too. There's the Ernie Boyer Charter Basic School, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Academy Charter, a residential school, the Hoboken Charter School for kids in K-12, and a Rutgers University charter aimed at K-8 youngsters in Camden. None of those proposed so far are going to the local board for approval, which must make existing schools comply with regulations relating to collective bargaining, a union pre-condition the legislature needed for passage.

- **Georgia's** Harold Barnett, Cartersville Superintendent, has taken his four schools charter, promising to boost basic skills achievement to record numbers in the state. Barnett's move is quite dynamic in a state considered to have a very weak law where only school boards can approve, and only existing public schools can apply.

**And some words of wisdom on the same...**

*"No change, no progress, no guts, no glory."* Udo Schultz, Vice President, Sabis Int'l.

*"Whether the schools are large or small, they are organizing into smaller learning communities. We call this the "Cheers" concept: the best education takes place when everyone knows your name."* Neil Sullivan, Boston Private Industry Council



I wanted to tell you about a rather hostile conversation I had with someone in Denver on a charter school matter, but the whole thing is just too boring to go into in detail. Suffice it to say that some people will do just about anything to have the last word! Which is what I'm doing now. Happy Halloween!

Jeanne Allen