

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 41**

HOLIDAY, 1998

Dear Friends:

Rather than reach you during the December rush, we elves opted to wait, take our time (and omit those editing errors to give you wonderful nitpickers a holiday, too!) and still say Happy Holidays while the advent wreaths were still warm. So, here we are in red trim and with lots of juicy news to start the New Year off right. This month, we talk about the Center a bit more than usual, mainly as a “year in review” in response to questions and comments piling up over the last year. Please abide our one partially “Center-centered” issue. We hope this helps address why we’re here and how you can take advantage of the Center in the future.



Resolutions

It goes without saying that a New Year wouldn’t be the same without resolutions. We renew our resolution of last year to work harder at copy editing, a task we do take seriously but often fall short of in the face of encroaching deadlines and unexpected policy demands. [Hint: Contributions to the “Get CER an in-house Editor fund” are only too happily accepted.] Other CER goals:

Resolved, we will join together ever more local people and groups working toward state and local reform;

Resolved, we will cover even more of your stories, successes, and notable accomplishments so that others are better informed;

Resolved, we will ensure that the inside scoop on everything being done to implement — or hinder — reform gets to the right people, and is well publicized;

Resolved, we will seek and act on opportunities to create true reform that allows greater access, accountability and excellence in American schools.

What’s New at the Center

From time to time you may call us — or visit our Web site at <http://edreform.com> — but not be sure what you need. To start the year off right, we offer this very partial listing of CER services and resources:

THE CHARTER SCHOOL WORKBOOK, *Your Roadmap to the Charter School Movement*: If you haven't received yours, it's not too late. This exhaustive compendium of the research, the resources and the action in charter schools today has been praised far and wide. Said the very inventor of the charter concept, Mr. Ray Budde, "*Strong in substance and beautiful in design and appearance.*"

Improved!! *The American Education Diet: Can U.S. Students Survive on Junk Food: An analysis of the condition of education, told through the very statistics and reports that are utilized by our nation's leaders.*

New!! Update on private scholarships, outlining how and why the 45 privately funded scholarship programs are educating underprivileged children well.

THE SCHOOL REFORM HANDBOOK, *How to Improve your Schools*: This 1995 publication still has applicability to your unique education reform needs today, and comes complete with updated resources and facts to make it current in 1998.

CER Fax Alerts: If you're a full fledged CER member and you don't get our frequent "Good Morning" faxes, please e-mail us at cerdc@aol.com or call us at (202) 822-9000 and we'll add you. Note: this is a service to friends and subscribers only.

Coming Soon! In the *next few months* CER will launch a special Reform Hotline that will allow you to call in any time of the day or night to receive special updates and news from the reform front. More information in future **MONTHLY LETTERS**.

Cheers From Our Readers

You provide us with such great feedback and news from the front, that we wanted to share with all of you this month some of those communiqués. Identities have been protected, to avoid backlash from any unsavory characters.

"Competition - what a concept! Keep up the good work." From a reader in Sioux Falls, SD, reporting on the effects of modest public school choice in his state.

"Every letter of yours is read, re-read, saved and very appreciated. I love your humor and feel so encouraged to continue my writing as an advocate for education reform. Many thanks to you and your fine staff." A parent in Green Bay, WI.

"I love your Monthly Letter. It is not only informative but always provides encouragement and that boost I need to keep our project going." A charter organizer in Teaneck, NJ.

"The Center for Education Reform's newsletter brings joy in the success of others, hope for the future of charters in our state, and humor that reminds us of the absurd

undemocratic plight of parents having to fight for educational choice." *A Grand Rapids, MI parent and charter friend.*

"I really enjoy the excellent job your organization does at bringing some reality to the educational discourse...Keep the lines of communication open and fight the good fight." *A reader in Carson City, NV.*

"Thank you to you and your organization for attempting to 'clear the air' on what a 'charter school' is all about. It is nice to know that there is an organization dedicated to the truth..." *A former principal in Milwaukee, WI.*

"Thanks very much. I always know I can count on you." *A charter resource group.*

And as is our custom, this gem from our tiny yet existent "kook" file:

"From a school board member who thinks you are an organization of crackpots! Thank you for letting us know the name of the enemy of public education..."

You Know It's Time To Demand Reform When....

- ...Your school district has to spend precious time and money fighting absurd lawsuits.

School teachers in the Greater Nanticoke area in northeast, PA have reportedly sued school officials for slander and newspaper reporters for libel, for speaking and writing about these teachers being accused of improperly receiving reimbursements and raises for taking classes by mail. The teachers claim the comments were detrimental, and want \$25 million for their trouble. Perhaps they plan to take some more of those really "rigorous" courses by mail with the money they hope to win in the suit.

- ...Your school superintendent pays over \$100,000 to squash concerns over a very "fuzzy" math program which even the math teachers denounced.

It seems that a Livermore, CA school hosted a new, very fuzzy math program that linked math with English and social studies. Teachers and principal sought and were granted transfers over the controversy. The superintendent allegedly spent over \$100,000 to "investigate" the complaints, and to pay an attorney and two administrators who have since been removed. The school district now posts the cost information on its web site in response to district-wide interest.

- ...A teacher who was fired for skipping two months of classes gets reinstated (with the union's legal help) and gets back pay, despite having a really lousy excuse that any private successful industry wouldn't tolerate.

The place: Collinsville, IL. The problem: "Someone" had changed 30 'D' grades to 'C' grades. The action was so upsetting the teacher couldn't work. A handwriting specialist testified it was the teacher's own hand. (*Courtesy of our friends at Illinois Charter School Facts*)

- ...The NCAA, a sports — not an education — organization, enforces certain course standards on American schools, so much so that it denies eligibility for certain collegiate sports to honors students and students with near-perfect SATs

Some time early last year, the NCAA sent all high schools a notice and questionnaire concerning their course offerings. Courses whose titles did not make sense to the NCAA were not recognized as meeting its standards. This caused some honors students to lose sports scholarships or participate in upper level sports. *The New York Times* and *USA Today* have exposed the scandalous “national standards” being imposed without any authority on America’s schools, but little has changed.

Warning: This News May be Injurious to your Mental Health

A gushy, over-bearing report by otherwise respected journalist David Gergen in *US News & World Report* December 8 was an indication that the unions are actually winning over friends with talk of new unionism. Gergen lauds NEA president Bob Chase for “working hard to redirect the NEA toward better results in the classroom.” Yet where was Bob when Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, for example, unveiled his new package of higher standards for teachers. Or any other of the many excellent reform activities written about this month?

Meanwhile, the National School Boards Association is compiling a list of “pro-voucher” groups; and the AFT is trying to track down teachers in all Michigan charter schools. After a scathing article about charters “lagging” in Michigan in its current magazine, the AFT filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the names and home addresses of every teacher in a Michigan charter school.

And because they need all the help they can get, the BLOB is now being defended by Harvard Prof. Gary Orfield who spewed inaccurate info about charter schools in a 1/2/98 *New York Times* piece. Orfield, who uttered outlandish things at a panel of the President’s Commission on Race, has drawn his line in the sand. “[Charters] are not well regulated and often fail to serve students or their communities fairly or well. ...The flexibility and innovation ideally offered by charter schools can be achieved with fewer risks within public school systems...Of course, problems exist in public schools...at least there are more systems in place to detect corruption or unapproved curriculums. Renegade charter schools would be much harder to rein in.” Remember that when Orfield calls you for his research needs.

Last month, a federal DOE rep. asked Internet-goers about the Harvard studies on Cleveland and Milwaukee choice successes. “...as far as I know, the Milwaukee data have been beaten to death... the Administration strongly opposes vouchers, and so we follow the flurry of voucher reports to stay ‘in the know’ on the issue.”

This last point provides a delicious segue into how the feds stay “in the know,” and what they do with such info. Former Milwaukee Superintendent Howard Fuller a civil rights veteran, argued that Ed. Secretary Riley’s voucher attacks come directly from both teacher unions. In criticizing the work of scholars whose positive research on school choice is anathema to the administration, Fuller says that “Secretary Riley appears to have accepted, without careful review, the NEA and AFT criticisms directed

at... these scholars. In doing so, he has given false credence to the inaccurate claim — advanced repeatedly by [the unions]—that the work of (Princeton Professor Cecilia) Rouse and (University of Texas professor Jay) Greene has been rejected by social scientists. This claim is untrue.”

You said it.... Yeah..... Applause..... Whoop, Whoop..... Bravo!!!

The U. S. Department of Education doled out a ton of money in September for evaluation and assessment of charter schools. Among those getting at least a few hundred thousand each were two regional laboratories (because tens of millions obviously don't go far enough), and the National Education Association, who is in a collaborative to “identify and disseminate information about local strategies or models...for communication among established and developing charter schools.” They call it research. We call it walking-around money (i.e. a friendly slush fund).

Despite these cold realities, we think 1998 is going to be an unprecedented year for reformers. The passion and commitment of ordinary Americans have them working overtime and with the right spirit to get good works done.

From the Trenches

- The diversity police are still plaguing Verona, WI's Core Knowledge Charter School, which was denied a request to increase students by almost 100 because of concerns that it lacks diversity. The average minority enrollment in Verona is 12%, whereas Verona's is at 3% despite having bent over backward to attract students. Did the district ever wonder if perhaps some of the less advantaged children are being well-served enough to cause them to stay where they are?
- So much for new unionism, perestroika and other union glasnost rhetoric! While we were gratified to hear that Chula Vista, CA approved last month a fifth charter school, the teachers' union caused much dissension in the process. The school was brought about by the School Futures Research Foundation, and will offer small classes, real-life lessons in business and a unique pairing of senior citizens living on site with young students. Of union opposition, school board president Patrick Judd put it all in context: *“I'm just disappointed that (the union) is always the anchor and never one of the oarsmen.”* [emphasis added]
- Also on the charter front, Massachusetts received 60 applications. Among the proposals: a school that would teach American history from Plymouth's perspective and offer Latin and a more progressive school aimed at utilizing local parks, camps and community service. [N.B. Better be careful; if Orfield is hanging around Harvard, he may be laying in wait to “study” some of these “horrific” experiments!]
- AFT prez Sandra Feldman called her union's win to represent teachers in Dallas “a resounding rejection of the right-wing, anti-collective bargaining forces that tried but failed to capture the vote.” Now they're off to lobby teachers to join. Texas is a right-to-work state, so you can't be forced to join. So the unions now have their sights set on the legislature, to try to make membership compulsory.

- We're rooting for you charter applicants in New Jersey where many a school board has refused to give a positive recommendation to your application. Thankfully their opinions are not binding. We pray that your Commissioner grants all your requests, to enable you first hand to show opposing school board members that you have much to contribute to the community in which you, too, are a member. A recent *Record* article is chock full of what is in store for any charter applicant in any state where school boards play a critical role:

"It's an extremely divisive law they put in place," said Teaneck board President Margaret Angeli....*'I have real opposition to the whole concept of charters,'* said Fair Lawn board President Russell Petrocelli....*'The curriculum they present is...a traditional curriculum that, candidly, we have improved over the years,'* said Ridgewood Superintendent Stokley."

As you lawmakers prepare for your new sessions, please keep these morsels in mind as you craft your legislation. Try not to confuse local control with school board approval, and please, oh, please, read the fine print if the school boards association or union or administrators group has just endorsed your bill.

The Condition of Education

- In Wisconsin, setting new standards in student assessments set off a storm of controversy — and some very disturbed parents and educators in this Lake Wobegone-like state. Officials there will soon be releasing the results of fall testing, pegged for the first time to four different levels of what children should know and be able to do in selected grades. Were the new system in place last year, it would have yielded fewer than 25% of 10th graders proficient in math, compared to average scores today under the old system being pegged in the 71st percentile nationwide. While some are no doubt in for a shock when the results are unveiled, the cheesehead state should be commended for setting real standards.

- Thousands of minority and low-income parents are fuming in Denver, CO over the condition of education there, so much so that they have now officially filed a lawsuit asking for vouchers. This past fall, the state's new assessment revealed many reasons to be concerned. Like Wisconsin, the bar was raised. But in both cases, this is not simply a matter of raising the stakes; there is widespread agreement about what students should know at certain levels. The statistics coming out of these and other states bear out the fact that the rigor or demand simply hasn't been there. There's good news for Coloradans. The new Commissioner, William J. Moloney, is a real reformer, and will challenge everyone to do better. But for Denver parents who have a more immediate concern, clearer test results won't help.

- The condition of education is good for about 2,000 Cleveland children, who are doing, on average, 5 and 15 points higher in reading and math respectively, than their public school counterparts. *The Economist* reports that the Harvard study found no creaming of Cleveland's finest, but rather found schools opening their doors to the very troubled. "Cleveland's parents punctured the patronising (sic) notion that poor families

will select a school for the 'wrong' reasons. Among scholarship parents, 85% said academic quality was a 'very important' reason for taking part in the voucher programme, and 79% said safety was." Cleveland's program continues with 3,000 students this year, now in grades K-4.

- Mentioned earlier in this LETTER was the effort at play in lovely PA to put teeth into requirements for the teaching profession. California appears to be headed down a similar path, with a proposal pending to base teacher evaluations in part on student test scores and to require competency testing (Note to all you Education Governors: this theme is a good one for your upcoming State of the State addresses!) California's State board also just approved a very strong set of math standards that requires more traditional math, and little if any of the fuzzy stuff that has characterized the early and middle-school years. The Board approved general frameworks, overturning some of the work done by an independent commission, including, according to news sources, deleting dozens of sample questions, some of which reportedly had more than one answer. The board wants to emphasize knowing one's multiplication tables by the end of grade 3, and long division, without a calculator, by the end of grade 4 (Go, Cal. Board!)
- Maryland is ahead of the pack as well these days, for its State board's approval of developing new tests that students must pass to earn a HS diploma. The tests would be aligned, naturally, with the state's curriculum requirements...
- ...and in Virginia, where some of the best standards around are about to be implemented, dissent is still rising from some who believe children will be challenged too much. One professor remarked that the standards do not address issues of equitable treatment. But as Secretary of Education Beverly Sgro says, "...all children...will have the opportunity to be successful...making algebra in Accomack the same as algebra in Abingdon."
- And if you've been champing at the bit to start your own standards-setting process, you need to get a new, spectacular resource entitled, "*Raising the Standards: An Eight Step Guide*," by Denis P. Doyle and Susan Pimental. Published by Corwin Books on behalf of the Coalition for Goals 2000 (no relation to the government program) the Guide can help you make better decisions, and ensure that your standards work. It comes complete with a CD-ROM that will allow you to link to key websites and models that furnish related information (like ours!). Place orders through 805-499-9774 or e-mail order@corwin.sagepub.com.

Contemporary Wisdom

Don't Know Much About History...a great song, recently invoked once again as the title of a *New York Times* Op Ed last month, talks about the lack of real knowledge present among college students, a void that is apparently OK to them. Richard Craig, a visiting professor at the University of Michigan says the lack of knowledge conveyed by a brief historical fact quiz he administers to upper classmen each year is not considered a big deal by even these "prized" students. He recounts:

“They said they wouldn’t need the information in their future jobs. Few of them were embarrassed or even surprised at their lack of basic historical and political knowledge. One student acted slightly offended that she should be expected to know these things. ‘I know what I need to know,’ she said. ‘When is any of this stuff going to matter in my career?’...Has the world become so specialized that history has become trivial? These days, students in their early teens are being told by their teachers and parents to start working on a career plan right away, and from that point forward they choose their courses of study to fit that plan. Children discover quickly that specialized knowledge within their chosen field is what’s really important. Knowing why there was a cold war just doesn’t matter...

“Paradoxically, the end of the cold war may have helped produce a culture that allows this to happen. Because the United States is now the only superpower, students no longer see an external threat, and thus see no need to understand why democracy needs to be preserved and supported...They’ll leave those big-picture questions to the political science majors. But if our most promising young people have no appreciation for why democracy is worth preserving, how will they know when it is threatened?”

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We’re looking forward to working with you for a prosperous, happy and healthy ‘98!

Jeanne Allen