

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 45**

JUNE, 1998

Dear Friends:

O.K., so it's not June. But this is your June issue, even though it's July, reporting back on the last few weeks of community and school doings, and results from the end of most legislative sessions. Of course, we are giving you some July highlights too (like the failed AFT/NEA merger, ha,ha,ha,ha), but all in all, this is our promised year-end round-up, with a special supplement to boot.



The Decision that Made Milwaukee Famous

Parents in Milwaukee could be seen doing the wave on June 10, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court unequivocally ruled their parental choice program valid. Let's be clear on what this means: up to 15,000 poor children will have the opportunity to use a portion of the dollars allotted for their education to choose any private or public school. While this program had been authorized in 1995, it was immediately challenged by the ACLU, the unions, et. al., and thus the court battle, that ended in early June, ensued. Meanwhile, according to reputable research, children in the original, limited program since 1991 had demonstrated achievement superior to that of their counterparts that could not participate. The fate of those children — and more — is now certain. The opponents, of course, have made noises about going to the U.S. Supreme Court. Such a battle would be much-welcomed and watched, but at least, for now, more children in Milwaukee will be safe. [For more details of the decision, a glimpse at CER's own Amicus brief in the case, or links to the sites of the groups who shepherded this thing through the courts, go to www.edreform.com.]

Voice of Reason

For those having periods of mental instability since the Milwaukee court decision, some comments from national reform leader Howard Fuller will bring clarity of thought. Fuller, the director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning and long-time educator, argues (correctly, of course) that the state of Wisconsin already heavily subsidizes a wide variety of religious institutions that taxpayers believe contribute to the better of society. He writes:

“Since 1965, Wisconsin taxpayers have spent more than a quarter of a billion dollars to help students attend private, religiously affiliated colleges. Last year, thousands of students used a \$16 million appropriation from the state’s Tuition Grant Program at religiously affiliated colleges such as Viterbo, Marquette, Concordia, Lakeland...and St. Norbert.

“More than \$100 million in taxes support tens of thousands of children at private day care and child development centers, many religiously affiliated.

“More than 100 public high school students are taking taxpayer-financed courses this year at religiously affiliated colleges and universities. They do so under a 12-year old state program which was expanded in 1991 to include private universities.

“Here are some of Wisconsin institutions which have received tax funds for early childhood education programs: Emmaus Lutheran Child Care Center; the Jewish Family Services Child Development Center; St. Joan Antida Day Care Center; and the Mission of Christ Day Care and Child Development Center.

“... Concordia University ‘seeks to develop mature Christian students by sharing the teachings of Jesus Christ in all of its educational programs.’ [I shudder just writing it!]

“At Lakeland College, the ‘concern for humankind exemplified in the life of Christ is reflected in the core curriculum of the college...’

“If students may use taxes to attend religious-affiliated colleges and early childhood programs, why haven’t our constitutional pillars crumbled? Because these students and their parents do so voluntarily, with no state coercion.”

Reluctant Debutante or Courageous Soul?

Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, made national news amid reform circles when his op-ed **“Why I’m Reluctantly Backing Vouchers,”** was featured June 15 on *The Wall Street Journal* opinion page.

It doesn’t take rocket science to know how we’d feel about his thoughtful and heartfelt piece. Read the whole article for yourself. But for now, we hope Dr. Levine doesn’t mind us quoting him a bit, and that you can abide our indulgence:

“Throughout my career I have been an opponent of school voucher programs...because I feared they would undermine public schools... [A]fter much soul-searching, I have reluctantly concluded that a limited school voucher program is now essential for the poorest Americans attending the worst public schools.

“Despite a 15-year long national school improvement movement, many urban public schools are still falling apart physically and produce dismal results when it comes to teaching students. These schools show no signs of improving; some are even deteriorating. They are the worst schools in America. Walking through their halls, one meets students without hope and teachers without expectations. These schools damage children; they rob them of their futures. No parent should be forced to send a child to such a school. No student should be compelled to attend one.

“...What I am proposing is a rescue operation aimed at reclaiming the lives of America’s most disadvantaged children.

“I offer this proposal not as a detractor of public schools, but as a champion who wants them to be as strong as they can be.”

Taking a “Page” From a Choice-minded District Superintendent

Houston Superintendent Rod Paige is following almost exactly Dr. Levine’s prescription for educationally-abandoned children. This May, he led Houston trustees to approve a plan to allow children in failing schools to attend one of several private or alternative schools with the Houston district paying their way. Children in at least three Houston-based schools would qualify and be permitted to go to private, non-sectarian schools that agree to meet the conditions other public schools must adhere to, such as open access.

Here’s the real irony; we’ve all heard and seen the unions and other choice opponents arguing that one reason they oppose choice is because private schools can be selective. Paige’s plan changes all that; but still, the BLOB opposes. Thankfully, some bold trustees and well-focused people are in control in this instance.

Pressure-Points

The opponents of choice, led and fostered by the teachers union, view the above examples as major obstacles to their multi-million efforts to eradicate choice. Thus, we found AFT president Sandy Feldman’s comments particularly interesting this time, given what they really mean.

“For the same amount of money that Milwaukee has spent to send fewer than 2,000 kids to private school, you could put a program like Success for All — with its long track record of success, especially with disadvantaged youngsters — in *every* public school elementary school in Milwaukee. You’d be helping nearly 60,000 students — and still have \$1 million left over.”

Of course, Sandy, the point is, you could, but you haven’t and you won’t, unless something compels you to do so. And that’s the beauty of choice.

Penny-Wise...

The extraordinary commitment of New York financier Ted Forstmann and California reformer John Walton to kick off the Children’s Scholarship Fund has brought smiles to many a parent, child and educator, and perhaps a bit of that hope that is often lost on poor children to which Dr. Levine so accurately refers. The new nationwide scholarship fund is bold and comprehensive in its approach: five cities this year targeted, with the potential for 50,000 additional children than we have today attending a school of their choosing. For our part, we hope the Fund’s organizers will choose venues where the necessity for choice is clear, not just popular. East St. Louis comes to mind...among others.

By our own accounting, this new Fund brings the total number of scholarship children in such programs nationwide to just over 90,000 amongst the 57 programs that currently serve those children. And that doesn’t include the various charitable programs that boost school scholarship funds directly.

...And Pound Foolish

Speaking of charitable giving, the good vibrations of this program didn't stop choice opponents from crowing that the money would've been better spent in the public schools. Oh yeah? Then explain why the well-intentioned generosity of the Annenberg Challenge has made little difference to the education of children.

While we're on the subject of choice...

Back in February, we reported on the evolution of a program, Project Choice funded by the Kauffman Foundation of Missouri, in which, we said, students promised a college scholarship for maintaining good grades did not fare significantly different from children not in the program. Project Choice is similar to the I Have A Dream approach, but adds several social services to each child's experience.

Kauffman Foundation officials contacted us to correct a few misunderstandings, and to provide us with some more background. Since then, we've had a chance to go over their literature. They find the program is not lacking in success at all, but that the measure of success conventionally used is not the one they would choose to judge their program. The presence of a mentor or caring adult apparently does support the proposition on which Project Choice was based. Individual success stories abound, although the program reports that the "high school retention rates of the first cohorts of Choice students...were not better than the retention rates of students in the comparison groups." Yet the Kauffman folks report that participants demonstrate more long-lasting successes in a myriad of ways than those not treated to the benefits of their program.

Kauffman found that a good education not only depends upon a caring individual in the life of a child, but good support services and follow-through.

Our beef with programs like Project Choice is not that they *don't* help in some way. The work of school reformers should be about creating a system where the current power structures are changed, so that individual schools begin to breed more achievement as a result of the right incentives, right programs, and right accountability in place. We mean no offense to well-intentioned programs. But how about getting the whole system to start off by doing the right thing in the first place?

Making Some Math Programs A Matter of Choice?

In the continuing saga on what kind of math our kids should be exposed to, "the experts" at a major publishing house obviously worked overtime to produce what has to be the silliest and most pathetic of all fuzzy math examples to reach us in a long time.

As I struggled to comprehend the exercise, I first gave the publisher the benefit of the doubt. I asked several people, ranging in age from 18 to 60, whether or not perhaps they knew about this particular kind of math, and that perhaps it was I who

was wrong. Maybe that day in third grade, I had been out of the classroom, down the hall or out sick.

Of course, when I was in third grade (not too long ago, I might add), I still remember the excruciating exercise that required me and my classmates to memorize the placement and geography of all 50 states. As I traveled cross country recently, my own third grader had to once again be told that California was west of the Mississippi.

So I asked all these people about this seemingly new math, and to my horror, each said they'd never heard of it. Since then, I've continued doing my unscientific sampling, and I've been hard pressed to find a teenager through adult who was guided through this "lesson." And yet I still wondered, perhaps there is, in fact, some sort of usage for this "lesson," however insane it may appear.

It was actually a tear out from the third grade teacher's Addison-Wesley Math book. Perhaps one of you can tell us the applicability and importance of it to our children's future. After all, Addison-Wesley was just merged with Simon & Schuster, making it the second largest distributor of textbooks in the nation. So, one would think, its sheer size (like the public school system?!) would mean it must be good, right?

And yet, I've seen no evidence that because of what this publisher does the children are achieving. On the other hand, children treated to Saxon Math, or even the more conceptual newer Chicago Math, post tremendous gains and demonstrate real knowledge after having been instructed with their lesson plans. The real experts at Mathematically Correct's Web Site have reviewed the content of dozens of texts and provide critical analysis of what is applicable to gaining math skills and what is not. But even one of their own leaders had not heard of this one elementary school exercise, which, while small and limited to a day of instruction, is utterly symbolic of what ails us.

Enough already; here's the cause of my outrage this time:

Now if any of you have jobs or educational units that require knowledge of these “shapes” or perhaps the concept they are trying to demonstrate (for you NCTM fans), we’d like to know right away. We might even fly you to Washington to illuminate us and others on the need for such tripe. Perhaps we could even get you a stint testifying before Congress...or better yet, a job writing math textbooks.

And yet, for my son, my only consolation when he boasted upon presenting this to me that he had finished his homework, was to say “That’s not homework, sweetheart, that’s what we grown-ups call nonsense. Now, let me show you some real math.” Once again I had to tell my son to ignore his lesson, which, of course, just gave me another bittersweet opportunity to educate him about why our education system and all its relatives need dramatic reform. [Editor’s note: while spell-checking this section, please note that none of the apparent math “shapes” appear in the dictionary!]

Top Ten Ways to Spend Your Budget Surplus

Here are ten recommendations from a few thoughtful state educational leaders — and a few from us — about how the pensive Governor might spend his/her state’s budget surplus to the benefit of children and for the cause of real education reform:

- 1) Provide one-time only, no strings-attached grants of half-a-million dollars to charter school resource centers to grow training, information and networking activities to support and nurture charter schools.
- 2) Provide capital funding that would follow students who choose to attend charter schools to help new charter schools emerge at a faster rate and expand educational choices for parents. *Lisa Keegan, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Arizona*
- 3) Provide funding for schools directly for K-3 students scoring below grade level on reading assessments to focus on research-based reading instruction, including explicit and systematic phonics, for the majority of the school day and for regular assessments to monitor their progress. *Linda Schrenko, Super. of Schools, Georgia*
- 4) Provide monetary incentives to school superintendents to contract with successful private schools to educate children not succeeding, ala Rod Paige in Houston. (*see page 3*)
- 5) Implement Teachers College president Arthur Levine’s recommendation and allocate several million dollars to support research that tracks the students and their progress individually. Require teacher education students at each publicly-funded college of education (or private one that receives state money) to spend a semester assisting a classroom teacher in a voucher or district-contracted school (including those private schools that serve special ed children on contract with the school district).
- 6) Contract for a wholly new, and specially-tailored state assessment to match the state’s standards, and vest authority for the specifications and contracting with a quasi-independent body. Administer the assessment annually to children starting with their first days in school, and at the end of the year every year thereafter. Publish the

standards and results regularly, and award college scholarships to children in the twelfth grade who score consistently in the top percentile.

7) Using the above as a guide, institute a pilot project that would reward stipends of \$10,000 per year to teachers whose work yields repeated progress among students, in terms of the greatest gains each year, not the highest number of high performing children. Half of the stipend would come in the form of a voucher to be used at any accredited college to take courses in the discipline in which the teacher is credentialed.

8) Establish regional "Best Practice Centers" staffed with trained professionals with expertise in curriculum and instruction, assessment and accreditation and instructional technology for teachers. As the results from assessments based on state standards become available, these centers can assist local schools and school divisions in the use of test results for diagnosing areas of weakness, identifying areas for improvement and in the development and implementation of plans for action. *Will Bryant, Secretary of Education, Virginia*

9) Create a new, one-year supplemental program that sunsets automatically, but which would provide \$1,000 grants to families whose children score overall below the 50th percentile on any norm-referenced test. The grants would be paid directly to the tutor of one's choosing for the subjects of math and reading only.

10) Rediscover the K-8 grade configuration which research demonstrates to be infinitely more effective than the middle school approach; recognize that the Hirsch Core Knowledge curriculum is the finest total package in the U.S. today by far [i.e. buy it!]; control education's single most powerful variable, "time," and implement the academic day recommendations in [the federal report] *Prisoners of Time*. *William Moloney, Commissioner of Education, Colorado.*



Thanks for your patience. We hope you continue to enjoy your summer, and send our thoughts and encouragement to anyone gearing up for a reform-minded school year. Coming soon: our thoughts (and some of theirs) on the failed union merger attempt, and more.

Jeanne Allen

A SPECIAL CHARTER SCHOOL SUPPLEMENT JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE...

The theme — David vs. Goliath over and over again; The place — various.

- **North Carolina...** Racial undertones are certainly at play as charters post dramatic achievement gains but opponents seek closure of 12 charters at which the racial balance does not match that of the district. Thanks to some local advocates in the Tarheel state, the *Wall Street Journal* covered the news that schools like Healthy Start, which serve children who have felt completely abandoned by the local traditional public school, face closure if a union-backed provision in the law is not repealed. It's one thing to guarantee a fair and equitable education to all, but it's another to deny access to children because of the color of their skin. And if that's not enough, Senators in NC on June 30 put in their budget a restriction limiting charter growth to 4% of district enrollment.
- **Arizona...** The Tucson City Council has thrown its lot with the establishment to make life difficult for a few new charter schools (Tucson is already home to 29). Thanks to that new education policy venue called zoning, new Tucson charters need at least 5 acres to open, and traffic on certain streets where charters are scheduled to open mustn't bring any more than ten times the traffic that occurred prior to the school opening.
- **New York...** This story on why the Empire State failed to legislate charters into being is a testament to why the NEA fears AFT affiliation. As the legislature was nearing completion of its session, and charters were a hot negotiating topic between Governor George Pataki and New York AFT union chiefs, it was clear that rather than bow to union pressure to mandate collective bargaining in charters, Pataki was holding firm to his commitment to bring strong legislation to bear. At issue was a \$70 million annual bonus the teachers lobby for and usually get, which yields about \$1,000 for each New York teacher, regardless of other contractual pay increases or performance. Pataki had vetoed the bonus twice, and was willing to do some old fashioned horse trading.

Enter New York City Chancellor Rudy Crew, much praised by the media for being innovative and more concerned about children than his predecessors. Crew only wants charters that he could approve and control. So he told the union he'd give them the \$70 million out of his own \$10 billion budget, so that the union didn't need Pataki, he no longer had a bargaining chit, and the rest, as they say, is history. A little postscript to the state that almost had charters this year — Crew usually goes with his tin cup to the legislature, crying for more money. It's funny how it's actually there when you want to find it. I wonder how many schools and toilets could have been

fixed with that \$70 million. WHERE IS JONATHAN KOZOL AND HIS SAVAGE INEQUALITIES WHEN YOU NEED HIM!!!!!!?????

- *New Jersey...* Yep, there again. A bill introduced by Sen. Larry Cafiero (R-District 1) would require school boards to approve future charters before seeking final approval from the Commissioner. It seems that those existing 13 charters and their 26 new neighbors are making school districts (who normally boast they are so good they don't need any reform!) so nervous that the legislators are bending over backwards to circumvent real school reform. Perhaps more shocking and disconcerting is a little-known provision in the recently adopted state budget which appropriates \$1.2 million for poor school districts (known as the Abbott districts, for the Supreme Court equity lawsuit that was waged) in which charter schools reside.

This "cushion" creates a double-funding of charter children, rewards districts whether they've lost children or not, and gets a lot of taxpayers, in the long run really p.o.-ed. Don't think the lobbyists for this provision didn't think of that, nor how such a seemingly modest provision for poor districts might grow once wealthier districts begin to demand the same. You don't think it crossed their mind either that perhaps people would eventually get so sick of paying twice for the same students that charter growth in NJ would be severely limited, do you? Probably not.

- *Virginia...* "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is a lesson reinforced by this scenario. Seems the Virginia School Boards Association considers its law to be the "strongest, best" in the land. It's components? Local school board approval, only two per district — one of which has to serve at risk children, no legal autonomy, teachers still part of the district...you get the picture. Still, VSBA prez Frank Burnham took issue with our characterization last month that the VA Charter law is among the most "seriously deficient — for now." He received our newsletter from the head of the Northhampton County, VA school board. Specifically, he wanted to clarify what we meant and suggest that perhaps we ourselves intended to lead the fight to change the Virginia law. In response, Burnham wrote the following to *all* of his school board members across the state:

"Thanks for [CER's] newsletter, especially page 4: 'All three are seriously deficient — for now.' What they mean is Virginia law-for now-gives total local control to local school boards related to charter schools, and they-the Center for Education Reform people and its supporters - intend to lobby the General Assembly in 1999 and beyond to change the law to give authority to the State Board of education to approve charter schools.

"That is why the VSBA urges school boards that receive requests for charter schools to schedule a public hearing and possibly adopt a resolution to receive applications and establish *stringent* [emphasis added] evaluation criteria in order to keep the General Assembly from using non-action on requests by local school boards as excuses to change the law. Any charter school law that gives the final decision to the local school board is 'seriously deficient' in the eyes of these [heavens!] people. This 'deficiency' is precisely what makes the Virginia law that VSBA lobbied successfully for the 'strongest, best' charter school law in the Nation."

When it comes to our intentions, he's only half-right. We don't intend any lobbying — but we're aware of several teachers, school board members and home-grown Virginia business leaders who will. As far as our belief that the state board should have charter approval authority, we'll go one step further — on the record. We

know that charter schools only really get approved if multiple authorities are available for charter organizers. So in addition to the state board, how about the fabulous state universities like University of Virginia, and even the Mayors of Norfolk, Hampton and other cities with high numbers of poor children? We won't be whistling dixie in Ole' Virginie next year, but real opportunity for children through charters is the only song we'll be singing.

(By the way, these VA school board members both assert that there aren't any successful charter schools "as determined by test scores or other academic data." Actually, there are, Mr. Burham. You can find them listed in chapter 4 of the Center's **Charter School Workbook**, as well in this communique and in a forthcoming release. We'll get you your own subscription to the MONTHLY LETTER right away so you can stay on top of these successes, too.)

- *Ohio...* the Toledo school district just doesn't get it. They put an old school building up for auction and the highest bidder by far happened to be a new community (charter) school. Rather than see educational improvements in their district, the school board pulled the building off the market and cited a statute that claimed they could remove the building from the auction if the selling of it would harm the district. Geez.

...AND THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

- *Illinois...* Sight of the famous Thomas Jefferson Charter debacle throughout 1997 that saw this fledgling charter's application rejected over a dozen times by school boards which felt that helping a measly hundred children or so wasn't worth their time. Because legislators pressured the State Board of Education to use it's newly gained authority to overturn silly school board maneuvers, the State Board voted 7-1 to overturn the rejection of the TJ Charter by Arlington Heights. But more than the approval itself, recognition and encouragement go to the parents and supporters of the charter who throughout all this bickering held fast together in their commitment to better education. Among the many: Jackie Gallison and Marilyn Keller-Rittmeyer. Cheers, ladies!

- *Michigan...* Doubting Thomases will be buoyed by this news: Over half of the MI charters posted considerable academic gains among their students on the state test, released in June. Students at Detroit's Colin Powell Academy (K-6) posted 22 point gains in 4th grade reading, 57 points in 4th grade math, and 13 points in 5th grade science. Excel Charter Academy in Grand Rapids exceeded statewide averages in all subjects. According to the Michigan Assoc. of Public School Academies, "despite a statewide decrease in writing scores, a third of Michigan's charter schools saw an increase in 5th grade writing - half of those by 20 points or more. In all areas, a majority of charters excelled, and most surpassed state averages.

- *California...* At Fenton Avenue Charter School in Lake View Terrace reading, math and language scores were five percentile points higher in their latest assessment. Over 95% of Fenton students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Fenton is one of four LA area charters that received renewals for another five years.

- *Minnesota...* The Minneapolis-based New Visions School serves 180 inner-city students, many of whom had trouble in their prior public school experience. Over the last five years, students have gained more than one year of academic growth per year on average as measured by two different norm referenced tests.
- *Texas...* Eighty-nine percent of West Houston's 120 Charter School students (mostly special needs) gained at least one year of academic growth during the 1996-1997 school year.
- *Ohio...* The State Board breathed life into the state's first nine charter schools, which will be located in Akron, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Dayton and Youngstown and serve approximately 2,100 children. The Dayton Business Committee has also been approved to operate a charter next year.
- *Pennsylvania...* While Philadelphia school officials are probably not ready to admit it, charters and the threat of other reform efforts stimulated the School board to adopt stricter promotion standards, higher graduation requirements, and overall, a commitment to ensuring that no child passes from grade to grade without having mastered certain academic requirements. They also approved an additional nine charter schools to open this September.
- *North Carolina...* The kindergartners at The Healthy Start Charter School deserve a round of applause for their great scores on the IOWA Test of Basic Skills released in June. They averaged in the 99th percentile for reading and the 97th percentile in math on the national achievement test. Ironically enough, this is the same school whose charter is jeopardy because the student population is not racially balanced.
- *Arizona...* The Stanford 9 Achievement Test results are in, and among others, the Challenge Charter School in Phoenix saw an increase in reading among first graders in excess of one year, and in math, children who started off the year below grade level finished well into the grade 2 level curriculum. Kindergartners and second graders also posted high scores.