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

The attention and national sorrow over disasters both natural and unnatural dwarfed last month's victory of school reformers over the status quo in the Sunshine State. In this issue, we review not only Florida's success, but also progress on the teacher quality debate and news of good schools and policy developments.



**The Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education**

"Brown still looms large as a great legal victory over the nation's racial caste system...but [this is] a time when many public schools are as racially isolated and unequal today as when the Supreme Court spoke 45 years ago," says *Washington Post* columnist Colbert I. King.

King restates one of the Brown decision's most compelling thoughts, that, "In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."

**Nero Fiddles while Rome Burns...** Some splinter education groups are busy holding anti-voucher rallies and denying the stark reality that it's time for major transformation of schools. Indeed they'd rather fiddle, than help pull the children from the flames of mediocrity and failure. Here's just a brief look at some of today's **obstacles** to attaining equality of educational opportunity:

- May 20 was the date for the "Emergency Coalition against Vouchers" meeting in New York City. Among others, the event was sponsored by a representative of the American Jewish Committee, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies the NY Hotel and Motel Workers' Union and a cast of literally hundreds more. As we'd expect, CER sources there told us that almost every minority in the room was pro-voucher.

- Earlier in May the "Be Vocal Against Vouchers" rally occurred in Philly. Claiming to speak on behalf of all but a few African-American churches a Rev. Robert Shine Sr., announced that "we will not rest until we have driven the

voucher issue into the sea." (Wouldn't it be marvelous instead if he'd spent his time and energy announcing that he won't rest until he drives failed schools into the sea?)

- These "Neros Fiddling" would do well to read a commentary by John Tierney in the May 6 *New York Times*, entitled "How Vouchers Can Help the Students Left Behind." Tierney points out that vouchers would free up money and space for children "left behind" and alleviate overcrowding. But rather than trying to see some validity to the pro-school choice argument, people like Jesse Jackson travel to NYC to decry the plight of poor public schools and any real choice proposal. Like most Neros of the choice movement the prevailing concern seems to be not with rescuing children, but with adult jobs.

- From once-acclaimed NYC schools chancellor Rudy Crew came a promotion piece last month that appears to have been sent to every business and philanthropic concern in New York. A retort to a comment by Mayor Guiliani earlier this month about blowing up the failed system, Crew appealed to New York's leaders to recognize how much work has been done and to warn against "destructive" language. Crew writes:

"Now is the time to end destructive rhetoric and stand behind the finest urban public school system in the United States. [N.B. That's the system that graduates less than 50% of all who start 9<sup>th</sup> grade four years earlier] I urge all...to oppose any attempt to use valuable tax dollars to support private and parochial schools. Write to the Mayor, the Speaker of the City Council and your elected representatives in Albany, asking them to end this insult to the teachers and principals who serve our schools and the children and parents who depend on them. Your support is essential to halt this attempt to dismantle the public school system."

Perhaps Crew is working on the NEA's new task force "to develop a national strategy against the privatization of public schools." Regardless, during this anniversary month of the Brown decision, education's top officials and allied groups should re-review that landmark decision and whether or not they've (perhaps) let near-sightedness get the best of them.

### **From the Trenches...**

- **...The Good News begins with Florida**, where a new day in education is dawning. No more will children's educational future be forever in the hands of a sluggish system with little accountability. The new A-plus plan rewards schools for their progress, raises the bar of what is expected of children and schools, and allows anyone in a school that is still failing after two years of extra direction, attention and money to find a better school. The combination of school choice and accountability almost provides for a guarantee to parents that schools will succeed or they'll be able

to take their money elsewhere. As we've told hundreds who have called, that adds up to a strong impetus for public schools to improve, and one that others would be wise to follow.

- More good news comes this month from **New Jersey**, where despite being battered and bruised, charter schools for the second time are facing a victory in the courts.

According to the *Newark Star Ledger*, "in five separate rulings, a three-judge panel of the Appellate Division of Superior Court dismissed legal challenges brought by public school officials in Highland Park, East Orange, Trenton, Matawan-Aberdeen and Red Bank. The court rejected arguments that the state's charter schools adversely affect the quality of education, racial balance and financial condition of existing public schools and should therefore be declared unconstitutional."

"It called such concerns premature because most New Jersey charter schools have been open only one year. And it rejected the contention that the charter school law should be struck down because it does not require the state education commissioner to assess the potential damage a charter school will have on public education.

"Such negative impact is by no means inevitable; indeed, the impact may be positive," the court said in a unanimous opinion written by Judge Michael Patrick King.

"Thirty charter schools are up and running in the state. By September a total of 52 are expected to be operating. Two more have received approval from the commissioner of education but are not scheduled to open until September 2000."

Garden State "charterites" are also thrilled by new information released by the Charter School Resource Center there which shows that "student and teacher attendance rates are remarkably high at 95 and 96.6 percent respectively, and that mobility rates are only 8.6% as compared with typical urban district rates of 30 percent or higher."

- **New Mexico** finally expanded its weakling charter bill, and now can boast of more potential charter activity. In addition to expanding from five statewide to 15 yearly the number of new charters that may be open, charters denied by local boards can now appeal to the state's education department. Also available now is some start-up funding.
- A hard fought charter bill is on the verge of passage in **Oregon**. Once ratified, the bill will permit an unlimited number of charters to open under the authority of either school boards or the state education department. Charters under this law will be afforded a great deal of flexibility, including the ability to have 50 percent of its

teachers educated but not necessarily certificated. Our hats off to Rep. Ron Sunseri and charter advocate Richard Meinhard, with whom the Center has worked closely and who've remained steadfast in ensuring passage of this important reform bill.

- Modest improvements made this season to charter bills in **Arkansas, Florida** and **Hawaii** will yield progressively better opportunities for teachers and parents to start and operate charter schools.
- By next month, there will be more to report on education reform legislation currently pending in state halls nationwide. An up-to-date, comprehensive look at charter school legislation and laws is always available online, and in print by calling the Center at 1-800-521-2118.
- **Teacher Union Legislation Subverts Charter Schools...** read an opinion piece headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The title doesn't overstate the case; the fact is that right now in Sacramento, California, the legislature is actually considering a union-drafted bill that would remove the freedom of teachers in charter schools and require them to be part of a union regardless of their choice. No other public employees are required to be in a union. This would be a horrible, national first.

Charter teachers — many of them current and former union members — are fighting the union power grab. Governor Gray Davis hasn't said whether or not he'd sign the union bill if it makes it to his desk.

- And finally, **Maine's Supreme Court** decided in a much watched school choice case that the law that restricts the state's tuitioning-out (i.e. voucher) program to non-sectarian private schools is not unconstitutional. In other words, school boards will still pay for a Mainer's right to send his child to a private school of choice, so long as that school is not religious. So much for equal protection.

## Good Vibrations

Earlier this year, we visited two schools that were able to start from scratch and that were started with the need for both sound learning and community in mind. They are presented as examples of what can happen when we think first about the goals we want to achieve in schooling and then build institutions to fit the purpose.

**The Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy** in Washington, DC is devoted to exposing students to the rich environment of the nation's capital and challenging them a strong curriculum. At about 60 students (with hopes to go into a facility that could fit double) Chavez is no doubt among the smallest high schools around. Its impact, however, is being felt far and wide among primarily disadvantaged children there, only few of which have ever been exposed to a complete, well-designed program.

Irasema Salcido, a veteran DC educator and mother of five is the inspiration behind Chavez, and has beaten the odds to open the school this year, inspire other teachers and involve parents and students from throughout the community. The school is constrained only by the limitations of bricks and mortar. Salcido, and company, have struck gold in building a community of caring and learning, and their efforts are a model for others.

Middle schools are often the subject of much disagreement. By clustering them in these fragile years, do we lose students and treat them too old too early or do they belong together as newly emerging, young adults? **Odyssey Charter School** in Manchester, CT is a telling example of how you can activate middle-schoolers' minds and bodies without creating chaos. Odyssey 's mission is focussed on media literacy, and using numerous technological innovations and tools to support every step of learning. Public school teacher Bill Jawitz is its founder, and like thousands of his education colleagues nationwide, has joined with gusto the fight for more independence and meaning in public schooling.

Odyssey children have won local essay contests, created award-winning videos and have been called on by the local civic community to do video work for upcoming events. They've made claymation documentaries, and explored the world of science through their state-of-the art media lab. Reinforcing the importance of marrying mind and body in school, Odyssey employs the services of the local Tae-Kwon-Do instructor and his program to teach physical education. The school is abuzz with the same energy and determination that characterizes its founder, and is a leader in Connecticut's small – but-growing charter movement.

Community, order, learning and passion...The Neros would do well to drop their fiddles and spend some time in these kinds of environs.

## **On Teaching**

There used to be only a small band of advocates for tying teacher pay to performance of students. Throughout the years, the unions themselves have argued -- as the Hartford Federation of Teachers did in court in '96 -- that there is no correlation between teachers and achievement. Hundreds of times before and since, CER, its friends and allies have tried to demonstrate over and over again just how important the quality of a teacher is to how well students perform, yet its gotten us branded time and time again as anti-public education, and anti-teacher.

Well, as Uncle Bob (Dylan) would say, the times they are a'changing.

A new report signed by a varied and well-respected group of state leaders and education folks has caused a shot to be heard 'round the world. The Thomas B.

Fordham Foundation-sponsored *"The Teachers We Need and How to Get More of Them,"* a manifesto on teaching calls for:

- 1) Results – based accountability systems in which student, classroom and building are all measured, and measurements are distributed and used as tools to spark improvement, reward staff and more.
- 2) Giving school-level administrators the authority to make personnel decisions. Accountability demands autonomy. Unless administrators can institute performance contracts for all employees, there is a disincentive both for present teachers and for those thinking of entering — among them Wall Street bound whiz-kids who know that, outside of education, the more they perform, the more status and money will be accorded them.
- 3) Ensuring that states enforce minimal safety, academic and testing requirements for teachers.
- 4) Opening up the teaching profession to talented individuals who did not necessarily graduate from education schools. By offering alternative routes to certification we can create a larger pool of candidates and encourage experts or professionals in other fields to enter teaching.

The growing problem of both teacher quality and quantity merit different approaches, and is already being embraced by policymakers of all political stripes.

**The Establishment Responds.** All this and more has caused (among other things) top union officials to sound, as top-notch journalist Richard Colvin of the *LA Times* says, "more like crusading politicians than advocates for the rank and file..."

"Why not tie teachers' raises to their ability to pass demanding tests? Even better, fire slackers who can't cut it. Or, most radical of all, pay teachers based on how much their students learn."

Colvin says that "unions nationwide are negotiating contracts with provisions that link teachers' skills to their pay," as well as coming up with programs to help their failing colleagues or do better up-front training.

Says the president of the Los Angeles union, "we're losing market share; the customers are bailing. So we need to say, 'what are the roots of the problem?'"

Indeed, as surveys show and as reforms demonstrate, increasingly both "market share" and teachers themselves are finding more harmony within alternative forms of education —like charters, private settings and the like. As the teacher manifesto makes clear, school improvement lies largely in improving teacher quality.

But buyer beware: Not all proposals are sincerely aimed at reform. Those calling for more education degrees and advanced or “national board” certification make the mistake that the problem can be solved with more education coursework, as though going through a process to qualify for another degree would somehow automatically make a teacher better.

The facts appear that those who dive in to the now-voluntary process to get this so-called “national board” certification are probably among the best anyway. But what of the teachers who while perfectly competent are not qualified to teach any particular subject?

**A look at the stats.** The U.S. Department of Education-sponsored study called “How Teachers Compare” looks at the National Adult Literacy Survey with an eye towards assessing overall teacher literacy. The good news is that nearly 50% of teachers scored at the top of the scales of the literacy survey, while only 20% of other “regular” professionals did. The bad news is that the survey overlooks the main concern about teachers, which is not only whether they are literate but whether they are qualified to teach our children that which they are teaching. Do they know their subject matter so well that they can impart that knowledge on others? Is it a chore to teach, or does it come with some degree of ease and comfort? And is there proof — accountability — that we know they succeed in teaching?

When at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level, 41 percent of public school students are without a qualified science teacher, and 34 percent of mathematics teachers in general have neither a major or minor in the subject, there is clearly an expectation problem.

### **States Tackle Teacher Quality**

Contributing to the momentum to ensure a larger pool of high quality teachers for our children, both Massachusetts and Pennsylvania are moving:

- Massachusetts state education officials have proposed an alternative program that requires a teacher candidate to have a BA in a core subject area, take the rigorous teacher exam that befell so many in the last two testing periods, and have an intensive summer training period. Officials in the Bay state want to switch the emphasis of certification on proven performance, rather than seat time in certification programs.
- In Pennsylvania, Education Secretary Gene Hickok announced plans to allow prospective teachers to bypass traditional requirements and instead would allow them entry to teaching upon proving a 3.0 GPA in their academic major, taking some intensive summer training, and only two pedagogy courses.

Often under reported is New Jersey’s success in alternatively certifying nearly 40 percent of its teachers since the mid-80s. That program is also widely credited with expanding teacher quality and the pool of minority teachers in the state.

**On Littleton**

As I sat in a hotel room that Tuesday night, I couldn't help but weep for the children, the teachers, and the community where the shooting in Colorado erupted.

We have friends in Littleton, and our hearts, our thoughts, our prayers have been with them since the tragedy.

From a school reformer's perspective, the tragedy calls into question not just the myriad of cultural and social problems that others have so aptly addressed during these last few weeks, but also the notion that maybe having such large, amorphous "shopping mall" high schools can't possibly breed community and safety.

Writes *Washington Post* writer Karen Chenoweth in her weekly Homeroom column, "...Would a small school have prevented the Littleton tragedy? I would never make that claim...But if being marginalized by other teens and ignored by adults in the building was in fact the trigger for the murderous rage...it makes sense that it might not have happened in a small school where the adults were able to pay attention to each of the students."

There is indeed an abundance of evidence pointing us to smaller schools for the necessity of better, safer, school communities. As space is limited this month, please go to the Center's web site at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com) for more thoughts into the Littleton tragedy and for a statement by the Colorado State Board of Education.



Just in time for our parting thoughts, the president announced a "new" plan to bring public school choice to every district. Not said was that such programs already exist in more than half the U.S. Nor was it mentioned that this proposal is nearly identical to the recommendation of the 1986 Governors' education task force, of which then Governor Clinton was a member. As our friend Arizona superintendent Lisa Keegan said, the proposal is "a bold leap backward to the status quo."

As presidential politics begin to heat up, let's commit to holding our elected officials to higher standards, no matter what their political party.

See you next month! Thanks for your support,

  
Jeanne Allen