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

“Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer. Those days of soda — and pretzels — and beer...” CER’s occasional trivia contest wants to know if you remember who first sang it? What year? The first ten answers get a free prize. Really. Not a really big, expensive one. But something that’s worth something. We promise. Well, those lazy, hazy, crazy days are coming to a close soon. So in this issue, we look back on summer happenings, and examine some current policy trends. If they’re a specter of things to come, we’ve got a wild school year upon us.

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### What Works, and What Doesn’t

In ongoing reform efforts nationwide, we’ve all come to expect that opposing sides will argue about the means, not the ends. Some interesting comments or events recently call into question, however, whether some in education may simply believe the whole effort futile. It seems there are some who simply believe all children can’t learn. We think it’s time to take them on.

An article in the *Forbes Magazine* July 26 issue is Exhibit A. Speaking about one of the nation’s most effective programs — Core Knowledge — the article illustrates just how successful this rigorous program is among many children, and in particular, less advantaged children. Core Knowledge is promoted by reformers, but also by such traditional educationists as the AFT. It’s now in nearly 1,000 schools, and growing daily. But despite its success among children and its clear and measurable standards, the program’s fairness and equity have actually been called into question.

Here’s what a Wisconsin-based university student had to say about Core Knowledge founder E.D. Hirsch in a recent Harvard educational review: “Hirsch is ‘delegitimizing the demands of oppressed groups for representation and redistribution.’ It is argued that “teaching the basics... could deprive minorities of knowledge of their cultures and traditions.” In other words, exposure to classic poetry and literature, and to the history and geography of this culture and others is oppressive. Now hold that thought.

Enter the SATs, the test most often given to aspiring college students to help higher education determine a student’s fitness for whatever standards the school may

have set. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) revealed this month that, in an attempt to be fair and avoid accusations of bias in the SAT, ETS officials actually have been purging those questions on which any one group of people fared better than others. Scratch the question from the test if African-Americans scored worse than whites, or where men may have scored better than women, or visa-versa.

Over the years you may recall that the SAT has made several transitions in the rigor of what has been offered and in its scoring. Many of us have noted that these changes have resulted in an easier test. ETS has long denied accusations of dumbing down the SAT. But the revelation that ETS all along has been developing test questions based on the proclivity of different kinds of students to answer at similar levels is an admission of exactly that dumbing down. And yet, even in the face of facts that demonstrate a precipitous decline among even advantaged groups on the SATs, they've continued the downward trend of purging any standards that may have been left.

**Follow the money, even in education.** Why the sudden openness? Well the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) recently warned higher education institutions that tests like the SAT may be held in violation of OCR rules if test scores were responsible for uneven admission rates among different racial groups. That would mean that in order to avoid lawsuits, colleges would stop using the SATs as a barometer of school success, and voila, ETS would lose business. In other words, we're suggesting that ETS's public pronouncement that the test is bias-free is an attempt to save its profitable non-profit business. Rather than ponder the consequences of losing yet another standard in American education, ETS would rather guarantee that everyone can perform on its tests equally. This kind of contradicts the whole idea of setting standards, doesn't it?

**And what of Core Knowledge?** Well, if you believe all children can and should be exposed to all sorts of broad, rich, content and academic work, then you'd believe that the SAT is an adequate, objective barometer, and was especially so before any changes were made. The facts now show that SATs are not objective at all, but instead carefully planned productions intended to offend no one and assess little. The questions the SAT has been purging — from similes with "culturally biased" words like drift or dune, to math equations that men and women score differently on — only put a child at a disadvantage if his education has been as remedial as that which plagues so many schools today.

How's this for a solution? Rather than lower the bar, create artificial parity and declare the tests fair, we could follow the lead of Hirsch and scores of other reform pioneers and require more of students, schools and communities. We could — egad! — raise the bar. But then, some graduate student might call that oppressive. What a world.

There are those who wonder why reformers get so exercised over the traditional educational system. One only need ponder the facts presented here to understand why a revolution has indeed begun.

For a glimpse at the questions ETS has been purging go to [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).

## On Charters

- In Albany they said it was the deadline. In Akron, it was just impractical. We're talking about the decisions made by an increasing number of school boards to forgo their obligation of **providing bus service** for every public school child, even if the public school the child is attending happens to be a charter school. The solution? Lawmakers could write into the education code that failure by school districts to provide direct transportation of equal kinds to charters is cause for all transportation funds to be withheld. Or the public could evict the school board that allows this to happen in the next election. Either way, mounting obstacles to those schools which are trying to start is cause for a coordinated assault.
- Speaking of obstacles, we've got it all! Now, in addition to state by state information about charter school achievement, pathbreaking research into the effectiveness of charters on traditional public school thinking (i.e. the ripple) and state by state closure reports, the Center for Education Reform is now offering the definitive analysis of all those **barriers** in "The Obstacles," Part Four in the Progress Report Series. It's available for free on the web, or in paper at our offices.
- **Arkansas** just can't seem to progress very far past its original weak charter school law. This summer, the legislature there improved its law, which is responsible for exactly zero charter schools, but the law is still very limited in what charters can do and in who can approve them. Keep trying. Didn't someone once say there's a town called Hope down there??!
- Up north to **Pennsylvania** this month, the new Mathematics, Civic and Sciences Charter recently took over 1,000 applications for just over 700 slots. Said one applicant, "I taught at a public school, and I don't want my children in one. I saw classrooms where students sat with their earphones on, and teachers were at their desks sleeping." Philadelphia is home to a robust charter movement, and in September, will have 27 schools serving roughly 8,349 children.
- **Episode IV: The Fifth Year.** Thomas Jefferson Charter School in Arlington Heights, Illinois continues to fight the Dark Side. In this case vested interests assume the shape of the local school board. For five years they have used the law's deliberate vagueness to thwart charter school applicants and avoid competition. The local school boards have done everything in their power to reject the parent-backed Jefferson Charter School (several previous MONTHLY LETTERS have chronicled these obstacles.) TJ Charter applied to 12 school boards, all to no avail. Eventually the Illinois State Board of Education overruled the rejection of District 59 school board and approved the back-to-basics charter school.

Despite the approval, the local school board continued to resist. In Illinois, the school district gets a representative voice in the local zoning councils and there are no clear zoning regulations for schools. The appropriateness and location of a proposed charter school is, then, subject to the school district's whim. TJ Charter located several appropriate facilities or locations for their school, but each one was summarily rejected

for all sorts of different reasons. Finally, having been forced miles outside the district to find a suitable location, the DuPage County community in which they attempted to settle began to object. Thus on August 5th, the DuPage County Zoning Board of Appeals rejected the school's bid to open on an unincorporated residential property. And the reason? The zoning board says it didn't know enough about the school and that the petition was moving too fast. Perhaps the zoning board will ponder the reason why someday they may be asked to approve the location of a prison.

In the meantime, TJ Charter supporters, teachers and students are hopeful that the DuPage County Board can overrule the zoning officials. We hope so. Hey, charter friends! Next time you hear someone say it's sufficient to have a charter law with one sponsoring authority, remind him of **Episode IV** in Illinois.

- Word to the wise: Charter schools named **Faith, Hope, Love and Power** are likely to be strong on aspiration but in financial disarray and light on substance. The four Texas charters are managed by Life's Beautiful Education Center which learned that financial accountability is also nasty, brutish and short. That organization is now shut down, but the charters are attempting to fix themselves independently. Unless they can find a way to manage their own books, the State Board of Education will close them down. The State Board revoked the charter of WACO's Emma L. Harrison Charter School in July due to poor fiscal and operational management. It's evident that there is a strong accountability process maturing in the home state of Lance Armstrong, the winner of the Tour de France.

### A View from the Blob

- *The PTA strikes back:* Earlier in the year, the Dallas Council of PTAs recommended a boycott of a district-wide survey by Dallas school officials, because they were afraid that the results of the survey would reveal too many problems with the district. According to the Education Policy Institute, the PTA council president said that finding fault with the district could "bolster the case of school vouchers,...which would prove that public schools are not working." Dallas school district officials did proceed with the survey, but it appears that word got out as fewer returned it and the deadline for returning the questionnaires had to be extended. Interestingly, Ross Perot funded the survey, and he said he would "fight any effort to use the survey as ammunition in the pro-voucher movement." The National PTA and its affiliates officially oppose school choice alternatives.

- *Florida's state PTA council* voted 42-7 to join the suit against the state's school choice program. I guess all those rumors about the PTA being out of touch are really true. Reports from the Sunshine State say that the PTA president herself once had her child in a private school. It seems that old classic saying — *What's good for the goose is good for the gander* — must be politically incorrect.

- *A case of principals pitted against school board members* in Philly earlier this summer demonstrates that little logic exists when interest groups reign supreme. According to *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist Tom Ferrick, Jr., the Philadelphia school board approved bonuses for principals that would range from one to three percent and be handed out

based on performance. "The principals' union says the plan allows management too much discretion to be 'subjective,'" so the principals' union is seeking to overturn the plan.

- *We keep hearing that there's a teacher shortage, right? We've also learned almost monthly for the last year that the quality of teacher education, placement of teachers and their performance standards are sorely lacking, right? Even the unions are saying they want to take responsibility themselves for infusing the profession with only the highest quality teachers, right? So you'd think that proposals designed to attract new people to the profession would be welcomed with open arms, right? Wrong!*

True to why we call "it," the Blob, the association that represents Pennsylvania teacher training institutes and the state union, the PSEA, has sued over the Department of Education's new alternative certification program. Under that plan, intended to attract new troops to the ranks of teachers, one would not need a full teacher education degree, but rather a subject-driven bachelor's degree and a 3.0 GPA in the subject he wants to teach in order to meet the requirements for a 15-month certificate. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of emergency teachers with fewer qualifications in the Keystone State, but that doesn't seem to bother those suing. The groups argued that the plan would "jeopardize the future well-being and education of students."

## On School Choice

Why is it that a one or two point increase in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress is widely trumpeted by the status quo, while actual achievement in choice is ignored? We hear regularly the criticisms of school choice plans: *But what about the children left behind? What happens if we lose money? What if ... ?* It's quite understandable that some may find change difficult, and they pose these questions out of a great fear of the unknown. But with a growing storehouse of evidence, people can rest at ease that choice is helping — not hurting — children. That "help" comes in a couple of forms, which include: 1) public school improvement and response to the presence of a choice program, and 2) individual achievement/accomplishment among choice students.

- In response to the growing number of students accepting vouchers from the CEO Horizon Project, the district-wide private voucher program for low-income students, San Antonio, Texas' Edgewood School District spent \$120,000 on an independent report to find ways to reduce costs and improve performance in their schools. Of the 14,000 students in the district, 13,000 were eligible for the vouchers and 566 accepted the offer and left the school district. "The early results indicate that children who need help the most are the ones taking advantage of the program," said CEO America president Fritz Steiger. This proves that the voucher program is not creaming the best and brightest students from the district. Instead, it is sparking additional district improvements, helping to alleviate overcrowding in some schools and providing immediate solutions to those most in need.
- One year after a privately funded voucher program for low-income students was started in New York City, students in grades two through five scored higher in

math and reading tests than a control group of students, according to Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG). The School Choice Scholarships Foundation gave 1,200 students a \$1,400 per-year scholarship for three years (more than 20,000 applied). There was about a two-percentile point difference in each subject between the voucher students and the control group. For fourth and fifth graders, however, there was a four percentile point difference in reading and a six point difference in math. PEPG also evaluated private voucher programs in Washington, DC and Dayton, Ohio, where students "generally felt safer at school and were more likely to say that their teachers cared about students and that the teaching in their schools was 'good.'" The Harvard team has also been asked to evaluate the San Antonio, Texas Horizon voucher program.

- Harvard's PEPG has also studied Cleveland's school choice program, and found preliminary evidence showing gains in reading and mathematics among 150 Cleveland students in kindergarten through grade 3 attending two choice schools.

- The fiscal impact of school choice is not negative, says Dr. Howard Fuller, a professor at Marquette University and former superintendent there. (The typical assertion is that voucher programs siphon off funds from the public schools.) In the period from 1990 to 1999, the years that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has been in effect, Fuller found that both real MPS spending and state aid to MPS have grown when inflation and changes in enrollment are taken into consideration. Real state aid per pupil has risen 43% in the past nine years. Real spending by MPS has also risen 29%, or 20% per pupil. When making claims about financial hardships caused by the choice program, the Milwaukee school officials have often failed to take into account the fact that if the school choice program did not exist, they would have higher enrollment in their schools.

- And if the growing mound of positive research is not enough, consider parental demand. One example: Early this year in Dayton, more than 1,000 people attended a school fair which showcased schools offering parents a choice in education. Thirty-six magnet schools, 6 charter schools, and 33 private schools, all of which are affiliated with Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE), were represented at the fair. A conference organizer said, "...It was such a great turnout for a Saturday. It was such a neat thing to show that there are that many parents who are concerned about having a choice of where their kids go to school."

### Notes and Asides

- A "new" study from the American Association of Pediatrics found that too much television viewing among young children leads to aggressive behavior. Or as my almost fifth-grader would say, "Duh—uh!"

- If you've only recently joined us and want to learn more about what's been happening over the last few years, you'll be interested to know that almost all of the previous 54 MONTHLY LETTERS are present and accounted for at the CER website. Reading even a few short years ago will make you feel like its deja vu all over again.

- Enrollment is at an all-time high in all schools. So, if more teachers and schools are needed, perhaps the reform ways introduced here and widely circulated these days aren't so far-fetched after all.
- A hidden gem: Tucked into Florida's large education package signed in June was a provision allowing for alternative teacher organizations to have equal access in distributing information on school property. They may also expect the district to collect dues through payroll deduction. Seems the monopoly may be breaking up. Ma Bell's not the only who can do it.
- A very public and heartfelt thanks to the CER interns this summer! You guys and gals have been terrific. Thanks to Betsy Mikesell (child development and quantitative economics major), Danny Dukes (history/education major), Tigran Unciano (mathematics major), Mira Zawadzki (political science and communications major), Nicole Berg (cognitive science major), Erin Wolff (political science and french major), Liz Moffit (graphic design major), and Myumi Morita (Japanese exchange student).

### Parting Thoughts

I knew something was strange about the woman who called-in to comment on an Albany radio show the other day. I was discussing charter schools and the great news about the city's first charter school, New Covenant, for which many minority parents are lining up. New Covenant is a partnership between the Urban League and Advantage Schools, Inc. But now that the first eight charter schools have been approved in New York, and the state has authorized several million dollars in start-up funding, the heat is on.

So there I was explaining the reason charters came to New York and why they are in demand, when the hosts began taking calls. The first caller was Theresa, and she began like this: "I'm struck by the level of meanness in your guest and in this debate," she said. Paraphrasing her next few comments she said, "the district is trying to do everything it can, and here comes a school that is going to take \$5 million from us and leave few resources for the district to do its job. The charter is going to lead to tax increases." She yammered on some more, and then said, "the Superintendent asked the charter school to cooperate with us as long back as February, but they just won't respond." She said more, and then it was my turn.

I told her that if there were any meanness in this debate, it was in fostering graduation rates of fifty percent in some Albany schools. I said that most charter proponents believe it's actually really mean to tolerate reading proficiency among only thirty percent of fourth graders. As for cooperation, since New Covenant didn't exist in February, it would've been difficult to have a pow-wow with the superintendent. Where was the superintendent before charters were possible? Did he seek out the Urban League and ask how he could help them find educational solutions more immediately? And as for the \$5 million the district is supposedly going to "lose" when the 550 New Covenant children begin, I suggested she look at financial issues in a different way; as in using money to help children succeed.

A few days later, I saw a clip from the *Albany Times Union* about a heated meeting between charter school supporters and the school board. "Both sides in the debate tapped into their own deep wells of resentment: school board members who were angry at the financial burden, and parents at the meeting, most of them African-American, who feel they've long received second class treatment from the city school system."

And then I learned who Theresa was. "It's lousy news," she told the *Times Union*. "It's like squeezing blood from a stone," board member Theresa Portelli said after administrators laid out money-saving options, including the possible closure of an elementary school, layoffs and an almost certain 7 percent tax increase, which she has termed a 'charter tax.'" Funny, she never told the radio host she was a board member. Perhaps her pronouncements would have been called into question.

One of the Blob's popular methods of extinguishing charter schools is to threaten a tax increase and provoke fear in taxpayers. Perhaps instead they should account for the schools which the 550 New Covenant enrollees are leaving, and the programs or people who might be responsible for their departures.



On that note, we'll return in September for our yearly Back-to-School extravaganza. We'll begin again to explore the positive things happening in reform, while being ever vigilant with our eyes on communities nationwide.

  
Jeanne Allen

P.S. We hope you've also by now received and enjoyed your August *Parent Power!* and will take the moment required to send us back your subscription form or the name of a friend who might enjoy the more practical, layman's advice that every parent needs to help build a wonderful lifetime of learning for their child. As a new CER service with a much expanded reach and audience, *Parent Power!* will need your formal response if you'd like to be a charter subscriber. As always, we're here via phone, e-mail or web to sign-up. Until we meet again — *Arrivederci!*