



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 204 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000
Fax 202-822-5077

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

What a beautiful fall it has been! Pumpkins, apple cider, Halloween, field trips and more have occupied the hearts and minds of kids and grown-ups alike. Students are well-settled into their school routines. But even such a fruitful time of year can be beset by difficulties. To show you what we mean, we've packed this issue full of both the tricks... and the treats that have prevailed over the past few weeks.



Parents for the Status Quo

There's a relatively new parent group around now which is attempting to gain a foothold in education with its friendly and seemingly innocuous approach to important policy issues. This group says it doesn't take positions on any choice mechanisms other than vouchers (it opposes them). But some in depth analysis of its work, and its recent coverage of charters schools makes us wonder whether Parents for Public Schools (PPS) might more aptly be Parents for the Status Quo.

In its summer newsletter, PPS makes charter school proponents appear fuzzyheaded. A section that presumes to break down what is said on opposite sides of the charter issue actually suggests that charter proponents are only concerned with competition and freedom from rules, rather than focused on making sure all children have access to schools that meet their needs. On the other hand, one who reads the opponents' views would conclude that they are clear-headed, child-centered, human beings. The contrast shows a clear PPS bias against charters, while their words suggest open-mindedness. Another example: in advising parents how to "size up charters," PPS encourages its readers to question why a charter is the answer and whether all stakeholders (parents, teachers, district officials, etc.) were consulted. The PPS assumption seems to be that if the charter is not the brainchild of the district's leaders, it's not necessary. On the contrary, if and when charters have to rely solely on the district and it's "stakeholders," no more than a handful of schools get approved. Today's group —1,680— is the result of a broader kind of consensus, and not one that relies solely on the establishment for its existence.

Buyer beware! There may be little distinction between Parents for Public Schools and the increasingly out-of-step National PTA, whose locals continue to break ranks on a number of fronts.

From the Trenches

“Money Can’t Buy Good Teachers,” says John Merrow, a television producer and former public school teacher who’s done a fantastic report on why good teachers are not making it into the classroom. “The Clinton plan ignores education’s core problems,” says Merrow. A recent analysis by CER about the “100,000 teachers” program confirms this statement. As Congress fights over whether or not to continue to fund that program, it turns out that the federal Department of Education can’t even confirm where the money was spent or who was hired as a result. The real solution to attracting and retaining a high quality teacher force, experts say, is to reduce barriers to entry, raise the bar, make training more content-based and enhance the profession by giving teachers more control over their work and a chance to be compensated on results.



Huh? Why did the federal Education Department fund the **“National Clearinghouse on Schoolwide Reforms”** when a report it sponsored found that only 3 of the 24 so-called comprehensive school reforms are even effective?



Eleven percent and growing...Charter schools in the Nation’s Capital are now drawing more than eleven percent of total student enrollment. A wide variety of new and existing charters are growing more healthy by the day, and offer an exciting contrast to all too many low-quality schools. *The Washington Post* reported that among traditional public schools “Nearly half of this year’s 12th graders scored below basic on the 11th grade reading test. Three of four scored below basic on the math exam.”



Perhaps **Houston and Fort Worth** can help the District (and the reading experts) figure out how to stem the failure rates. Significant progress was reported this month in closing the gap between whites and minorities on basic reading and math skills. Houston owes its 40 point gains to more intensive phonics instruction and more demanding math programs. Fort Worth put trained math instructors in front of kids as well as employed some new computer based math programs.



The Curriculum Wars, Part I

Some of the nation's best thinkers and actors on reading and math instruction went head to head at Harvard's Public Education Policy and Governance Center last month. Stimulating and tense discussions ensued, which serve to reinforce just how important choice and accountability are to re-making public education.

The **reading** controversy can best be broken down as follows: In a nation where 30 percent of suburban children and 70 percent of urban children are unable to read at a basic level, *Is knowledge of phonics necessary/worthwhile for reading?* The phonics folks argue that the research shows that good readers read word for word and line by line and decode words as they go along. The whole language lobby argues that reading is more effectively acquired through word familiarity.

Marilyn Jager Adams, a proponent of the explicit instruction of letter/sound correspondence (phonics) summed it up this way: *"To the extent reading is [made] easier, a person has more headspace left for other things."* Those who struggle are deterred from other uses of their brain, and are more challenged in general.

While there may be some room for disagreement — and certainly much need for choice in this arena for children who learn differently — phonics opponents are shocking in their suggestions that the motives of phonics proponents are less than admirable.

Whole language adherents argue that phonics fanatics are over-represented on national boards and in policy-making positions. The whole problem in their view has less to do with reading instruction and more to do with society's "abandonment" of Great Society poverty programs. They claim that bad test scores have everything to do with child poverty and very little to do with reading instruction. For them it's very simple: a child surrounded by well-educated people, lots of books and lots of attention will learn to read.

It's a wonderful formula, but one that is rather fatalistic for education people. While we work to alleviate poverty, shouldn't we be working to teach even poor children to read? That's what they do at Wesley and Kipp Elementary schools in Houston, at Marva Collins' schools, at Barclay in Baltimore, and thousands more.

Those schools succeed with more than 90 percent of their children. They succeed despite failed teacher training, poverty, lack of pristine school buildings and more. They succeed because caring adults have engaged programs that work and do it with all their focus and with consequences for results. (See www.noexcuses.org for more evidence).

(The Curriculum Wars, *continued*)

The phonics researchers argue that all children can learn how to read with any number of challenges in place. The whole language researchers argue that failed reading scores have more to do with the children themselves and their environment than reading instruction. In fact, they even argue that political ideology and capitalism are in large part to blame for failed programs.

To wit: one Harvard presenter drew a Venn diagram of conspiracy. He linked the political fates and fortunes of the following: textbook publisher Hal McGraw III, the head of the California Republican Party (with the same last name and no relation), former first lady Barbara Bush, Texas Governor George W. Bush, phonics and more. The intent was to show that phonics has grown in favor from a Republican political conspiracy – and not from success among countless children.

Such a conspiracy would come as a shock to Fairfax County, Virginia residents, who've recently had their own war over whether the district's phonics program is actually being taught properly. On one side are parents and even **the president of the local union**, who argue that proper training has been denied teachers; on the other side is the superintendent and his team, who claim that the concerns of parents are misguided.

There's a conspiracy afoot, all right. It's a conspiracy of common interests looking for all children to read well. That's a conspiracy that we should all join, and one in which *reasonable* people can disagree.

Part II: The Great Math Debate

A similar set of tenets has created war among math people. The academic community appears generally torn as to whether or not traditional mathematics teaching and reformed math are compatible. Most parents don't care, except when it comes to whether the approach actually succeeds with their children. In that case, it is vitally important that we all know the score. Herewith is a quick, brief, and unscientific (though reliable) primer on what ails the math profession, and thus, why our children can't do basic math effectively at just about every level.

1) *The Theory*

The National Council of Teachers of Math (NCTM) issues guidelines for math policy that have a deep effect on just about every textbook on the market and standards setting processes. Independent math professors and scientists have begun to question the NCTM's approach and argue convincingly that the guidelines are not relevant to children learning math at required levels. California State Northridge Math Professor David Klein argues that NCTM reforms have actually "crippled K-12 math education."

NCTM officials view math learning as relative. They argue for a more conceptual approach to math teaching using the following reasoning:

“We live in a different world.
We have different kids.
We don’t know how to measure success.
We have to learn to connect math to our children and to respect their ideas,
and
It’s important to think about how we deliver math as a community.”

This philosophy — “constructivism” —invites students to reach conclusions in math neither through predetermined routes nor equations but by constructing their own thinking. “Kids have to personally make sense of things,” says University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Gail Burrill, a former NCTM president.

On the opposite side, the critics of NCTM argue that the successful math approach involves the direct instruction of arithmetic to children.

2) *The Practice*

Teachers of math – most who are not trained in math — are given textbooks at school with this orientation or trained to think that way during education school.

They’re told that substance matters, but exploration matters more. Teachers of math are often taught that it’s more important for children to understand, than to do, math.

Those who succeed with students tend to use explicit programs and be well-grounded in mathematics.

3) *The Result*

Remedial math education is the norm in U.S. higher education. According to the National Research Council, sixty percent of college students are taking **high school** math courses. The Third International Math and Science Study showed us the poor state of U.S. math and science instruction. A majority of less advantaged children continues to perform below basic levels in math in most states. Indeed, even middle class and more affluent children are being hoisted forward with inflated grades and demonstrate little grasp of mathematical concepts once they reach college or the workforce.

4) *The Effect*

One would think that would be enough to challenge conventional wisdom about “reform” oriented math approaches. Yet despite the failure, the U.S.

(The Great Math Debate, *continued*)

Department of Education (ED) granted “exemplary” status on fuzzy math programs that run contrary to the research. In fact, University of California/Berkeley math professor Hung-His Wu refers to one of the “exemplary” programs — Mathland — as “execrable.”

Another ED sanctioned program — Connected Math — is under attack by communities from California to Maryland. It advises teachers to allow children “to bump into the answer” in pairs or groups, as if there’s nothing scientific about math.

Just as unscientific as these fuzzy math programs, the federal ED conferred “exemplary” and “promising” status on eight others that have been assailed by scientists, mathematicians and researchers nationwide. Never mind that curriculum decisions are not within the mandate of the ED. Washington’s affair with vested interest groups like the NCTM is well known. That cozy relationship has now resulted in the federal government’s imprimatur on programs that couldn’t past muster among reputable experts. Rather than produce rocket-scientists, ED just contributed to more lousy math instruction.

Even California examined and rejected these same programs. Today’s disjointed, hip-looking and entertaining math programs may be o.k. for children who already have strong math skills, as long as they’re not looking to acquire higher-level math skills for a more scientific profession. But entertaining pictures, games, and the like have led researchers to conclude that US math instruction “is a mile wide and an inch deep.”

As for national policy making, the only federal body that has business in the math wars is the Congress. The appropriate committees should immediately convene hearings to determine how it is that precious federal dollars are being squandered by vested interests.

Choice and the Courts

- The **injunction by an Ohio judge** of 800 new students enrolled in the Cleveland Scholarship Program was being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court as we went to press. At issue in this unusual move is whether the high court will uphold or reverse federal district court Judge Solomon Oliver’s decision to ban new applicants to Cleveland’s program.
- On October 12, the Supreme Court decided not to hear cases that allow **Maine to use public funds to pay tuition** for children at secular private schools but not for children attending religious private schools. So what does this mean? Shakespeare might say it signifies nothing. But he’s dead. So we say (in a more appropriate context) that it signifies nothing. It sets no national precedent and is not expected to

stem the national debate over vouchers. Why? Because in Maine students have their choice of schools, with the exception of religious schools. Parents challenged this limitation claiming that it discriminated against their religious freedom. The court was not called upon to determine whether a particular school choice program violates the Establishment Clause. Instead, it faced the opposite question: whether a tuition program that specifically excludes religious schools violates the state constitution and parental civil rights. The court decided that it is not obligated to support a program that does not exist in law. Thus for additional tuitioning cases, Maine has little applicability.

- Stay tuned in Florida, where the judges assigned to review the state's accountability and choice program will hear a motion on November 12 to dismiss the challenge. Rather than consider the educational importance for kids, the ACLU and the teachers' unions are claiming that opportunity scholarships violate the establishment clause because parents may choose to use them to send their children to religious schools — an argument that has been rebuffed in both Wisconsin and Ohio.

Perhaps the opponents should consider the actions by a Florida superintendent, his deputies and others in Hillsborough County who have pledged to **put their money where their mouth is** on the quality of the school they deliver. They've announced that they'll each take a five percent salary cut if any of the county's schools gets an F in the next review of schools under the Sunshine state's new accountability and choice law. Aw... it's probably just a coincidence!

On Charter Schools

- The New York School Boards Association's new motto should be, *Nero fiddles while Rome burns*. Content to dither with business as usual, the Empire state's school boards group has joined the New York State United Teachers of the AFT in filing a legal challenge over the establishment of the state's first three charter schools, saying that "the court should annul all [charters] issued," and presumably to be issued.

A glance at some ninety charter school applications, (go to newyorkcharters.org) might allay these groups' concerns about whether there are good schools being proposed. Or was that their real concern?

- Build it and they'll come: Oregon's new charter law "spurs wave of interest," says the *Seattle-Post Intelligencer*. Only a few weeks after the ink on the law was dry, hundreds of people hungry for school choice — most notably teachers — flooded the state's education department with calls. The first two applicants to be approved by a local school board are Lourdes School, a small rural school faced with the threat of closure that will now be able to remain and grow as a community school, and an alternative school for disruptive youth.

Next time you hear a legislator or charter skeptic say that "there's just no interest in our state" for charter schools, tell them they have nothing to lose then by enacting a law. Perhaps they'll be [pleasantly?] surprised!

- As St. Louis, MO's school superintendent was grimacing over charter schools, the state was announcing that the Show-Me states' jewel of a city was about to lose accreditation for substandard results on school assessments. That didn't stop the St. Louis school administration from suing the state over the charter school law, which yielded 15 charter schools in Kansas City alone this year. Those charters now comprise roughly ten percent of the district's enrollment. As the lawsuit winds its way through the courts, squandering time and money, the state commissioner of education ruled that indeed Kansas City will lose its accreditation next year. Meanwhile, St. Louis, which performed only a margin better than Kansas City, is still under close scrutiny.

- A glimpse into Maryland's environment for charter schools, the following comes from a teacher-friend regarding his attempt to get his district to look at a charter proposal: (the names have been changed to protect the innocent.)

"Just a quick note to say that we submitted [*Sunshine*] County's first (and only charter school application) We met with the central office folks. Guess what? They didn't like it!!!!

The Board of Education will decide [next month]. *This is a great example of why applicants should not have to go to the local district to create a charter.*"

- **The Ohio Empire Strikes Back....** A full component of vested education groups rallied for their cause to weaken charter school efforts in Ohio. Their day in the sun — appropriately just before Halloween — backfired and was universally slammed by all major papers. What follows are **excerpts from the newspaper accounts**, which were illuminated by the Community Schools Network and Ohio reform friends:

The Toledo Blade, Editorial. A Pointless Rally, October 23, 1999:

Public school educators in Ohio could better use the time improving their schools instead of protesting charter schools...

Ohio Federation of Teachers president Ron Marec said recently that if there will be "privatized charter schools, there ought to be a level playing field." First, charter schools are not private. They are public. But his remarks also reflect a lapse in memory, because two years ago his organization gave approval, however guarded, to the pilot charter school project.

As for the issue that money is taken from local school boards... the matter is not that simple. The state's per-pupil funding follows students who move from traditional public schools to charter schools. When Ohio students attend schools that are legally sanctioned public schools, as charter schools are, then those schools should receive the state funding for each one of those students.

And neither is it true that charter schools hold an unfair advantage over public schools, as the former are required to meet the same academic demands imposed on public schools.

It would be more detrimental for Ohio legislators to succumb to teachers' unions' complaints, when legislators paved the way [for charters] because of dissatisfaction with public schools in the first place.

The Columbus Dispatch, Stifling reform October 26, 1999:

Opponents of school vouchers and charter schools never sleep. They are tireless in their zeal to slow, block, reverse or kill every effort to open American public education to the fresh air of innovation and competition.

The latest attack came last week....The measure really is the opening move in an effort to smother the independence and flexibility of these education- reform experiments with mandates, red tape and bureaucracy...

Left to local school boards, charter schools would not be created at all, or would end up virtually indistinguishable from other public schools, crushing the independence and innovation that is the heart of the charter-school concept.

The proposed legislation is not about accountability in alternative education; it is about protecting the public-school status quo.

Union pronouncements about saving public education from the alleged evils of alternative education simply attempt to mask self-interest with sanctimonious spin....The accountability problem that really matters is in the public schools.

The Toledo Blade, A threat to charter schools, October 26, 1999:

Some of the ideas in the state Democrats' proposed mandates for charter and voucher schools are reasonable. But their proposal to make charter schools get their charters from local school boards is misguided...Only a few years after vouchers were set up in Cleveland and the charter schools launched, the legislators want to rein in the schools' freedom.

The state education board sponsors 49 charter schools outside Toledo. In Toledo, only one of the 10 local charters is sponsored by the Toledo Board.

The legislators have some ... sound suggestions...But if the Democrats' threat regarding the issuance of charters should succeed, all public schools, charters included, will be right back where we started.

- **Contrast the Ohio stories with this one from Flint, Michigan,** from the *Flint Journal* this past August:

Parents in Holly Township cheered and called their spouses on cell phones when they heard that their children had been chosen, by lottery, for coveted spots at the new Warwick Pointe Holly Academy, one of the Flint area's newest charter schools.

"Dad, he got in," Kim Tipolt told her husband by phone. "I'm tired of public schools," she said before the drawing, echoing the feelings of many parents. "They don't want to take enough time to educate your children."

The kindergarten-through-6th-grade academy will have 450 students. About 550 children have applied. The school received its charter from Central Michigan University.

You know it's time for reform when...

...The ACLU sues to ban Advanced Placement courses, which for many children offer the only and best hope for a real education. We sympathize greatly that the ACLU sees too few minority and poor children in these classes. But how's this for a solution? Rather than tie us all up in court, how about joining forces to make Advanced Placement the norm for all children? We're standing by our phones...


...ETS claims its efforts to manipulate test questions to allow for more equitable scoring is just a way to be fair, rather than a way to ...

... Half the nation's governors and twice that many business leaders hold another summit and recommend ideas that were mainstream in the mid-90s.

A Few Good Men. "The day a charter opens it helps all public schools." So says Norm Carrell, Wyoming Principal of the Year and one of fifty National Distinguished Principals. That's the statement of an individual with confidence, who as a traditional public school principal welcomes reform. It's also the statement of someone you'd expect to have an outstanding school, which indeed he does. Carrell is principal of Ft. Caspar Academy, his state's first parent-initiated public school of choice, which uses Core Knowledge, Spaulding Language Arts and Saxon Math as the three pillars of its curriculum. That curriculum has brought the school from the fiftieth percentile to the mid-nineties in just a few short years. Congratulations Norm!



We'll be back in December to end this historic year on the right note. We'll follow-up on the curriculum wars, bring you some year-end highlights and previews of what to expect in legislatures next year, and more. Keep your eyes peeled on our website for news of CER's latest service on charter schools — our new Progress Report book. And, if you'd like to keep abreast of developments in reform more often, we invite you to join our e-mail service, which you can also access via the web at www.edreform.com. Until then, enjoy your fall and have a great Thanksgiving from your friends at the Center for Education Reform!


Jeanne Allen

P.S. We've had several members still using an old email address at cerdc@aol.com. We're no longer there, so if you want to get in touch, use cer@edreform.com for a reliable, prompt response!