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

Along with a little snow (which delayed us slightly in getting this to you), the beginning of 2000 brought some renewed attention to problems long plaguing public education, and some hope that things are turning around — thanks to the pressure education reform brings. Here's what you need to know about the world of education reform from this past month:



Those Who Can ... Should Teach!

According to the trade paper *Education Week*, the best and brightest leave education within a few short years, some states don't even provide for basic skills testing for teaching candidates and far too many have low standards. Add to that our own growing list of complaints — the barriers to entry, the bureaucracy — that shuts far too many interested folks out of the classroom and you have one reason that too many children fall between the cracks. Most of that is something we all can agree on — teachers, and even many union leaders included. What becomes murky is the solution. Here's a few being tried:

- The Colonial, Pennsylvania School District is in its first year of a pay-for-performance plan for teachers that will reward the highest performing 20 percent of teachers and allow them to reap the benefits of having effected greater student achievement. The plan — which required the services of an arbitrator to resolve union problems with it — bases yearly individual and group awards on tests, or where no appropriate test is available to gauge a particular set of children or a grade, independently-created evaluations based on other data will be used.

- Ohio lawmakers are half-way to enacting a policy that would make it easier for people without education credentials — but who are well-trained in their field — to enter the teaching profession.

- Unlock the monopoly the teacher education schools have on training teachers. Even Education Secretary Richard Riley agrees that "Teacher education and professional development programs are not addressing the realities found in today's classrooms." Those realities require teachers to have in depth knowledge of their subject, and to be evaluated accordingly.

• One retired superintendent writes that we should “hold teacher ed. school professors answerable for their product — the teachers they are training for America’s classrooms.”

These are just a few things we can do and should do. But watch out for hot-sounding policies that actually result in business-as-usual. A number of proposals are circulating in the states that allow for teacher performance as one mode of evaluation, but makes it so minor that things like coursework and peer review trump student performance as a factor in evaluating teachers. While *Education Week’s* report points out that money does matter, it’s not an isolated issue. Quality and quantity go hand in hand.

P.S. Washington, DC area Catholic schools are raising tuition in an attempt to keep pace with teacher salaries and to retain and attract good teachers. They’ll be raising salaries by as much as 14 to 20 percent for teachers; a long overdue move. However, let’s hope the Catholic system also heeds the proscriptions above and uses objective evaluations to measure and reward these committed souls, lest they fall prey to what ails their public counterparts.

On Charter Schools

• The **Michigan** Education Association (MEA) is still bragging about its victory in defeating a measure that would have raised the cap for charter schools. Their role in the legislative process? The eleven Republicans who the union endorsed and funded in the ‘98 election broke ranks from the Governor to side with the MEA. One hundred-ten charters were dreaming about their chance to get started. But the MEA demanded the state exercise more control over charters if the cap of 150 schools was to be lifted at all. Of course, as you can see from the fact that 41 percent of Michigan eleventh graders failed the state’s assessment, the union’s penchant for the status quo might be a tad misplaced.

• Speaking of payback time, let’s look at **New Jersey**: The NJEA helped advance several measures to curb charter growth and cut funding, having helped elect the “right” people to the legislature. Among the bills being heard: a proposed enrollment cap of 500 children or 25 percent of the district’s enrollment; a hold harmless provision that allows school districts to suck up money for two years for children who choose to go to a charter school; so called evaluation requirements that are big on demographics and inputs and not on charter-like outputs ... and more. So far, charter families and educators in the Garden State are starting to make their own power and voice felt. Even more important, the package seems to be stalled because it carries with it a price tag to the taxpayers in excess of \$50 million. It’s going to be a long year...

• The State University of **New York** (SUNY), which has chartering authority, has approved 13 new charter schools to open in the coming school year (and one the following year). A wide variety of civic groups, companies and neighborhood folks are involved, but of course, the lion’s share of attention is being devoted to the

raging battle over money. Even in Roosevelt school district (which has remained on the state's failing schools list since some of us were children) the squealing and squawking on the sheer possibility of two charter schools opening is amazing! Despite the plight of the troubled district in not educating children, locally and nationally, the BLOB is screaming that their money is being drained, siphoned and every other synonym that means "my job might be in jeopardy." We're hopeful, however, that when real, honest-to-goodness people see the schools in action, they'll welcome them and the schools will try harder to do some sorely needed catching up themselves.

- Three really great, veteran alternative public schools in **New York City** have applied to the city Board of Education to convert to charter status. Beginning with Children, KIPP Academy and Wildcat Academy all have worked hard in past years to serve children who aren't normally well-served by traditional schools. They've been given much freedom to do so, but even that little bit of freedom is apparently not enough to do what they want to do and to expand and help more children. What is most interesting about this development is that it's these very schools, among about 100 alternative schools, upon which the opposition to charters in NY has staked their claim. Unions and their friends have long argued to lawmakers that New York doesn't need charter schools because they already allow for a wide variety of alternatives. But those are still centrally controlled, and they'd rather spend their time and resources directly on kids and not have to go through any hoops to get there.

- The **Missouri** charter school law is now safe, having survived a legal challenge by the state's school board association. However, a state education department report found that most charters had failed to comply with the state's requirement that only 20 percent or fewer teachers could be non-traditional, without a credential. While there's a legitimate quarrel with the idea that a credential necessarily means quality (see related story about the Vermont teacher on page 6), the law is the law and those charters need to hop to it and fix themselves before they fall prey to the same kind of lower standards they've tried to break from.

- For the fourth year in a row, there's more action brewing in **Washington State** on charter schools. Two bills are pending in the House and Senate respectively, and hearings this month showed a wide band of enthusiasts for pushing the program. The bills would essentially curb last year's proposal and allow for 20 pilot schools, with further growth and evaluation left up to future legislatures.

State Education Committee Chair Dave Quall (a Democrat) is the current co-sponsor, along with Rep. Gigi Talcott (a Republican). Quall testified at his own hearing, arguing that charters will improve student performance, serve the underserved and is overdue in Washington State. Others testifying included the head of the Association of Washington Business and researcher Robin Lake whose work has found how charter schools often create or implement innovative techniques and strategies.

- **Maine's** fledging Association of Charter Schools was formed to bring charter schools to that state. It has gotten thinking-legislators to respond, and thanks to

State Representative Judy Powers, a bill has been introduced to explicitly permit charter schools. However, there are some misguided notions afoot that just by tinkering with an existing law to allow charter-like schools would result in some federal money flowing there. But federal law says a state has to have a law authorizing charter schools explicitly to qualify for funds.

- One really smart-thinking charter leader can be found in Joanne Nelson from Tampa, **Florida**. Joanne is the chair of the Florida Association of Charter Schools as well as the founding director of the Tampa Bay Academy Charter School, which focuses on severely disabled children. Amidst both her jobs, Joanne (and others like her nationwide) is gearing up for the first annual *National Charter School Week*, May 1-5, 2000. Her suggestions on how best to celebrate charter schools are so good we wanted to share them with you in the hopes that you mimic them to your hearts delight:

“This is a wonderful time to tell ‘the charter school story’ to your legislators, parent groups, school boards, and local and state media ... It would be a perfect time for you to plan for ‘open house’ events, school board presentations highlighting student participation, and a myriad of other things to let everyone know about your charter school.”

So if you’re from a charter school and you’re reading this right now, ask at your school about their plans for May 1-5. Ask your resource center how they plan to help you. If you need help, perhaps we can get you packets of planning information from your colleagues in other states to help you along. But get involved and let’s help turn around the less than fifty percent awareness that reportedly exists about charter schools!

- **Ohio** charter schools were criticized this month for doing poorly on the state’s 9th grade tests. But a closer analysis of the scores reveals that of the several charter schools that have 9th graders, 5 had only been open for 5 weeks when the tests were given. Two other more established schools showed slight improvement, despite serving severely handicapped children. However, Ohio charter leaders are looking at these scores as baseline data to allow them to better assess progress next year. Ohio currently has 48 charter schools and 57 applications are on deck to be considered for next year. Meanwhile, the State Board of Education has begun to focus attention on how to best supervise the charters with the proper balance of oversight. They should also, however, see that the Department of Education provides needed support to charter schools, which must contend with much adversity from Ohio’s establishment.

Elsewhere in the Trenches...

A group of Michigan leaders is trying to reverse the trend of major school choice losses through the initiative process. **Kids First Yes!** is an interesting mix of business and inner city leaders who are trying to overcome the state’s constitutional barriers to choice by allowing voters to decide whether to reverse a constitutional ban on **school choice**. (Such bans — known as Blaine Amendments — exist in 30

states. They derive their name from the crusade of early 20th century Congressman James G. Blaine, who wanted to allegedly remove any government aid to parochial schools. It was actually a thinly-veiled anti-Catholic effort; prior to then, such natural alliances between private and public schools were commonplace.) The Michigan choice group is working to bring this issue to the people this November, and is in the final stages of gathering signatures to qualify.

- In Milwaukee, **school choice opponents** continue to find interesting ways of trying to squash the permanent choice program there. The city's High School **Writing Proficiency Assessment** asks students the following question to gauge their writing skills:

Public tax dollars are being diverted from public schools to pay for students who want to go to private schools. You attend a public school. Tell why you think this is/is not a good idea.

So much for unbiased education or stimulating good writing skills. We wonder what happens to students who argue that school choice is a fine policy. Do you suppose they get a good grade, too? It's uncanny: Here's a case of anti-choice people in Milwaukee (and elsewhere) who rant and rave that school choice is somehow going to kill the very bedrock of democracy, and yet Stalinist-like propaganda makes its way into tests for these young minds to ponder ...

- Question: Why is an **Air Force Colonel** with credentials as a teacher the object of a **grievance** against a Montpelier-area district filed by the Vermont Education Association?

Answer: Because he is volunteering his services and that's at odds with the collective bargaining contract. (And he's a really good teacher, too.)

Now a much-reported story in the national news, Corrow's predicament is not uncommon. He has a skill set and energy that he volunteered to the school when the budget was in question, and is devoted to teaching and sharing world cultures and conflicts with the students at Williamstown Middle/High School. Yet because he is not paid, and therefore not represented by the bargaining unit, the union finds his position unacceptable. The Superintendent is standing behind him, as are the parents. And some wonder why we're critical of unions?

- The **Nation's Capital** is once again the site of much turmoil surrounding the **politics of education**. A few months before control is supposed to be restored to the school board, many are encouraging a delay of that sort of "sovereignty," since the school board has failed to show its competence in even the advisory role it's played for the last few years. Enter the refreshing Mayor Anthony Williams, who believes if the buck stops "here," he should have authority for selecting the superintendent and school board. Such a model — which follows the much-heralded Chicago experiment — would surely make for a more streamlined authority model. After all, the school board's own chairman — who also is head of the Greater Washington Urban League — has "mounted massive resistance" to charter schools, according to DC charter

leader Nelson Smith. How can stewards of public education make the right decisions if they're hostile to promising reforms?

Congress is inclined to support aspects of Williams' proposals and the city council has already agreed in part to a scaled down version of governance changes. We'll keep you posted.

- The PTA is at it again, this time in Fairfax, Virginia, where some anti-school choice propaganda was sent home through children and is causing quite a stir among residents and school officials. You might recall this occurred at one other place (that we know of at this point) in Michigan last fall. In that case, school officials took no responsibility for the flier, which stated that because Milton Friedman was (sic) an advisor to Chilean Dictator Augusto Pinochet, that school choice was racist, fascist, etc.

Here's the account from the *Washington Post*:

"The controversy began with a flier sent home this month with students at Rocky Run Middle School. The notice said that legislation before the General Assembly would provide school vouchers and tuition tax credits to private and parochial school parents, diverting 'much-needed funding away from public schools.'

"The fliers encouraged parents to sign a petition and attend a rally in Richmond. As contacts for more information, the fliers listed a PTA official and the Virginia field coordinator for People for the American Way, a civil liberties group.

"The incident became public after a Rocky Run parent complained to Del. Jay O'Brien (R-Fairfax). Subsequently, a parent at Cub Run Elementary said his child also brought home a flier.

"School officials say Rocky Run's PTA officer should have sought permission from the principal for the flier, and should have used PTA letterhead. Also, a school secretary copied the notice without authorization. Cub Run's flier was printed on PTA letterhead."

So, while the Michigan PTA needs a little history lesson, the Fairfax County PTA president Rosemary Lynch needs a civics lesson. The local PTA leader told the *Washington Times* that she feels quite justified in using children as pawns:

"I think we're perfectly within our rights to let parents know we've taken a position against [tax credits]."

RIGHTS??? Whose rights??? No one voted Lynch any power to make decisions for parents and children. The PTA's membership is less than 10 percent of all parents nationwide, and locally, parents have entrusted their children to a school system for education, not public policy. Phew, someone get this lady a civics book; quick. And perhaps a copy of **Common Sense**, by Thomas Paine, too.

There's good news: Virginia's Attorney General Mark Early is notifying school superintendents statewide cautioning them about advocacy groups looking to use school children to advance their political agendas. Let's hear it for rational public servants!

- All about **kids**? A **teacher strike** is being threatened in Cincinnati, where the AFT union is in conflict with the superintendent on salary, hours, class size and charter schools.
- There's a growing but still vocal minority of education insiders who welcome **competitive pressures**. Here's one example:

The A-plus program is creating a lot of anxiety. I think that's good. I think there needs to be some anxiety. If it weren't for the A-plus plan, and the Sunshine State Standards, we wouldn't be seeing the kind of improvement we have today.

Sara Wilcox, Superintendent
Martin County Schools, Florida

More on Teachers

We happened upon two interesting "historical documents" while doing some pre-spring cleaning this month. The following comes from a major foundation, and the president of the U.S., respectively, early in 1996.

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk about Public Education Today. This Public Agenda report (initiated in part by the NEA!), suggests that teachers' attitudes may be at odds with the majority of Americans who are deeply concerned about quality:

Teachers "big three" concerns differ somewhat from those of the public. Both groups express serious concerns about order, but teachers express less concern than the public about how well schools teach academic skills or maintain student safety. Consequently, teachers and the public have different starting points. Teachers start with money, class size and then order.

However, teachers, like much of the public, favor traditional approaches to education....Teachers support higher standards, but raising them is not their most urgent goal. Teachers are not ardent advocates of especially rigorous education...they appear more concerned with their students' social skills and adjustment than with their attaining top grades and test scores.

Only 28 percent of teachers would be "very concerned" if "international test scores showed American students were doing poorly," compared to 56 percent of the public and 63 percent of community leaders. (More of this report is available via web at www.publicagenda.org.)

From the March, '96 business and education summit. President Clinton argues against status quo policies for hiring and retaining teachers. But ironically these words belie the focus of last year's push for 100,000 teachers.

We also need a system that doesn't look the other way if a teacher is burned out or not performing up to standard. There ought to be a fair process for removing teachers who aren't competent [that is] much faster and far less costly than it is. I read the other day that in New York it can cost as much as \$200,000 to dismiss a teacher who is incompetent. In Glen Ellen, Illinois, a school district spent \$70,000 to dismiss a high school math teacher who couldn't do basic algebra and let the students sleep in class...We should do more to reward good teachers, we should have a system that is fair to teachers but much more expeditious and much more cheaply in holding teachers accountable.

Tough Love

National Urban League president Hugh Price deserves praise for his forthright comments on what ails urban education last month. His National Press Club speech called for "radical reform" and made it clear that we've gone about the task in the wrong way for too long. There's much with which we disagree — including Price's scorn for vouchers, high stakes test and ending social promotion — but the fact that he's willing to speak out strongly with urgency for much needed changes that we can agree upon gives him a spot on our radar screen.

"I believe urban schools should be treated like charter schools. Liberate them from the stifling central office bureaucracy and give them the latitude to operate the way independent secular schools do."

Price also understands the leadership void in the inner city: "Rare is the urban school board — elected or appointed — that would be considered an asset to the educational process from the perspective of poor and minority children... School boards should become obsessed with raising student achievement, or else step out of the way."



Speaking of love, Valentine's Day is right around the corner... Be sure to tell a child how much you love him, a good teacher how much you appreciate her, and the parents around you how much you value their involvement and hard work! Thanks for your attention once again this month!!!

Jeanne
Jeanne Allen