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

Oh those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer are upon us! Rather than just lolling around getting sun and reading fiction, the reformers of this nation have been on call 'round the clock.' As we prepare for the perennial back-to-school flurry, we look first to the activities of some of the major players — for better or worse — this season. This issue, in particular, pays close attention to the antics of the BLOB — or the establishment — as some of you prefer to call it. So grab a margarita and look upon this as easy reading that will take you 15 minutes tops to digest. As always, we'd love to hear from you if you could find another 10 minutes to write us or call.



Don't Fix the Schools – Just add more time!

Sometimes education proposals are so sad that they are actually funny. The unions outdid themselves earlier this month at their annual conventions. The award for the most outrageous proposal goes to the American Federation of Teachers, who now believes that only by adding an optional year to the traditional four year track will we be serving more challenged students well. Let's emphasize the obvious:

Ten years ago the push by the establishment was to add on years before the typical 13-year school cycle. In the face of deplorable statistics showing our children were still in the rut noted by the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the unions and their allies argued that enrolling every child in school earlier would give them a leg up. Without a necessary focus on content, they argued that children came to school unprepared so getting them earlier would greatly help the schools' ability to educate them.

Many states now have mandatory 4-year-old programs and earlier and earlier, the babies went to school. Similar thinking — right or wrong — surrounded the early '90s push for more time in the day and the year.

Now here we are in the year 2000; with stagnant reading scores, dismal urban school systems, mediocre suburban schools and even ivy league students who don't know much about history (see related story on page 6). And the American Federation of Teachers says we should add another year!

Had it been the case that we have raised the bar for all children over the past decade and that we're teaching them so much more than yesteryear, it might in an odd way make sense to have this proposed, optional year. We could say that since we had begun requiring in-depth knowledge of history, math and science, and since literature now required study not only of the contemporary authors but of Yeats and Shakespeare, then perhaps, just perhaps these new demands would warrant more time.

Yet in most schools the content scale-up has yet to begin. High stakes test that are requiring students to demonstrate knowledge in order to graduate are simply AND FINALLY pushing the need for more and better content down to the school level. Now, more than 20 states are measuring and checking whether or not students are learning what was expected in the first place – hardly a novel concept.

In fact, as the AFT itself has often argued, the standards today are no where near where they need to be and the knowledge our schools impart is of lower value and lower quality than ever before.

Which is why *we're all talking about reform to begin with!*

For the unions (who more often than not *don't* represent the views of their members) more years means new contract negotiations. Don't be offended. It's that simple.

Thank God these conventions come only once a year. If you notice your policymakers starting to debate the fifth year option of high school, be armed with the facts to show them whether or not the schools are even being pressed to master years one through four, and don't let them pull this bologna under fear of reprisal.

PS. The New York Times *agrees and on July 7 wrote in an op-ed entitled Recipe for Weaker Schools that the AFT's proposal "is not a good idea at this point. Public high schools need to make far better use of the four years they already have."* The Times points out later in the piece that the Education Trust has a new report showing that *"the public high schools have declined dramatically over the last 10 years – and now yield less academic growth among their student than in any other phase of the public school system."*

Life Imitates Art in Rochester: What a surprise that Rochester, NY – the site of failed after failed attempt to reform the system from within – would be considering this month a proposal to create special five year tracks like the one AFT president Sandra Feldman proposed. The argument being made for this transition time is that some children take longer to learn than others.

Meanwhile, children themselves who are dropouts and have returned to the classroom through alternative or charter arrangements argue that all they needed was a school more focussed on their own individual needs to get them back to the books. Most also allege in major surveys that they're allowed to "just get by." Maybe we need to tell the kids about this fifth year idea. It may make them avid reformers!

More on the NEA

A funny thing happened on the way to the forums... Union forums, that is. When both NEA and AFT convened to hash out their agendas and policies for the next year, there was more media skepticism than ever before about their role in improving America's schools. The conventions were seen as self-serving, egocentric and overly political. The NEA voted to raise dues payments by five dollars. It will use these funds to stock its war chest to fight choice and charter efforts. The AFT resolved to "take back" the charter issue and reissued its set of conditions under which they will support charters, a box into which most of the nation's 2000 charter schools would not fit.

Interestingly, both unions took up the issue of performance-based pay and NEA chose to have a formal dialogue. According to the report in the *Teacher Quality Bulletin*:

"The NEA passed a resolution affirming its opposition to performance-based pay at its convention. The resolution has sparked debate around the country, including criticism in several major newspapers. A *Washington Post* editorial described unions as 'too often simply defending the status quo, even when that status quo means inferior education for too many children.' A *Chicago Tribune* editorial began 'Few professions reward workers merely for showing up. Many public schools do, though.' In an op-ed, Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, chided the union for claiming to stand for reform while in reality focussing only on the short-term interests of its members. Andrew Rotherham, of the Progressive Policy Institute, criticized the union for its reflexive opposition to new ideas."

A catfight is in play among NEA rank and file over high stakes testing. Some of the same anti-testing fervor we profiled last month dominates the ranks of NEA delegates, who wanted the NEA this year to go on record opposing high stakes testing. One particular delegate writes on an anti-testing list-serve:

"I introduced new business item 63 at the representative assembly...which urged NEA to assist state affiliates in lobbying for a ban on high-stakes tests. [It was] referred to committee. What committee will this go to and what will happen to this new business item? What would have happened had it been approved? Resolution B55 details our philosophy about standardized tests as does line 47 under Legislative Concerns: NEA opposes reliance on a single test for determining a student's future or as an indicator of school success. Bob Chase addressed this issue in his article 'Tests and Sensibility' in NEA Today last January. How have these words in Resolutions, Legislation, and from the President's Corner been acted upon? NEA touts a commitment to advancing the cause of public education but has pandered to legislators and to corporate America on the issue of high-stakes testing. We have got to have the courage and the principles to publicly oppose these tests no matter the consequences. We are the largest and most powerful union in the nation. We must use this to our advantage to speak out for our students who have become pawns in a political game for over which they have no control. We, the true experts, cannot be a party to this testing travesty any longer."

How, we wonder, does this union delegate explain the progress of 83 schools in the District of Columbia, who for the first time in recent memory increased test scores upon the heels of standards and testing hitting the District? More than a few DC school principals have cited the focus on tests as largely responsible.

Hands in the Cookie Jar. The IRS and Federal Election Commission (FEC) are investigating whether or not the NEA has violated the rules barring significant use of tax exempt funds for political purposes. After scrutinizing NEA documents Landmark Legal Foundation found that the same union that boasts an ability to oppose legislation and elect NEA-friendly legislators does not report any political expenditures on its federal tax return as required by the IRS. While NEA's political arm *is* permitted political expenditures, NEA maintains that its general kitty of money is not used at all for political purposes. According to Landmark, this is despite the fact that the last several annual NEA budgets include line item expenditures for political action and the recruiting and election of candidates for school boards and other offices. "The issue is whether the NEA leadership in Washington is complying with federal tax laws and whether it is fully informing America's teachers and the public about the enormous reach of its political activities," said Landmark's Mark Levin.

Dave's World

An occasional feature by Gen-X research fellow and resident reform expert Dave DeSchryver

We stopped getting cable television in my house. It was decided that the time can be better spent and the savings were well worth the experiment, but that decision may have been too hasty. It seems that visual images may make me a better writer:

- According to the North West Regional Education Lab (NWREL) **picture books** are critical tools that get middle school students to write better. It sparks their imagination and activates enthusiasm. To advance this tool, NWREL is providing teachers with instructional videos on the use of picture books. So, not only is a picture worth a thousand words, but it appears that it generates a thousands words in students. And here is the genius: not only can students avoid that toilsome, eye-straining, snooze-promoting sentence-diagramming process, but teachers don't have to read about teaching it either... just get the VCR and press play! I think the government is smartly spending our dollars. Unquestionably our nation's young writers need more visual input and less grammatical foundation, and highly qualified English teachers are far overrated and much more expensive than a VCR tape.

- If you want to compete in a marathon you have to train your legs and lungs incrementally and with discipline in your diet and running. In fact, I've never encountered an athlete who wins without proper training. Those that do well are usually more experienced and have a **well-developed training program**. They are the ones who stand at the starting gate and say "been there, done that," with confidence.

So it is in the world of education, when during the week of June 19th headlines across Florida testified to the obvious: "hard work paid off" (*Sun Sentinel*, 6/21/00). Under the Florida A+ Plan, last year the Lauderdale Lakes Middle School received an "F." If they received another "F" this year the students would have been given the freedom to choose a better public or private school. Principal Robert Martin wanted neither the failing label nor the chance of losing students to other schools, so the school began to train. He scheduled a disciplined and incremental plan titled "Mission Possible." The campaign included getting the word out to the community that the

students needed to pass the test, tutoring, weekly meetings with staff and daily checks with students. The school also relied heavily on reading and writing coaches. The school started a reading program in which all students were required to read a book every two weeks. Students attended after school math and reading camps and students were required to keep journals. According to school officials, they were not teaching to the test, but they were teaching to the state's academic standards – information that children are expected to know at every grade level. The students passed the test and the school is no longer an "F" school. You can be sure students taking the test were nervous but confident, being told and able to tell themselves, "been there, done that."

- Also on June 21st, the 6th circuit court of appeals heard oral arguments regarding the **Cleveland scholarship program**. The program is in its fourth year and it's providing vouchers of up to \$2,250 per student to about 4,000 low-income children living in the Cleveland public school district. The legal arguments regarding the Establishment clause are not well defined. The courts have been vague on what money can and cannot be used to educate children in private sectarian schools. So let me make it simple: the arguments boil down to the role of the parents. Opponents of the program claim that parents are mere conduits of education dollars, and that the state is supporting the school where the dollars arrive. Proponents believe that the decision of the individual parent is critical, that the state is supporting the individual right of the parent. Presiding Judge L. Ryan seemed familiar with these conflicting views. He asked New York Attorney Marvin Frankel (who is arguing on behalf of the teacher's unions and against the rights of parents) if giving parents the authority to decide where to spend the money made any difference. How would you answer, where do you stand? Does your decision mean anything when it comes to your kid's education? If you asked Marvin Frankel, he'd likely tell you that you don't mean a darn thing... legally speaking of course. Yeah sure, of course, Marvin, of course.

- "**Tenure** does not grant job protection for the incompetent," Michigan college professor John McDonald told the AP press on July 4th. But ask anyone who has tried to lay off a failing teacher. It's near impossible and very expensive! Mary Jo McGrath, a lawyer in Santa Barbara, California, who has specialized in helping school districts fire teachers, told the *Christian Science Monitor* about the nastiness. She handled a case for the Grossmont Union High School District that tried to fire a horrible teacher.

The case dragged on for almost a decade, concluding in 1995 with the teacher's dismissal — and a price tag of more than \$300,000 for the school district. "Does not grant job protection" ...my gluteus maximus!.

- Public education in our **nation's capital takes a step toward accountability**. In an effort to promote greater responsibility for the decisions of the district's board of education, Mayor Anthony Williams prompted a special election that allows the mayor to appoint 4 members of a 9-person board of education. The other five members are elected. After a close election the Mayor's accountability plan won. Interestingly, in a televised forum this month, Mayor Williams told an audience that DC needs the school board reform or "we'll get vouchers." It's an interesting cause and effect.

Dave's World, *continued*

Meanwhile, on her departure as superintendent to go to San Francisco, Arlene Ackerman wrote a letter to every DC parent urging them to send their children to school this September. Now that's action!

- Take That! New Jersey's charter schools are constitutional, says the State's supreme court in a ruling issued late last month. "The choice to include charter schools among the array of public entities providing educational services to our pupils is a choice **appropriately made by the legislature** so long as the constitutional mandate to provide a thorough and efficient system of education in New Jersey is satisfied," wrote the justices. The three school boards which sued to put charters out of business are out of luck. In the future, any board that wants to complain must demonstrate that a charter "jeopardizes" their ability to educate those who remain in the district's schools.

On Content

Don't know much about history? Sad but true, a report about the inadequate history knowledge of students at some of America's top colleges re-opens the content debate for us this month. To quote *The New York Times*, "Nearly 80 percent of seniors at 55 top colleges...including Harvard and Princeton, received a "D" or an "F" on a 34-question high school level test on American history.

Of course, it's *only* been 14 years since the 1986 pilot assessment of U.S. history by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) found that less than 40% of high school seniors knew the period in which the Civil War was fought, and today the same number of collegians are in the dark. I hear some of you testing critics out there saying, "so what about such trivial dates and times. What matters are the concepts..." Of course, I say back to you, dates alone are not important, but if you don't know when the Civil War was fought how can you know the impact of that struggle on Americans today and how they live. If a child thinks the Civil War is "history" without a fix in time it's unlikely he'll learn the value of that lesson.

At roughly the same time as the above revelation, the American Textbook Council released a major, must-read, report entitled *History Textbooks at the New Century*, which gives us some idea of why collegians are woefully uneducated in the subject. The report finds that most history textbooks today, "both in writing and content" seriously miss the main goals of a history book, particularly at the elementary level. This generation of textbooks "seem to reflect lowered sights for general education, coupled with the conviction that a snappy, scattered format with few words and many classroom activities will alleviate student boredom with history and reading and writing." Gil Sewall of the Council also found that "editorial confusion reigns; content is thinner and what there is is increasingly deformed by identity politics."

These points were illustrated by the following passage out of McGraw-Hill's *A New Nation*. To make our point, we bolded the stuff that may be more "identity politics" than necessary content. This is just a fraction of what the report analyzes:

New Ways to Farm

Railroads, new plows, and windmills allowed farming to come to the Great Plains. The kind of wheat that would grow there was introduced by **Russian** immigrants.

Chinese immigrants brought farming skills to their new homes. In Oregon, a **Chinese** immigrant named Ah Bing bred the famous Bing cherry. In Florida, Lue Gim Gong bred a frost-resistant orange, starting the Florida citrus fruit industry.

In Texas and the West, raising cattle had become big business, often pushing out original ranchers and cowboys – the **Mexican American** rancheros and vaqueros. Cowboys herded cattle to Abilene and Dodge City in Kansas. The cattle were carried by train to Chicago, which became the world's largest meat packing center.

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We agree with textbook expert Sewall that this (among several passages) makes up “a stew of historical nonsense. It forsakes the Oregon Trail and covered wagons to California and Scandinavian immigrants founding places like Minnesota, that is, the real story of the American West. It is new history at its very worst, a pastiche that denies fifth graders a chance to taste and learn about the greatest migration of modern times, the American peopling of the continent.”

There's tons more worth reading. Get a copy of the report and take action to ensure that your schools have real history: (212) 870-2760 or email atc@columbia.edu.

Not only are our children not knowing much about history, but a report by the American Association for the Advancement of Science finds that biology textbooks are lacking in content but full of pictures and graphics that impede their ability to learn. “Illustrations are often complicated and ‘inadequately explained,’ and students...receive little help in interpreting concepts they are expected to grasp.” While it's unclear whether the AAAS' report (to be found at www.project2061.org) is completely on course, it's time for schools to tap their local expertise to evaluate the programs they use before subjecting children to years of inadequate study.

Teacher Quality Focus

A plan to package some tried and true business approaches to recruiting, retaining and rewarding teachers has been unveiled by the Milken Family Foundation and will be piloted so far in 4 states, whose state chiefs belong to the Education Leader's Council. The Teacher Advancement Program calls for restructuring the way teachers are promoted and rewarded. Multiple career paths and market-based compensation are the two pillars of the program, which provides schools flexibility in paying teachers and helps teachers grow in their jobs, with master teachers earning up to \$100,000. Program architect Lowell Milken noted that in most jobs people are rewarded for working hard while teachers' pay is largely based on seniority. Milken asks, “Why would we ever think that somehow the education system would operate under a whole different set of principles from everything else we're accustomed to in society?” For more information, go to www.mff.org.

Of Law, and Sausage

"Imagine a federal education program that rewards economic segregation. Imagine further that this program has spent about \$120 billion over 35 years without narrowing the achievement gap between poor kids and their better-off peers. Wouldn't members of Congress be clamoring to change it?"

"The program is Title I, the single biggest federal outlay for K-12 education. Two congressional mandated evaluations of Title I have shown that it has not improved the performance of poor children relative to others."

These are excerpts from a *Wall Street Journal* article by scholar Diane Ravitch of the Brookings Institute (whose latest book entitled: Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms was just released by Simon and Schuster. It explores the history of 20th century public education and reveals much about how history repeats itself, regardless of outcomes.) Ravitch says that while a dramatically changed Title I could have an impact on how schools operate and how children fare, Congress is loathe to make major reforms in the delivery of this program. The evidence is so clear, and yet nothing but talk resulted.

A leader in the fight to change Title I for the better, the principled Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman said, "It may be stimulating. It may be fascinating. It may even be educational. But if it's only a debate without a result, it does nothing really for the **children of our country.**"

Next time you hear someone talking about giving Washington more educational programs to administer, remember (or look up!) Winston Churchill's famous comment about law and sausage and think Title I.

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Of course, as we were reminded this July 4, bravery and principle are two bedrock characteristics upon which this nation was founded and for which it has warred to advance many times. Here's to more of both for those who want to really help the "**children of our country.**"

See you in September, for our annual *Back-to-School* issue. In the meantime, enjoy the rest of your summer!


Jeanne Allen