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

As you read this month, we know the answer to the question that has occupied us all for so long... Who is our next president? And who are the other new policymakers that will have an impact on our children's education? More importantly, what are they going to do? Throughout the fall we reminded readers and observers to use reform as a barometer in their voting. Now that the voting is over, the real work begins. It's time to hold feet to fire and make sure it's parents, not systems, to whom lawmakers respond. It helps to remind as to the issues that need their attention most.

Eureka!

Originally Heureka, it is Greek for "I have found it," exclaimed by Archimedes upon discovering how to test the purity of Hiero's crown. The term 'Eureka' most epitomizes the following stories, where school officials make discoveries that we hope will result in progress.

- Lessons on how to evaluate teachers comes this month from **Pasco County, Florida**, which has decided to use the "value-added" approach to start evaluating teachers on how much their children learn. While the specific methods are up to individual schools, the performance component in compensation is an important start. The Florida Legislature is helping districts do this through the EDUCATE 2000 Act that requires districts to use performance as a factor in salary and bonus pay.



- **Connecticut** is going to start making grammar and spelling count. Really. Apparently kids have been more or less writing for fun, and to date, they've never been evaluated on these basics on the writing portion of the Connecticut Mastery but only on how well each student composes a story. Seems the Connecticut Council of Teachers of English does not count accuracy in grammar or spelling among the important elements of writing. The State Board of Education disagrees, and says that more than just creativity, the test will make answers about grammar, punctuation and spelling count next time. The Yankee State is often commended for its student achievement. With these fundamental pieces missing, we have to question what else they've been omitting.



• There were reports last year that affluent **Montgomery County, Maryland** may not be educating children as well as once thought. High school math scores were dismal, with more than 50% failure rates, owing in part to the math curricula. To his credit, the Superintendent commissioned studies to get to the heart of the problem. The "juries" are now in; *The Washington Times* summarizes: "[the county] must stop segregating poor students, use a consistent curriculum, align it with state tests and help teachers teach it better." It is important to remind policymakers that such words of wisdom are only possible because there were tests that allowed measurements, and the publicly available information led to outrage, which in turn led to the studies commissioned. Now, the district seems poised to do something about the long-running problem.

Of course this is the same county that won't let the Jaime Escalante Charter School come into existence. Which leads us to our next section...



On Charter Schools

• *Maryland, my Maryland.* Could it be that the state that is impervious to reform may yet be able to eke out a simple charter school bill this legislative session? Much remains to be seen, but we're encouraged by a briefing in front of the legislative committee that handles education at October's end. In addition to the usual education groups, the committee did host our good friend Gail Hawkins-Bush from the Alliance for Progress Charter School in Philly, who bent their ears about the realities of what a charter school means to so many people and why strong laws matter. We hope that message continues to dominate the debate. Readers recall the proposed Jaime Escalante Charter School and its ongoing efforts to convince affluent Montgomery County to give it a place in the district. It's still fighting to be born, and the more this group is pushed aside, the more there is support for a real law. Several grassroots coalitions are building for Maryland reform and CER has its own coordinator for the state. Call if you want more information.

• By the time you read this you'll know the fate of *the Washington State charter school initiative*, which was gaining ground as we toiled on this paragraph. As momentum built endorsements were earned for the charter effort from ten daily newspapers and both the National Urban League and its Seattle chapter. Its CEO says, "To many African Americans in Seattle and Tacoma and across this country, charter schools are seen as the most dramatic development in educational reform since desegregation." He's right on the money.

• The Urban League must be wrong, according to a new paper the *National School Boards Association* (NSBA) released last month that says there's no evidence that charter schools work. This relatively shoddy look at existing research selectively concluded that charters offered little innovation or diversity either. Of course, the NSBA statement on charters reads, in part, that they "recognize charter schools as one of several mechanisms *available to local boards* [emphasis added], provided that the school board retain sole authority to grant the charter."

• More on school boards: It should also be noted that where school boards do retain the sole authority to grant the charter, they don't charter very much. One case in point is *Fairfax County, Virginia*, where it just voted to NOT accept charter school applications, which means 162,000 children will never have any educational option other than that already dictated by the school district.

• With a history of great basketball and the Indy 500, one would hope *the Hoosier State* would be among the next states to be successful in their drive for reform that has charter schools as a key strategy for getting better schools to all children. State Senator Teresa Lubbers has long tried in her capacity as Chair of the Education Committee to get a charter school law. With a growing bi-partisan coalition that includes Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson and lots of grass roots leaders, it may be the year.

• Now on to *Wyoming*, where plans for the Snowy Range Academy continue to build. The proposed Core Knowledge K-9 that uses Saxon Math and the Spalding reading program is the brainchild of a devoted group of parents in Albany County, a district that recently did away with letter grades — to the parent's shock — to somehow "comply with state standards." Wyoming Citizens for Educational Choice is one of the local pioneer groups not only trying to get a school started but trying to get the law strengthened so that the school board's intransigence on charter proposals is not a roadblock to new choices for children. Our read of history tells us it's not just the Mountain Men that were destined for roadblocks in this territory. Check out the group's website (still under construction) at www.geocities.com/snowyrangeacademy.

• *North Carolina's* State Board of Education Chairman Phil Kirk paid a recent visit to The Franklin Academy, a charter school in Wake Forest and is reportedly interested in seeing the charter cap raised to 200 for which he is to be commended. The Tarheel State is the sight of some terrific charter innovations. Carter Community School in Walltown (near Durham) took over the old Walltown school building which was derelict but is now transformed, with the help of some private funding, from Duke University, among others. Charter entrepreneurs like the state's Peter Morcombe, whose group Financial Reform for Excellence in Education has five charter schools, is recommending innovations like NEMOs— short for not-for-profit educational management organizations — to help meet Kirk's target.

• Speaking of caps, *Georgia* was all the talk this summer when Governor Roy Barnes set about to promote and eventually pass his reform plan. He advocated for charter schools, and has even invited new people to come to Georgia to start them. Only problem is his state board chairman now wants every charter school proposal to comply with seven-pages of new roadblocks. Otis Brumby would require charter seekers to have to prove their student achievement would be higher than existing schools, as well as other mind-numbing, impossible hurdles. So stop the presses on those "Let A Thousand Peach Blossoms Bloom" bumper stickers. So much for reform, Guv.

No Education Crisis?

One group touts “the good news about American Education.” President Clinton, in response to then-candidate Bush’s assertion that we’re in an education *recession* counters that we’re in an “education revival.” And the Don’t Worry, Be Happy Hall-of-Famers who write books about it and give out awards to anyone who doesn’t believe the alarming statistics continue unabated on the lecture circuit. Oh, and Chase at the NEA says “the majority of schools are working hard and doing a good job.” That may be, but it strikes us that thirty-percent proficiency rates in reading doesn’t make for a “good job.”

To put the real state of play into perspective — and show once again the crisis isn’t of our own making — we thought our readers might appreciate seeing just a few recent headlines about the state of American education from coast to coast:

30% of Students in S.F. (San Francisco) Off Track to Graduate; Schools not meeting new criteria

(San Francisco Chronicle, 10/5/00)

Most Eighth Graders Fail State Math Test

(New York Times, 10/13/00)

Due to Crowding, Schools May Promote Failing Pupils

(Boston Globe, 7/7/2000)

Many Students Not Ready For College

(Contra Costa Times, 10/17/2000)

Nearly A Third Facing Summer School, Retention

(Associated Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 5/12/2000)

Students Fail Classes But Move Up, D.M. Promotes 300 To High School Despite Eighth-Grade Troubles.

(Des Moines Register, 10/01/2000)

AND MORE PROOF THAT STANDARDS AND TESTING DO MATTER:

Parents Back School Standards, *(Washington Post, 10/5/00)*

...about the Public Agenda’s findings on parent attitudes toward standards and corresponding tests, that found that “reports of the ‘death’ of the standards movement have been wildly exaggerated.”

Schools Better at Meeting Standards *(Washington Times, 10/26/00)*

...about how more schools met standards for accreditation this year as measured by cumulative state standards’ scores. Superintendents are proud of results and attribute them to “hard work.”

Short Takes

- Results from math tests continue to reveal woefully unprepared students. Whether it be in suburbia, where in some counties less than half of high school students could do basic algebra, or New York city where 8th graders “scored miserably for the second consecutive year on state tests – with a whopping 77 percent failing the math exam,” achievement remains abysmal. That’s one reason to cheer for **California’s new law to require every student, starting with this year’s 9th graders, to take Algebra I.** Algebra teaches children not just to do higher order math, but how to organize one’s thoughts, address logical reasoning and broaden one’s thinking. So it was rather puzzling to read of one superintendent’s problems with the new law. In showing his disaffection, Dean Waldfogel of Irvine Unified commented, “When was the last time you used algebra?” Gosh, I guess we should forget about history and science, too. And we wonder why some children think education is irrelevant.

- The Ivory Tower was in all its glory this October when **the now infamous Rand Corporation paper on Texas tests** was released. Its conclusion was that when looking at the results of Texas students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Texas Assessment (TAAS), the claims of rising student achievement — particularly among minorities — doesn’t hold up. The fact that the two tests are completely different and one is based on a sample when the other is based on individual achievement did not apparently taint the “study” as it should have from the beginning. Instead, within minutes of its release the paper found its way to then candidate Gore’s hotel rooms, and within minutes of that the press declared the Texas miracle to be a bust, without any confirmation of its findings. After the facts surfaced about the shoddy report and its lack of research base, the findings were all but dismissed.

Real people who live in Texas were quite put off about the whole thing. Like the woman who wrote, “As someone who works closely with education in Texas, over the past few years we have increasingly seen a higher level of importance placed on the youth of our state, particularly in regards to education.” Another writes: “I’m really tired of reading and hearing how terrible the education programs are here in Texas. My grandchildren are certainly getting a better education than their parents did... I can honestly say that the present grade/jr. hs generation in my family stands the best chance of excelling academically because of the changes our Governor has sponsored.”

- **No standards? Iowa** is that ‘build it, they’ll come’ state that has longed bragged about its *lack* of frenzy over state standards. They always do well and respect local control so why centralize any of it, the argument often goes. Yet we were stunned to learn of some huge issues in achievement in Des Moines (in particular) where social promotion is rampant and where the basics are often lacking in rising 9th graders. One-fourth of students entering ninth grade in 1992 failed to grade four years later. And while recent problems seem to be on the right radar screens, we can’t help wondering how many other districts are letting kids slide without some larger, state accountability in place.

A View from the Blob

Back by popular demand, this section which both riles and reinvigorates...

- With increasing numbers of very independently minded school board members taking office, the **National School Boards Association** is more aggressively trying to fight vouchers with its new Voucher Strategy Center (which more aptly sounds like a leftover agency of the cold war). In one issue paper, NSBA argues the following contradictory point, which if it weren't so sad would actually be funny:

"These studies (referring to recent achievement gains in students in voucher programs) are 'more of the same' from pro-voucher groups that selectively pick one or two positive findings of a particular study, while downplaying less flattering findings, and attempt to paint the studies of clear evidence that vouchers work."

Kind of like the NSBA, which paints all studies as negative and plucks selective findings to make its case?

- And rather than recommend some real reform, **NSBA continues to recommend federal education funding** as a priority for members, and has come out with a "School Board Member's Guide to Promote Federal Investment." No federal program is too small for their attention, and candidate questions are focussed on asking whether or not the candidate supports this or that funding increase or investment. It's as if they're in a huge 20-year time warp and have missed the reform discussion. That's probably why increasing numbers of school board members are calling CER and groups who advocate reform, hungry for substantive recommendations. They're in luck, as CER works to expand its services to these important public servants.

- As if the **National Board for Professional Teaching Standards** — which is likewise focussed on process not results — wasn't enough, there's word that a similar "professional certification" board at the national level for administrators is in the offing. No doubt they think they, too, can get wads of federal money. But with a shortage of administrators that stay as permanent, effective managers, one could argue that rather than professional certification they should be recruiting savvy business people and non-traditional people to fill jobs. The proposed National Policy Board for Educational Administration will seek to give additional brownie points to administrators that pass certain reviews and evaluations by their colleagues, and no doubt add to their salaries because of it. Problem is, there's little merit attached.

- Speaking of that concept, "The Stamp of Merit," by the Education Intelligence Agency (EIA) discusses some of the more **ludicrous resolutions to come out of the NEA** convention this summer. They passed a resolution opposing the moratorium on Internet taxes, for example. One NEA member wanted a vote to avenge the "framing of Mumia Abu-Jamal," who was convicted of killing a Philly police officer. There are scores of other non-education tirades assembled each year. It's an interesting read, and you can get information about this publication via email at Educintel@aol.com.

- North Carolina Governor **Jim Hunt took issue with former Labor Secretary Robert Reich's** argument that vouchers are part of the solution. In making his anti-choice argument, Hunt unwittingly makes the argument for vouchers:

"It has taken us nearly *two decades* to pull together these and other strategies relating to curricula, teacher training, early childhood education and other elements..."

Two decades? Hmm... And he's bragging? Governor Hunt later says "it's wishful thinking to assert that struggling schools will somehow magically transform themselves because of a threat that some of their students will take a voucher, pack up their bags and go elsewhere."

Well, it may be wishful thinking (which one could argue we need more of these days) **BUT IT'S TRUE**, too. Maybe a little trip to Florida and Milwaukee is in order sometime soon, as well as some reading that doesn't come from the Blob. The package is on its way.

- "The Clark County, NV school district — despite pleas of poverty in the fastest growing county in the nation — scraped up enough cash to buy 60 diesel trucks. The funds came through the 1998 bond measure, which was earmarked for capital construction. At a time when magnet schools face cutbacks, the district spends multimillions on improvements at the high school football fields. 'The feeding frenzy is on, the money has to be spent or allocations will be changed next year,' one district insider said. 'Until we have accountability and independent audits, improvement is a long shot.'" (*Las Vegas Journal Review*, 9/6/00)

- Can you imagine telling a teacher that she **MUST travel an hour away from her community and children to take a job** when there's an opening nearby? It is apparently happening to some first year teachers in **New York**, much to their chagrin.

First Chancellor Harold O. Levy created a fellows program — designed in part by Teach for America — which attracted hundreds of bright, qualified professionals to teach in troubled areas in the Big Apple. The Board of Education was then forced by court order to assign new teachers to failing schools first before any other openings in non-failing schools could be filled. The argument that failing schools need good teachers is a good one, but rather than force teachers into situations that are untenable for them (and cause demoralization and more shortages to boot), the state could do a number of things to alleviate its long term teacher crisis problem for good:

- Offer the school to a non- or for-profit charter group or neighborhood group to take over and reconstitute;
- Give children in failing schools a choice and close down those that attract few;
- Evaluate staff and give those who pass with flying colors the ability to move to another school of their choice;
- Tie pay to performance, tests to standards, and provide more money to those schools that succeed...

...And more. The idea of tackling a big city school system with court orders and band-aids only prolongs the agony of students who are trapped. The Commish (of Education) should get off Levy's back and let him run the schools with whatever strategies he wants to employ. As long as he's accountable, too, he'll make better progress independently than under the long arm of the state.

We give thanks...

...for people like Sarah Tantillo (New Jersey Charter Resource Center), Dan Quisenberry (Michigan Association of Public School Academies), Sue Bragato (California Network of Education Charters) and so many of their colleagues, who wake up in the morning devoted to ensuring the growth, health and welfare of charter schools and the children they serve.

...for parent groups like PASS, which created and sustains the Verona, Wisconsin Core Knowledge Charter School for its 310 children, often in the face of adversity from their district.

...for citizens like Tom Murtagh in New Hampshire who take the initiative to educate and inform other citizens about the need for better schooling opportunities. Murtagh reproduced the Center's charter school brochure and distributed it personally to 3,000 homes in his community.

...that states like Pennsylvania are putting school districts on notice that if you fail children, we'll remove authority and turn it over to real people who want to be held accountable for results.

...for the multitude of school board members who are working for REAL reform on the ground and in their communities. We know its hard, but your perseverance to focus on achievement is making an impact. Our thanks go to people like Harriet Berlin in Nebraska, Marjorie Egarian in New Jersey, Gary Tomak in California and countless more who as board members recognize their first duty is to the kids.

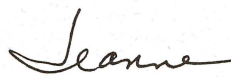
...that the First District Court of Appeals on October 3 reversed a lower court decision and declared Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program constitutional. The court noted that nothing in the Florida Constitution "clearly prohibits the Legislature from allowing the well-delineated use of public funds for private school education, particularly in circumstances where the Legislature finds such use is necessary."

...to supporters of the Center for Education Reform (you know who you are!) who make our work possible, and in so doing, make reform happen.



Halloween is over and thank goodness! Now maybe all those politicians will take off their masks...☺ Next month, a full election roundup and our annual Holiday issue. Boy time flies! Just remember that if you have a chance to effect a child.

Happy Thanksgiving!


Jeanne Allen