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

We hope you enjoyed the special package of CER premium materials you received about how charter school laws stack up and how the charters themselves look and operate as evidenced through CER's Survey of Charter Schools 2001. Of course, making schools better is about more than any one single reform effort so we get back to the broad business this month of introducing you to the latest ideas, action and thinking behind education reform in the U.S.

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Parents Talk, Schools Walk

The news media is suddenly recognizing the significant trend among parents to question authority, dive into school reform and not put up with mediocrity as readily as they once did. Most of us have fond memories of walking up the street to our public schools and our parents content never to question whether we would get what we needed or not. Today's inquisitive minds are different, and hopefully more easily educated about what ails even the best public schools.

This trend was recognized last year by *Investor's Business Daily*, and just in the last month by the *New York Times*, and even *Education Week* in its coverage of CER's Leader's Forum focussing on the individual efforts of grassroots leaders.
From the *Times'* article:

"[P]arents say most schools have moved so far away from the fundamentals that their children come home knowing about the Holocaust but not World War II, Babylonian math but not fractions. Children cannot think critically, they retort, if they do not have the basic content to think about. Many tried for several years to change the system by talking to principals or running for a seat on the school board. Others hired tutors. But increasingly, parents horrified by what they call progressive education run amok have been starting their own schools, teaching ...enlightened back-to-basics, grounded in grammar and spelling, historical facts and mathematics." [4/28/01]

One mom called it "organizing on the sidelines of the soccer field," and wrote for CER's *Parent Power!* newsletter,

"The sidelines became the perfect breeding ground for our parent group. That fall became the 'winter of our discontent.'" We soccer moms were learning a great deal from each other about what was or was not happening in our children's classrooms." [Jan., 2000]

The importance of this trend is that in an atmosphere of pressure of available school choices, schools eventually do have to walk the walk. With legislators increasingly stuck over making substantial reforms happen and their alliances with the education lobbies growing all the time, the reasoned parent voices become all the more important in ensuring that reform blossoms.

From the States

Once again the states are leading the charge for education reform, and while some of the results of legislative deliberations in state houses are not all good, the following run down may help to illustrate where the real action is and should remain. (Note: *Since legislative sessions have been closing for the year almost weekly, some of the information may be somewhat dated when it reaches you. For updates see www.edreform.com*)

Where the Fat Lady has sung:

- She sang loud and hard in **Indiana** — a long time CER Partner — where the nation's seventh strongest charter school law now reigns with universities and the Mayor of Indianapolis allowed to charter side by side with school boards. The Indiana law was the culmination of a seven-year effort by many state leaders, most notably State Senator and Education Chair Theresa Lubbers. Lubbers worked hand-in-hand with leaders both of education and industry to stand firm on the principles of a good, solid charter law. As a result, the Governor from the other party signed her bill and many people wanting to provide these other public school opportunities to children are waiting in the wings. For more information on the law and its potential see [CER's News Alert, "Indy Scores Charter Victory"](#) www.edreform.com/press/2001/indy.htm.
- Charter fans in **Iowa, Maryland, Maine** and **Tennessee** were also hoping to see their Fat Ladies sing right, but legislators there failed to muster the same courage and foresight among a majority to allow their states to join the charter bandwagon. Some follow up action in a few of those states is worth noting: parents and even a charter group in Maryland are mounting forces again to bring the issue to life next year, when perhaps a political campaign will help shed light on the issue. Meanwhile, Maine and Tennessee have created charter school study committees that we hope will be rigorous and of value to all involved.
- It's also over, for now, in **Arizona**. The legislature failed to provide the necessary funding to make sure the state's AIMS test based on the standards is properly implemented and taught, leaving too much of the achievement burden on children themselves and not on the schools that claim to be there to help them become well-educated.

The Grand Canyon State's leader of reform and CER Friend Lisa Graham Keegan has also moved on to greener pastures as she takes the helm of the Education Leader's Council to mold that organization into a larger, more permanent force for change in state and federal education policy. More on ELC, it's upcoming September conference in Atlanta with invited participants including President George Bush and Lisa's own announcement can be found at the ELC Website www.educationleaders.org.

- Modest improvements to state charter school laws were enacted in **Wyoming, Florida and Alaska**, For a full overview of how the laws stack up go to www.edreform.com/charter_schools/laws/ranking_2001.pdf.

Where the Fat Lady has yet to sing:

- The Yellow Rose of Texas may turn up wilted if some legislators who want to squash the state's charter schools have their way! While Governor Rick Perry, Education Commission Jim Nelson and charter leaders are working hard to keep efforts to improve charter school accountability rational, a legislative report by charter skeptics determined that nothing short of a moratorium would help the state's charter school get better. While there's no real logic in that supposition, politics isn't usually based on logic. We'll see this time.

- **Pennsylvania's** former education Secretary Eugene Hickok was barely in his new office as Undersecretary for the U.S. Department of Education when his old colleague, Senate Education Chairman Jim Rhodes, was introducing a similar moratorium on charter schools in Pennsylvania.

Also in the Keystone State, news of the reform developments in **Chester** came in early March when the state announced that three different private companies would be share the role of helping the beleaguered city's schools become healthy once again. Under contract, the Edison Schools, Inc. will run one elementary school, two middle schools, and three combined; LearnNOW, Inc. will run one elementary, one middle, and one high school; and Mosaica Education, Inc. will run one elementary school. Neighborhood parents are reportedly beaming at the choices that lay ahead and the new, substantial interest the state has shown by doing something about their schools, rather than by simply passing another appropriation measure. The reforms will affect more than 6,000 children.

- **Illinois** may raise the cap on charter schools in Chicago from 15 to 30;
 - **Michigan** may remove the cap on university-sponsored charter schools;
 - **Missouri** may permit charter schools beyond the city limits of St. Louis and Kansas City;
 - **South Carolina** may permit charter applicants to seek a charter directly from the state, as well as from the local school district
 - **Ohio** may create a third chartering authority (a State Community Schools Board), as well as ease the facilities and transportation burdens on charter schools;
 - and **New Hampshire** may shift chartering authority to the state and away from the local school districts which have yet to authorize a single charter.

Where the Fat Lady has clearly started warming up, and the goods news is that she's on key:

- Earlier this month the legislature sent to Florida Governor Jeb Bush legislation that will expand dramatically the special education voucher program, making it available to 340,000 students with disabilities who are unable to obtain the services they need at their traditional public school. Together with a dollar-for-dollar corporate tax credit for businesses donating to scholarship funds for children in poverty, Florida is now the national showcase for reform in the area of school choice.

You Know It's Time for Reform When...

...Schools start creating perverse incentives for passing tests rather than simply making their curricula and programs better so that children are always prepared. One of the elementary schools in the affluent suburb of Bethesda, Maryland created a "MSPAP playground" for children who came to school on time and had their "special red pen." So when one little girl missed her bus and showed up at school late, she had to go on the regular playground and later suffer the taunts of her fellow students. Marc Fisher, a *Washington Post* reporter wrote (5/10/01) a stunning column about this kind of activity throughout Maryland and Virginia. Another example in Virginia is if you pass the test in each subject area you get a five-point bonus, allowing one child who failed a teacher's course to pass the class because of the five added points.

The solution of course is not to get rid of the tests or the pressure they bring, but to start with leaders at each school who should put an end to such misplaced practices.

...The public is clamoring for teachers and your superintendent is using them to perform trivial administrative tasks rather than to teach. That's the case in New York City of all places, where the Board of Education actually has a policy that requires 1,000 veteran teachers to do something other than teach, while a major shortage is at hand. (*The New York Post*, 4/20/01)

...A middle school student is rewarded by publication of an article in a local newspaper depicting school in an unflattering light. The girl portrays the following scenario of her "demanding" school: "...the chimes sound and everyone quiets down. To make it simple, we get out our homework, pass it in, write assignments down, do the day's activity, learn the mandatory new thing we didn't already know and leave.... After break...we basically do the same thing we did in first period...I get through third period, showing some interest in what's being taught — and finally it's the last period of the day." (*Bethesda Gazette*, 4/18/01)

...Academics observe art to make conclusions about testing. According to an *Education Week* story last December entitled "Study of Art Draws Conclusions on Tests," a Columbia University Teacher's College study of student's DRAWING themselves taking the Massachusetts state test (known as the MCAS) led authors to conclude that "high stakes tests diminish how hard some youngsters try."

...Federal money is used to make cartoons. We learned recently that the cartoon series entitled Dragon Tales is "funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education." Wouldn't it be a better use of funds to get the kids to turn off the TV rather than give them more excuses to watch it??

...The major school-employees union president Bob Chase appears on a picket line with Hawaii's teachers demanding increased pay and benefits. Clad in his Hawaiian shirt, the papers in the Aloha State printed a picture of Chase next to union signs that said "Bob says CUT TO THE CHASE – Settle Now." Cute.

...A county expels 2,000 students each year. That's the case in Lake County, Indiana, where the state's new charter law has been a dream for Anita Dygert-Gearheart who plans to get those kids back in school.

The School Employee Unions

"Teacher union" is a misnomer.

The term suggests an organization for and by teachers. In reality, the American Federation of Teachers represents 1.1 million education employees, *only half of whom are teachers*. The rest include nurses, custodians, bus drivers, secretaries, and cafeteria workers.

The National Education Association has 2.6 million members, more than 12 percent of whom are not teachers.

There's another problem with using the term "teachers union." The term suggests that teachers are voluntarily associated with such organizations. In reality, most states legally require some association, as when collective bargaining is required of school districts by the state. Woe be to the teacher who "voluntarily" decides not to participate. Not only would she be duly scolded by colleagues (and have been), but in the urban arena, there are a whole host of stories about threatening calls, slashed tires and the like. Sure, there are many teachers who pay only what is called the "agency fee," meaning the part of the "voluntary" dues that are used to secure rights for all teachers by the union. But those agency fee employees are not often treated like colleagues.

Tracey Bailey would agree. He's the Florida Teacher of the Year who recently took over the national office of the **Association of American Educators**. AAE is a national teacher organization (teachers only!) that provides the support services public school teachers need to ensure they are protected in their roles and that they receive the access to information about modern education efforts that they need. Then there are the more than 18 groups that offer such services state by state, like the **Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE)**. These groups offer teachers a choice and an option, and not surprisingly, they are big in states where there is truly a choice, like Missouri, Georgia and Texas.

In total, there are currently 8 AAE state affiliates with two on the way and 18 other state-level independent teachers associations.

In short, membership is usually coercive, not voluntary. No longer should we be party to calling such groups teachers unions. So let's be fair to the membership. These are school employee unions at best, and while many may believe they should have every right to exist as a unit and have a seat at the policy table, let's be honest about what these organizations are and are not. They are neither unions of teachers, nor federations of teachers, nor education associations. They are **school employee unions**, and from here on out, that's what we'll be calling them.

Worth Mentioning

- North Carolina Congressman Cass Ballenger is not only an avid school reformer, being fond of his own state's charter schools and calling for more school choice, he puts his money and his efforts where his mouth is to help children. For 35 years he's been getting school supplies and materials to impoverished people in Central America and the Caribbean. For more info call his Foundation at (828) 327-2923.
- Meetings: Mark your calendar for the annual meeting of the American Educators in Private Practice for their 10th year in business on July 26-28 at the University of Southern California (USC), on July 26-28, 2001. For more information, contact Chris Yelich, Executive Director, AEPP, cyelich@aep.org or go to www.aep.org.

The Education Leader's Council's sixth annual conference goes down on September 28-29 in Atlanta, Georgia, hosted by State Superintendent of Schools Linda Shrenko. For more information, go to www.educationleaders.org.

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Top Ten True Statements Uttered by "Teacher Union" Officials

A special supplement by the Education Intelligence Agency: Mike Antonucci, Director (EducIntel@aol.com)

1) ***"They don't see them as relevant to their daily work life."***

- They see them as divisive and only concerned with insignificant issues; they can't tell their union is working for them.
- They view unions as being about protecting teachers, but not in the best interest of children.
- They see unions as beneficial only when you are in trouble.
- And they see them as being about collective negative action."

Wyoming Education Association Executive Director Jean Hayek, describing how new members view teachers' unions.

2) ***"However, one thing I am sure of is that we are not truly listening to***

all of our members. All the Association feedback we have to review - both nationally and in Ohio, supports this conclusion. In particular, we are not listening to our newer and younger members.... What would we really do differently if we really did listen to

our members? First, we would very rarely, if ever again, give a cent to a politician or a political party." *Former Ohio Education Association Executive Director Robert Barkley.*

3) "We are not willing to give up any employee rights."

California Teachers Association President Wayne Johnson.

4) "At the recent [Washington Education Association] Representative Assembly, we saw instances where WEA delegates were treated with disrespect because they shared perspectives that differed from those of the majority. Ignoring legitimate dissent is dumb, and it comes at a price. Glossing over differences or belittling those who express them is even worse. It's divisive, disrespectful and detrimental to the decision-making process. It creates hard feelings that detract from achieving the common goal."

Pat Steinburg, past president of the Washington Education Association Staff Organization.

5) "My friends, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience—and results in the military, and we need to tap into that. We need to do whatever it takes to rescue these kids."

American Federation of Teachers President Sandy Feldman.

6) "Many of our members simply do not trust our national affiliate."

Virginia Education Association President Cheri James.

7) "No community will long tolerate teachers doing well while their students are not."

Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski.

8) "Our goal is not to make law. Our objective is to kill a bad program any way we can. We will attack on any grounds."

National Education Association General Counsel Bob Chanin, describing NEA's school choice legal strategy.

9) "We've researched emerging private management companies, and we believe Edison is in a class by itself in terms of its academic program, infrastructure and ongoing research and development."

Pennsylvania State Education Association President Patsy Tallarico.

10) "Have you noticed the hysterical howling of the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association about the problem of having so many uncertified teachers in our nation's schools? To hear them tell it, putting an uncertified teacher in front of a classroom of youngsters is tantamount to child abuse.... [I]t is absurd to maintain completely artificial barriers to the entrance of smart, well-motivated people to the ranks of America's teachers. Why would sane people assume that to be a good teacher requires education courses which are almost universally disparaged for their lack of substance and intellectual rigor?"

Morty Rosenfeld, president of the Plainview-Old Bethpage Congress of Teachers (New York).

On Content

Dr. E.D. Hirsch (UVA) eloquently unlocks doors to the reading gap in his commentary, "The Latest Dismal NAEP Scores." (*Education Week*, 5/2/01) Hirsch argues that the latest 4th grade NAEP scores prove not a "reading gap" but a 50-year plus language or verbal gap, magnified by the teaching of the "hodge-podge" called language arts which does little to eradicate the verbal or language deficiencies with which many children arrive at school.

"Experts in vocabulary estimate that to understand spoken or written speech, a person needs to know about 95 percent of the words. The other 5 percent of word meanings can then be inferred from context. If we assume that an advantaged kindergartner knows 95 percent of the words in a teacher's remarks, or in a passage read aloud from a book, the result is that the child is not only gaining new knowledge from the exposition, she is also gaining new word meanings, by being able to infer the meaning of the other 5 percent of words — achieving a gain in both world knowledge and in word knowledge.

"The less advantaged child, by contract, suffers a double (or triple) loss. The exposition is puzzling from the start, because the child doesn't know enough of the words. He therefore fails to gain knowledge from the exposition, and also fails to learn new word meaning from the context. And to intensify that double loss, the child loses even that which he hath — his interest self-confidence and motivation to learn.

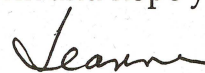
Texts like MacMillan/McGraw-Hill's *Writing and Language Handbook* for first graders prove the point. Lessons like this one on descriptive writing are common:

"These socks [with picture] are long and red. Do you think they are smelly, too? If they are, you can describe that to your readers."

Conversely, some older texts (as well as the Core Knowledge sequences) offer passages about animals, recreation, people in history, poems, and the like. Hirsch prescribes an intensive approach to solving the failure by 4th grade – which emphasizes intensive reading instruction with hours devoted to content rich in nature, history, literature, music, art and building the child's vocabulary through all of the above. "First, determine what knowledge and words are lacking. Then effectively teach that knowledge and those words." For Hirsch' succinct description of why such a melange hurts kids he has my gratitude. Read the article at www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=33hirsch.h20.

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Most parents enjoy the ending-school year Field Day, concert, field trip, competition and more. As we get caught up in the natural fun and good feelings that come with such an ebullient time of year, let's remember that there are children who lack the trappings that come from successfully completing another year. To those children we dedicate our efforts for reform and hope you'll continue to join us. **Happy Spring!**


Jeanne Allen