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

From where we sit, we can see the White House. Almost daily there are sirens, signaling either official motorcades or fire engines. It's the kind of atmosphere that really makes you take life seriously.

Despite the easy distractions, our spirits are buoyed by the energy and commitment so many of you have demonstrated to changing the education landscape. Never before has the quest for a high-achieving, standards-filled principle-laden education system been more important. How to get all those adjectives in our schools is addressed in our "Cover story" for this month's missive to you.

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### Mom, Apple Pie and the Schools

"Let freedom ring" has been sounded from every corner of the globe, and what a wonderful time to be a student when schools and community leaders are unabashedly praising the tenets upon which this nation stands.

It's hard to believe in light of all that's happened that there is actually a debate about what we should be teaching children. Most normal Americans would fret if they knew that there was actually a group of intellectuals and educators that see the events of September 11 as something we did to ourselves. Said the Deputy Chancellor of the New York City schools Judith Rizzo, "Those people who said we don't need multiculturalism, that it's too touchy-feely, a pox on them. I think they've learned their lesson. We have to do more to teach habits of tolerance, knowledge and awareness of other cultures."

Really? *Is that the problem?* We need to teach our children that a bunch of crazy fanatics running planes into buildings in sacrifice for Allah is something to tolerate? That we have to respect the differences in politics that cause some regimes to starve, assault and abandon women and children? I don't think so.

Lynne Cheney, both a scholar and the Vice President's wife, chastised educators whose response is blame America, first. She points out that many state standards emphasize a variety of cultures. "...If there were one aspect of schooling from kindergarten through college to which I would give added emphasis today it would be American history. We are not doing a very good job of teaching it now, as a recent survey of seniors at the nation's top liberal arts colleges and universities reveals. Scarcely more than half...knew general facts about American democracy and the

Constitution.' ... Of the 55 elite institutions whose seniors were polled, not one college or university – not a single one—required a course in American history. **At a time of national crisis, I think it is particularly apparent that we need to encourage the study of our past.**" (Mrs. Cheney's speech continues with why that is and is compelling; go to [www.whitehouse.gov/mrscheney/news/20011005.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/mrscheney/news/20011005.html).)

More wisdom is heard from Checker Finn and Diane Ravitch, who point out in their October 4 email letter "The Gadfly," that diversity IS America.

*From Finn:* "...Educators must face a basic decision about the message they seek to impart to children. It either includes patriotism or it doesn't.

"Some would steer a middle course by suggesting to children that diversity and tolerance are the same thing as patriotism. Is it not patriotic to emphasize the positive value of America's diversity?

"Of course it is. Diversity is part of the lesson needing to be taught. But so is love of freedom and the fact that it has enemies who loathe it. So is the fragility of a free and diverse society, and the central obligation of that society to defend itself against aggressors. So, too, is respect for heroes, including those who froze at Valley Forge, who stormed the beaches of Normandy, and who perished while trying to rescue terrorist victims in lower Manhattan. It has become a compulsion to pull down America rather than celebrate and defend it."

*From Ravitch:* "Some educators have reacted ... by calling for changes in the curriculum. Their immediate response was that we have 'to change the curriculum to make our students more tolerant,' as if our students were the perpetrators of these heinous crimes. But it was not Americans who piloted the four hijacked airplanes, and it was not American bigotry that targeted innocent people for death and destruction.

"... We need to do a far better job of teaching both American history and world history. Certainly students need to know about the major civilizations in the world, but they first need a better understanding of our own democratic ideals, where they came from, and how many sacrifices have been made by others to assure the present generation of Americans the basic rights and freedoms that we now enjoy. In the absence of deep civic knowledge, our students will be unprepared to figure out where we stand, what we believe in, and what we must defend. Or even who "we" are. As schools respond to the crisis of our age, a good place to begin is by finding out what is meant by the phrase 'We the people.'"

So if you agree that our children — and probably adults, too — need to learn the sacrifices that brought us all we have today, you might want to do something about it. Educators could easily supplement the traditional history textbooks that are a mile wide and an inch deep. Administrators could reject the pabulum that often passes for history and purchase from more content-based publishers. Policymakers: Does your state have standards to ensure that children starting as early as the first grade are taught about formative events in U. S. history? And of course, there is always the content-rich Core Knowledge curriculum that awaits any innovative education leader. For connections to all of the above, click on **Mom, Apple Pie and the Schools** at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).

## On School Choice

- The Supremes are the latest craze in school choice. Not the group, of course, but the **U.S. Supreme Court** whose decision in early October to consider the fate of the Ohio school choice program has all sides reeling with hope and squealing with delight. In its release announcing the Court's decision to review the case, the Institute for Justice (IJ), explained their decision this way:

"The Court agreed to review the question: Does a program designed to rescue economically disadvantaged children from a failing public school system by providing scholarships that they may use in private, religious or suburban public schools that choose to participate in the program -- and which operates in the context of a broad array of public school choices -- violate the First Amendment because in the early stages of the program most of the schools that have agreed to take on scholarship students are religiously affiliated?"

The case for why the Supreme Court should review the lower court ruling and why it should find in favor the Ohio program was made by groups petitioning the court earlier this summer. CER's friend of the court (Amicus) brief outlines the history of educational failure in Cleveland that caused policymakers there to implement this program. Indeed, as IJ points out in its press release, "in its most recent evaluation, the Cleveland Public Schools satisfied only three of the state's 27 performance criteria." (CER's Amicus and the arguments of other groups are available on the web.)

Here's how the sides are shaping up: The plaintiffs are a group of parents backed by the ACLU and People for the American Way. Groups such as the American Federation of Teachers and the National School Boards Association are lining up and file Amicus briefs.

The defendants include the State of Ohio and a group of parents represented by the Institute for Justice. Amici include CER, BAEO, the American Education Reform Council, the Beckett Fund and a host of others.

Arguments are expected in late January or early February. Get ready for Toad's Wild Ride.

- **Education Secretary Rod Paige** told a group of reformers gathered in Atlanta that choice is the next great battle on the education front, following passage of the President's education reform package. "The genie is out of the bottle on choice."

- The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) has announced that a Children's Tuition Fund has been established to help needy children get access to their network of private schools. More than 450 ACSI members serve 77,000 students in urban areas, and are focussed on providing more opportunities to growing numbers of children in need of sound educational alternatives. (Go to [www.acsi.org](http://www.acsi.org))

- The Children's Scholarship Fund also added additional grants to its initial pledge to fund 40,000 scholarships for **low-income children**, and will create 14,000 more scholarship next year in 18 locations. ([www.csf.org](http://www.csf.org))

### From the Trenches

- Woodlake Elementary School Teachers in North Sacramento, California were proud to accept the **merit-based bonuses** this money that affirmed their hard work and commitment to improving test score. Awards ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 per teacher were made to 12,000 teachers whose schools demonstrated success in boosting kids' scores the most. But readers might recall that last spring, the teachers union sued the state protesting the formula for the awards, and as a show of defiance, many union leaders said they wouldn't accept the awards. A job well done is worthy of precisely the monetary boost the state of California just made; it's only a shame, however, that such control didn't rest with each school to make those determinations on a regular basis.
- The **Alfie Kohn fan club** (a subsidiary of the Don't Worry, Be Happy! Hall of Fame) just got another member. A surprise to many in the Grand Canyon State, **Arizona** Superintendent of Public Instruction Jaime Molera who took over the job in August has decided that the much-acclaimed AIMS test is "bad policy." First he delayed the test's teeth from showing for another four years; now Molera is saying that there should be alternatives to the test. There is no question that it takes a while for schools and students to alter their traditional ways and begin to respond well to the pressure imposed by new state standards and tests. But they did it in Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts and Virginia, to name the most prominent, and they could do it there, too — unless the Superintendent thinks the children under his tutelage are any less capable...
- **Virginia** needs to be emphasized. When the Standards of Learning (SOL) first came to the Old Dominion State, the bellyaching was unbelievable, as we reported along the way. Just this month, schools there doubled their passing rate on the SOL tests, not because of precisely because the schools began to align their teaching to the standards, giving their children the power to actually do well on the tests.
- Giving credit where credit is due, several **Los Angeles schools** and their leaders deserve recognition for raising scores in reading and spelling, with gains as much as 18-points in some cases! But the real kudos should go to those who decided to get hip and purchase Open Court textbooks to help turn around constant failure. Gains were highest among those for whom English is not their first language; Latinos showed the greatest gains. African-American children also posted 10 point gains. The achievement demonstrates the extent to which children can succeed if that's the imperative.

Unfortunately, "three out of four ninth graders flunked the math section on the new high school exit exam," says the *Los Angeles Times*. They didn't do great on the English section either. That newspaper concedes that the only way to move the achievement rates is to make changes in union contracts so the superintendent has power to hire, fire and create consequences. We'll see. The *LA Daily News* points out

that; "After more than a year on the job, Romer has started talking tough. It's as though the LAUSD superintendent has finally caught on that – wait a minute! – exit exam scores dramatically lower than the state averages are unacceptable."

- This would be funny if it wasn't so serious. There is actually a group called "Parents Against Testing Before Teaching," which was organized to fight high stakes-testing in **Louisiana**. Thankfully, they lost their court case
- **Someone get these guys a job!** The Bay State's anti-testing pundits at the Massachusetts Teachers Association said the dramatic test gains on the MCAS aren't "sound educational policy." This reminds us of the time that the Hartford, CT teachers union argued in court while fighting a merit bonus plan for principals that "there is no correlation between teaching and learning."
- For years the owners of department store-giant **Wal-Mart** have led among philanthropic efforts to support critical education reforms. While copy-cats are slow, they are sure, and this month saw **K-Mart** chief executive Charles Conaway contribute \$1 million to renovate the building where University Preparatory Academy is housed. The Detroit-based charter school promises college entrance to all who attend. Observers are raving; we wish them the best.

### **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Summit**

No one in the trenches paid much attention at all to the proceedings in New York State of half the nation's governors and a smattering of major corporate CEOs. While their intentions were noble — to build some consensus on standards, testing and federal action (for the most part) — it wasn't the tragedies that kept 'the real people' from paying attention but the fact that these gatherings continue to have no relevance to what is really going on in the daily lives of parents and teachers.

On standards and testing, many states are making great progress and if they have the will, they can beat just about any attempt at rollbacks of high stakes testing. That was clear in Massachusetts earlier this month when the students of the Bay State's schools debunked opponents by making great progress on the MCAS and demonstrating that success comes when schools raise expectations and work to help everyone meet them.

On charter schools, those gathered didn't think the issue worthy of their attention. Lou Gerstner, CEO of American Express announced that charters weren't "scaleable." How's that for thinking outside of the box? Gerstner has long talked a good game, but somehow, his words never match his commitment to real reform.

On school choice, despite growing and visible minority support, the business leaders didn't want to wrinkle their suits in any fights to bring about real choices for children, despite the fact that probably a majority of the participants there were either schooled in private or exercise that choice with housing patterns or private schools for their own kids.

And on curriculum — nothing. Nothing about real math vs. fuzzy math (even though their companies are in the forefront of trying to raise caps on the visas that allow other workers here to fill increasingly technical jobs); there was nothing about reading or history books.

Those gathered are considered representative of business; but the business groups that work in states and communities — like the National Federation of Independent Business or various state Manufacturing Associations — are very clear about their embrace of reform. In fact, business groups in Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and Nevada to name a few are signing on to an Amicus brief on school choice in the U.S. Supreme Court. In other states, state and local leaders that do not fall in lock-step with the establishment are starting schools, challenging low standards and high budgets with no accountability.

Someone once called the groups like the one that convened for this Summit a “cartel” for the clear lock-step behavior and inability to allow others in. The good news is that reform wasn’t harmed. But the bad news is that with all these important folks sitting around a room, nothing was gained.

### **Advice from Bill Gates**

The following was from a speech Bill Gates gave recently to high school Students. It was printed in the Washington, DC-based *Georgetown*. Because we found some of these “rules” particularly applicable to education reform, we wanted to share just a few with you.

*Rule 2*        The world doesn’t care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something BEFORE you feel good about yourself.

*Rule 4*        If you think your teacher is tough, wait until you get a boss. He doesn’t have tenure.

*Rule 6*        If you mess up, it’s not your parents’ fault so don’t whine about your mistakes; learn from them.

*Rule 8*        Your school may have done away with winners and losers, but life ha not. In some schools they have abolished failing grades and they’ll give you as many times as you want to get the right answer. This doesn’t bear the slightest resemblance to ANYTHING in real life.

And this personal favorite,

*Rule 10*       Television is NOT real life. In real life people actually have to leave the coffee shop and go to jobs.

## Short Takes

Each week CER's *NewsWire* provides a digest of hot reform items with unique analysis not found anywhere else. Here are some short takes from recent editions. The full stories are at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com) and click on Reform Updates.

**CALLING THEIR BLUFF:** Opponents of school choice argue that students using government scholarships should be subject to the same evaluations as traditional public schools. So why aren't they rushing to support the idea when it's put on the table by choice supporters? Howard Fuller, founder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), has proposed that Wisconsin track for 10 years the progress of students receiving publicly financed scholarships for tuition at private schools, as well as students in public schools, and report on that progress annually. But the Wisconsin Education Association quashed the idea, calling in chits to get it slashed from the state's budget bill.

**WHILE NERO FIDDLES, ROME BURNS:** But even as scores decline and deficits loom over the state's largest city, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) is focusing its attention on stifling the most recent set of opportunities for children in the Keystone State—cyber charter schools. A new PSBA report argues that the children who attend charter schools—particularly cyber charter schools—should not be paid for from the funds that pay for public education in general, and that the state should create a separate pool of money. The crux of PSBA's real complaint: They want control of the money, where it will stay in the same system, regardless of whether the job gets done.

**REVENGE ON CHARTERS?** Ball State University became the first Indiana college to announce it would authorize charter schools. But the superintendents of Fort Wayne and Allen County public schools are seeking to ban Ball State student-teachers and administrators from their schools. "This is a serious attack on public education," intoned Fort Wayne Schools Superintendent Thomas Fowler-Finn. The same tactic has been tried - with no success - in by superintendents in Michigan and by school employee unions in Pennsylvania.

And Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson has moved quickly in his new role as a charter school authorizer under Indiana's new charter law, accepting 21 applications submitted for the five slots allotted to the Mayor annually under the law.

**NEW JERSEY's** charter schools received a boost with the release of a favorable report on the charter movement there. Education Commissioner Vito Gagliardi offered a series of recommendations including more support for charter facilities financing, technical assistance and increased relief from mandates. The report notes substantial progress by charter students on the statewide assessment, as well as high satisfaction levels from parents and students.

**FEDERAL POLICY:** The National Conference of State Legislators withdrew their support for President Bush's education plan, citing that it is unable to find the rationale for annual testing. The NCSL could find it, however, in a wide range of results from across the country. In California, just 34 percent of ninth-graders passed both parts of that state's exit exam, with 75 percent of Los Angeles ninth graders failing the math section. In Maryland, a state-commissioned study proposed adding tests for grades four, six and seven to help the state measure student performance.

**KIDS KNOW BETTER:** Metropolitan Life Insurance Company released a survey that underscores the low state of academic standards and expectations. Fifty-six percent of secondary school principals and only 39 percent of teachers strongly agree that teachers in their school have high expectations for all students. And sixty-seven percent of secondary school principals but only 48 percent of teachers strongly believe that their school provides a curriculum that is challenging to students. Only 25 percent of students strongly agree that their school has high expectations; only 23 percent describe their classes as very challenging. The survey demonstrates that students understand that they could be getting a whole lot better education than they are. To see a copy of the MetLife survey, go to [www.metlife.com](http://www.metlife.com).

**The Publications You've All Been Waiting For...**

As we say adieu for another month, we are happy to report that – finally – the legislatures and charter authorizers stopped working long enough for us to catch up with the new developments in laws and the charter schools now opened and approved for the 2001-2002 school year. Thanks to CER External Affairs Director Anna Varghese, **Charter School Laws Across the States; Scorecard and Rankings**, are done, and as we expected, many states took a nosedive in their rankings, while some bumped up a bit. The 85-page document is available for \$19.95 from CER.

And Melanie Looney, CER's Charter Liaison and Senior Policy Analyst is happy that, while she got to know most of the nation's charter schools pretty well this summer, it's finally over and the 7<sup>th</sup> Edition of the **National Charter School Directory** is at the printer! Call now to reserve your copy, which sells for \$30.00.



We are enjoying the autumn on the East Coast, but our thoughts and prayers continue to be with all of you, especially those of you at schools and near children, during these sometimes nerve-wracking times. Keep busy, pick your education reform battles carefully, and call us if we can help you with any mischief!

  
Jeanne Allen