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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
No. 72**

**HOLIDAY, 2001**

Dear Friends:

Do charter schools yield benefits for kids? Are other school choice programs — like vouchers — helping the worst off get better? Is the standards movement driving change? And what is happening with Philadelphia? During this joyous season of advent and holiday cheer for all religions, many of us find these questions less than compelling. But even though it's Christmastime, there are many things to ponder, to learn and to push forward. Herewith is our annual Holiday issue, and with it, our best wishes to you and yours on this Holiday season.

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**Reading, 'Riting and Common Sense, *From the Editor***

I listened one school night this season to one of the nation's foremost experts on how children learn to read and the corresponding brain functions. Dr. G. Reid Lyon, a high-ranking NIH official, was the guest speaker at my daughter's school. An informative and highly energetic talker, Lyon explained in the most simple of terms how efficiently and effectively the brain can process the skill of reading if what the brain is provided is clear, orderly and recognizable. In other words, the brain needs to be able to recognize phonemes, or the various sounds all of our letters make first, and then it can receive the parts of the language (the sounds and how they relate) to be able not only to recognize, but also to comprehend.

Parents were literally spellbound. Clearly no one had ever spoken about these functions and the path toward strong readers in this way, and with this much information. Dr. Lyon also raised the bigger problem — that teachers are rarely if ever taught about how reading gets accommodated in the brain. And of course without that knowledge, we'll never be a nation of readers, and the nearly 40% of children who are mainly disadvantaged will never reverse that label.

The President and First Lady have taken this issue on with a great commitment to re-training teachers and making sure federal funds go only to schools that use programs which are proven and use brain-friendly methods. We're talking about programs that emphasize phonics, not just books that say they do. It's extraordinary that we have such a commitment at the highest level of government.

The bully pulpit is a key part of what the President can offer in improving education. But the tangible efforts from Washington can only do so much, and every day children are supposed to be learning to read or progress through their school year. And as long as teacher colleges continue to allow reading teachers to graduate not knowing what it takes to teach their discipline, we'll be chasing our tails.

There are several easy-to-read booklets and tapes that the National Institutes of Health have made available for parents, educators and the general public to learn more about what it takes to make all children readers. Anyone involved in education — as parent or otherwise — should know what it takes. For more information go to [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov), which is the National Institute for Literacy.

### Spinning Wheels... on School Choice Programs

Public policy requires the consent of the governed, normally, to be successful. The governed, of course, require some information to be able to best influence the policy makers. It sounds elementary to many. What's not so elementary is the fantastic spin that the governed are treated to every time someone's gore may be oiled. Here's a look at some of the last month's most interesting spins... when the reality is really otherwise.

- If the nation's 2,400 charter schools are serving equal or more numbers of minority children according to all the evidence from the U.S. Department of Education to local government statistics, why is the National Black Caucus of State Legislators calling for limits to one of the only reforms to reach their children to hit the U.S. in more than four decades? We were appalled to read this from their Education Report 2001: *"Some charter school operators have established unaccountable elite schools with the freedom to practice racial and religious discrimination — policies that are frighteningly reminiscent of the so-called Christian Academies that sprang up following the Brown v. Board of Education decision desegregating public schools."*

Besides being grossly untrue, this group fails to recognize that each state has a plentiful supply of African-American lawmakers who helped enact charter laws, and a tremendous supply of fellow charter founders who continue to support and nurture children who were left behind in the traditional public schools.

*The Washington Post* practically took this group's report as fact, and the spin that charters may unfairly hurt poor children was evident in news coverage the following day.

- What should have had equal press coverage but didn't was a report released by the California-based RAND Corporation, called *Rhetoric Versus Reality*, whose authors studied existing research across charter school and choice programs and concluded — we were heartened to read — that the opponent's cries of Chicken Little have not proven true, nor have their accusations of "creaming" of the best kids happened at all in school choice programs. Rather, charter schools seem to mirror their public school cohorts, and there is some evidence that a year or more in a charter will have a positive academic effect. In both charter and voucher programs, parents are overwhelmingly

satisfied compared to their public school counterparts, and while the researchers found little conclusive in their research about academic progress, they did find that for lower income and minority children, vouchers do help achievement.

While some researchers do not believe the RAND report looked closely enough at the evidence that choice works, the authors did conclude by saying that only with an expanded publicly-funded program could we reach any final conclusions about the success of choice.

The spin from the Blob was interesting, however. A phantom group called the National Coalition for Public Education, which represents the alphabet soup of Washington-based lobbies and status quo groups dug deep for the negatives in the report. Within minutes of the RAND press conference, they were on the phone to newspaper editors and reporters claiming that the report exonerated their opposition to school choice. So the reporters ended up writing stories that masked the net gains the report found for reform.

- The spin-meisters have taken over the public bickering in Philadelphia, where some pretty bold leaders have attempted to enforce a state law that allows them to oust failed education leaders and impose a new order on a city that for too long has permitted only half of its students to graduate, and those that do normally have received a sub par education from most schools.

Governor Mark Schweiker inherited the takeover move from Tom Ridge, the nation's homeland security czar. The plan calls for turning over about two dozen failing schools to private management, and another sixty or so to partnership teams of civic groups throughout the city. The central office would also become more of a corporate set up, under private management. The establishment has been screaming since Harrisburg intervened. Schweiker responded in November to the move by Mayor Street and a few hundred of his supporters to camp out in the school district office until the Guv and his team would go away. So the final decision was first modified and now delayed until December 21. Meanwhile, the less than one thousand protestors making headlines are being spun as overwhelming opposition in all the headlines, despite the fact that they represent less than 1% of the entire city population and are people most affected by the changes (i.e. the unions, contract employees, etc.).

*(Postscript: Among the groups working with the obvious education establishment are these unconventional bedfellows, which make some wonder why a school district undergoing restructuring would be an interest of theirs: Asian Americans United, Black Radical Congress, Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network Philadelphia, Jews Uniting for Social Justice, National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, the Spiral Q Puppet Theatre... and list goes on. Go figure.)*



## On Standards and Testing

- Did **Virginia** really lower the passing score on parts of its well-respected Standards of Learning assessments? While the past three years has seen some heated debates on first the standards, and then the tests, most Virginia districts this year showed that focus and good standards can pay off when they bested their scores from last year (See Monthly Letter, No. 71). Now, in reaction to complaints about the social studies test, the Virginia Board lowered the passing score, on which less than half of the children passed. The State Board plans to review the scores again in two years, but nevertheless, some think their actions may have been premature.
- The Buckeye state apparently has followed suit, lowering the score fourth graders need to move to the next grade, because they were afraid that the score they set would require them to hold back nearly half the 4<sup>th</sup> graders in the state! Even though there is some discretion for schools to make a determination as to whether to promote a child who gets a poor grade, **Ohio** leaders say that it's no longer a requirement to be 'proficient' to graduate to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Perhaps it would have been a better move to broadcast the potential failure of those 4<sup>th</sup> graders before they retreated, allowing the public to at least be aware that moving ahead doesn't mean one has actually progressed.
- **Georgia** puts the two states above to shame for its efforts to all but remove remedial education from four-year state colleges. Since 1996, the students in remedial courses dropped to 16% from 30%. According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Rep. Charlie Smith wants to completely abolish those courses. "Statewide about 25 percent of the college prep kids coming out of high school can't do college work. We need to do more to make sure they're ready for college. Right now, thousands of them are not."
- And in **Massachusetts**, Boston students made the highest gains yet on the 2001 MCAS test, and particularly noteworthy were the huge gains from some of the most troubled districts. Rather than call for retreat, Boston Superintendent Thomas Payzant remarked about the improvement that "the acceleration is pretty dramatic, more than I would have predicted. [We] ought to be very proud... while understanding that we have a ways to go in terms of kids who are not over the bar." (Hear that? He says we have to help the kids who are not over the bar. He didn't say the state should lower it.)
- **Maryland** did a really interesting thing this fall with its state test scores. When state officials saw the results, they pulled them from public view saying that they were so off course from the trend that they needed to evaluate what went wrong. Because the state's test, the MSPAP, has been criticized in a major evaluation for evaluating a student's skills absent a demonstration of knowledge (e.g. allowing them to write an essay to show they can convey a thought without making sure the essay also is correct in grammar and writing skills) some think that perhaps the hold up with the Maryland test shows the test is faulty. Only time will tell.
- Down to Memphis, **Tennessee**, some are suggesting that the way to help children graduate is to lower the performance standards. Currently the standard is set at 50 percent. A forty percent passing rate is considered, on the state's report card to be

an F, but that's apparently okay with state board of education member Avron Fogelman and even the city superintendent. State leaders such as Commissioner Faye Taylor and Jesse Johnson, the VP of the Memphis Chamber of Commerce, disagreed. Said Johnson, "I will not support a system that believes it's okay for some children not to perform at a high level of achievement or lack the ability." Said Dedrick Briggs of 100 Black Men of Memphis, "We cannot throw in the towel on excellence."

## On Charters

- Tennessee is in the news for its growing activity toward charter schools which while still in the early stages, is giving its union indigestion. A quite big plum of a document was leaked from union headquarters, outlining its most enlightening slant toward charter schools. While publicly the **Tennessee Education Association (TEA) and its national colleagues** spout all manner of tepid praise for charters, privately they speak otherwise. The summary of a bill to create charters begins with this comment: "*What is wrong with Charter Schools? A short course follows on the crime of mugging children and taxpayers...*" Here are some other sad, but true excerpts.

**The bill:** It is the intention of this act to provide an alternative means within the public school system for ensuring accomplishment of the necessary outcomes by allowing... charter schools that are... allowed maximum flexibility to achieve their goals. -

**TEA Comment:** *What "flexibility" means is the right to mistreat employees. These people do not want to be burdened with tenure, pay schedules, fringe benefits, retirement, dismissal hearings or employee rights.*

**The bill:** "Chartering authority" means the local board of education or the state board of education which, on appeal, approves, renews or decides not to revoke a public charter school application or agreement.

**TEA:** *Oversight of these toy schools is literally an "oversight."*

**The bill:** Public charter schools shall be part of the state program of public education.

**TEA:** *These schools will divert resources from traditional public schools. As media darlings they will grab headlines, be tracked for the "happiness" factor of students and parents, and public schools, the real ones, will suffer. We will hear about the "failed" public education system.*

**The bill:** Except as otherwise provided... a public school is exempt from all statutes, rules, and regulations applicable to a school...

**TEA:** *The primary victim is tenure for employees. The secondary victim is quality education. (Editor: Connection??)*

**The bill:** ... A public charter school shall be operated by a not-for-profit organization. No charter shall be granted to a for-profit corporation.

**TEA:** *Well, this seems to offer protection from a corporate takeover, right? Are we excited about not-for-profits replacing the public schools? Your local day care is probably a not-for-profit. Do not cry for the "for-profits..." (and then TEA goes on a tirade about for-profits taking over public education without accountability.)*

**The bill:** A timetable ... as a public charter school which shall provide for a minimum number of academic instruction days (must be part of the application).

*TEA: Schools have total freedom to run all year or even start at 6:00 pm in the evening.*

**The bill:** [Application must include] names and addresses of the members of the governing body.

*TEA: Want to bet that the names will not be known at the time of the application so that identities can be hidden...*

**The bill:** No more than six applications may be approved per grand division in each of the academic years (*Note: this was a provision instituted to appease the TEA last year*)

*TEA: What a safety valve! Have I got a bridge to sell you! The initial schools will receive tons of money, reap pages of praise in press releases, and be well stocked with technology. Based on this trial period, everyone will want to do it! And evidence will mount to advance the date for unlimited numbers of schools. And not last nor least:*

**The bill:** A public charter school shall be accountable to the chartering authority...

*TEA: And to no one else? This is the local board... Local control and incompetence!*

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- Why is the State Education Department (SED) in **New York hoarding the federal money** that was reserved for start up funds for approved charter schools? The main reason Congress enacted its federal public charter school program was to help ensure that charter schools would indeed have enough money to allow a start on sound footing. Unfortunately some state education agencies are loathe to follow the letter of the law. Instead, as reported by the *New York Times* last month, the SED wanted this one applicant to prove that it had 100% of its start up funds in order to approve its application. The fact that it counted federal monies toward what it expected to start with was unacceptable. That may explain why the state has a hard time spending the \$14 million it has received since 1999 on charter schools, and why applicants to the state education department have to seem wealthy to succeed.

- The above illustration is yet another example of why **it is critical that state charter laws allow multiple chartering authorities** to sponsor charter schools. Universities like those in New York offer an avenue of hope to many whom are squashed by bureaucratic thinking. **Indiana's** law already has spawned bountiful interest at some charter friendly universities, and another alternative sponsor, the Indianapolis mayor, moved swiftly but deliberately to appoint a panel, study applications and as a result, just announced the approval of four new charters for the greater Indy area.

The study mentioned earlier by the RAND Corporation also recommended that policymakers can ensure equity in charters by not only guaranteeing equal resources, but by allowing for multiple sponsoring authorities.

- Charter leaders were shocked when **Michigan's** Senate Minority Leader named the number one enemy of charter schools in the state to the **new Charter School Commission** tasked with evaluating the progress of charter schools there. While some proponents will hopefully balance the Commission's make-up, the appointment of the state's public employee union president was considered over the top. Far from potentially objective, this guy's own union threatened a boycott of student teachers from any university that would sponsor charters. Clearly, if any reports come from this

Commission, they'll need to be viewed with a thousand grains of salt. Meanwhile, open hearings were going on in Detroit and Grand Rapids in early December, and more are to come. These are good opportunities for charter school parents to step forward with their own personal testimonies. It's a fait accompli that the unions will be doing so!

## Mea Culpa

We have two corrections to offer from October's issue, No. 71. First, apologies to Lou Gerstner and our readers who know that he's the CEO of IBM, not American Express. It was a slip. Regardless, his summit ignored most of the fundamentals of reform. But we apologize for the error.

Second, Bill Gates was given credit for some great advice that we excerpted from a local paper. As we pulled it out, we thought it sounded way too, well, too punchy even for Gates. The welcome correction came from several readers who pointed out that the advice was really from author and radio show host Charles Sykes, and his great book called Dumbing Down Our Kids. We're especially sorry to Sykes, whose work deserves much credit.

## More Reasons Why We Need Reform

True to the nature of the rank and file, principals and superintendents revealed some of their biggest frustrations and concerns to Public Agenda, the survey and research firm. In *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*, these managers make the case for fundamental change:

"What superintendents and principals need most, they say, is more freedom to do their jobs as they see fit - especially the freedom to reward and fire teachers."

"Fully 81% of superintendents say that when talented superintendents leave the field, they are most likely to do so because they are 'frustrated by politics and bureaucracy.'"

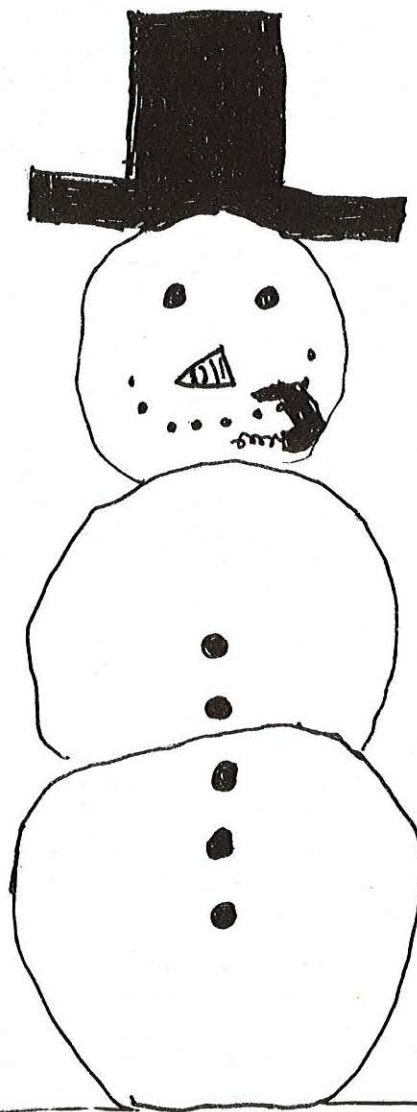
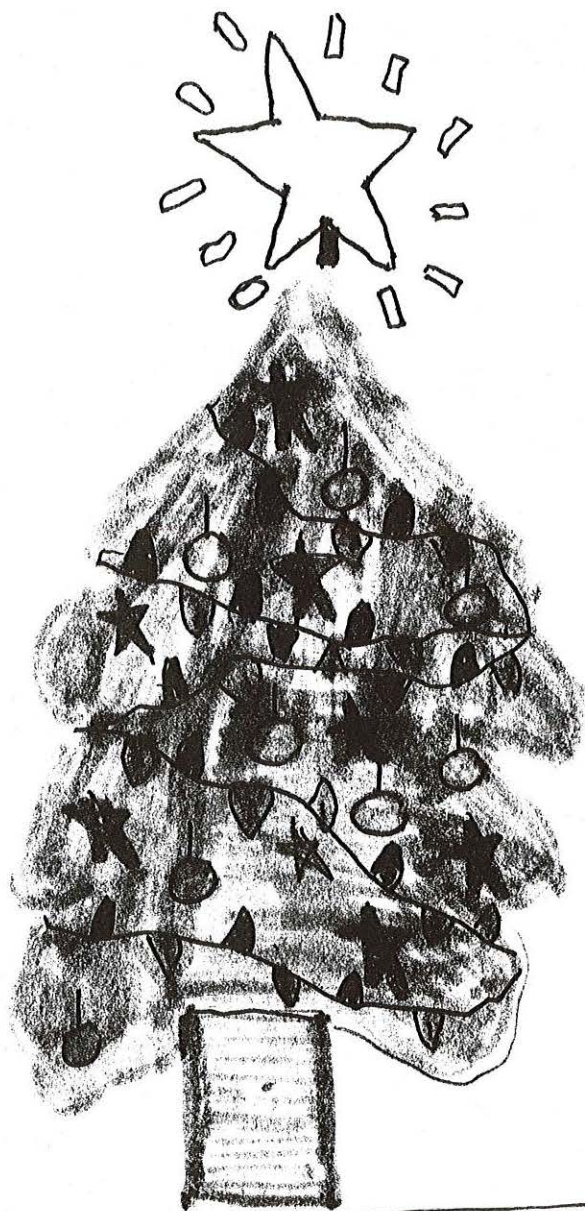
"... superintendents say the relentless pressure of politics is much more to blame for pushing their colleagues out of the profession than low pay (5%) or unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability (10%)."

"School leaders' ... freedom to act and take initiative is often constrained. Nearly nine in ten (88%) superintendents complain that 'keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time.'" (*Hmmm, seems to contradict the actions of their so-called leadership groups in Washington, who have opposed just about every proposal to loosen strings and give school districts more flexibility!*)

"Administrators [feel] hamstrung when they see stellar teachers they wish to reward or ... run across truly ineffective teachers they want to remove. Relatively few... say they have enough autonomy to 'reward outstanding teachers and staff.'"

"'If I had the power I would do away with the teachers union,' said one principal. 'I know of no other job which you have for life after a few years of experience.'"

Wishing you Tidings of Great Joy  
From all of us at the Center for Education Reform



Carmine  
Mary Kayne

Gina

Leanne

Mike

Mad  
Jennifer

Debra

Kara

Melanie  
Maniketh

Anna