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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 76**

DECEMBER, 2002

Dear Friends:

It's hard to believe the school year has really gone this fast...With Christmas here, and prospects for an exciting new education reform year around the corner, the job of education reformers — like all of you out there — becomes that much more important. To be sure, great strides have been made this year. We start with a look at the year in review and the impediments that still stand in our way, before we bid you a Joyous and Blessed Holiday Season.

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Wipe Out! — Election 2002

The war rooms of the various teacher unions, school boards and other notable education status quo'rs were in turmoil over the November election results. A whole host of reform-minded governors and other policymakers were elected, nearly assuring that education reform and accountability proposals will be in plentiful supply in the new session. Because the tide of reform has clearly turned, champions of the status quo can claim few real victories.

Typically politicians have been told to stay away from declaring themselves reform supporters in fear of a predicted backlash by the education unions and groups. Not this time. We learned from candidate surveys and research that more than half the candidates endorsed real education reforms, like charter schools, school choice and pay-for-performance for teachers. When it comes down to election results, fully 52 percent of choice supporters and 51 percent of charter supporters won gubernatorial races. The brighter picture for reform in the states, coupled with the fact that more leaders in Congress are now leaning toward education reform, gives unprecedented opportunity to trounce the status quo and usher-in badly needed school choices and accountability in cities and towns across the U.S.

States like Maryland, New Hampshire, Hawaii and Vermont have been on the sidelines. Now strong charter school legislation has tremendous potential to move forward. In Massachusetts and Rhode Island, there are renewed opportunities for the expansion of these independent, innovative, parent-friendly charter schools.

Elections *(continued)*

Efforts to hold school districts to higher standards and show academic improvements will encounter fewer enemies, and today's state executives are much more likely to enforce and abide by the new federal law that has mystified so many.

With the constitutionality of school choice no longer in dispute, new leadership at the state level may impact new programs. South Carolina's new governor, Mark Sanford, spoke openly in support of the kind of choice program that has spread in Florida, where children that are trapped in failing schools are given scholarships to make their own choices. New Hampshire's Craig Benson and Maryland's Bob Ehrlich have been given the chance to fulfill campaign promises to create real choices.

The fact that candidates this year were able to unabashedly support new innovations in how we deliver and fund education is a tribute to voters, who are getting better at distinguishing between conventional wisdom and programs that have real potential to improve schools. New policymakers must heed this new savvy generation and seize the day. Voters need to be watching.

On Charters

As we head into the New Year, nearly half the legislatures will face bills affecting new or existing charter schools. Policymakers remain under-informed about most nuances of what various kinds of charter laws can cause to happen, or impede. A look at some recent state developments follows.

- Some states without elections still have leaders who apparently forgot that charters are a legislatively mandated, constitutionally upheld part of the public school system. **New Jersey's** Jim McGreevey took a beating from charter school proponents when in his Education Summit this fall, he neglected to include charter schools in his remarks for how his vision of an education system will work. The press asked where charters fit in, and McGreevey remarked that his "focus should be on public schools and public education." Not surprisingly, the superintendents gave him a standing ovation.

McGreevey may want to expand his focus. One New Jersey parent made that case when speaking about options now available under the No Child Left Behind Act, which districts like Camden have apparently chosen not to fulfill to its fullest potential. Speaking to the *New York Times* about how bad Camden's schools have been for years, parent Rashida Maddrey said "Parents have been arguing for years for better schools — my parents argued for it because the schools were lousy then, too. I'm not even going to bother next year. I'm putting [my daughter] in a private school."

- **New York City** Chancellor Joel Klein appears to be headed in the right direction on a number of fronts. Whereas previous Chancellors have paid lip service to charters and let their bureaucracies micromanage to extremes, Klein says he wants to see an environment where the charters "can feel supported and can thrive." Recently auditors discovered thousands of empty spaces in classrooms citywide, but charter schools have waiting lists as much as twice their capacity. Klein is considering increasing the pace of

quality charter approvals and he should also consider opening up space for them in existing buildings.

Also under Klein's direction, public school choice will be extended throughout the system to help respond to the federal government's new accountability law. Parents are supposed to have choices in many circumstances in which schools are failing. Many districts have complained that they don't have the capacity to handle more choices. But capacity is no longer an excuse for districts. If you don't have them, create them.

- Charter schools **receive less money** than district run schools but have significantly fewer students per teacher, according to a recent study issued by professors Mike Podgurskly of the U. of Missouri and Dale Ballou at U. of Mass. The frequency of class sizes below 15 was twice that in charter schools as traditional public schools. For more info go to www.edexcellence.net/library/personnel_policy.
- **Achievement** in charter schools is occurring at dramatically higher rates than ever gets credited. From state to state, charter schools represent the bulk of the higher performing schools in some of the nation's most troubled cities and with increasingly disadvantaged kids.

Pennsylvania: The 5 year-old World Communications Charter School was nearly shut down two years ago, due to its rock-bottom standardized test scores. However the latest round of state test scores — released at the end of October — revealed that the school has corrected its failure and, in fact, indicate that World Communications has become one of the best schools in the state. Eleventh graders improved by an average of 250 points in math on the Penn. System of School Assessment placing the 11th graders 150 points above the state average.

Also in PA: Community Academy of Philadelphia has offered programs that are aimed at helping at-risk teens. The school has grown to 600 students, kindergarten through 12th grade and is building a new \$12 million campus, financed by the state's first tax-exempt charter-school bond deal. Community Academy has average daily attendance of 93 percent, compared with less than 75 percent at some city high schools. 30 percent of its graduates head to four-year colleges, 30 percent enroll at two-year colleges or technical schools, and the rest join the military or workforce.

Colorado: A waiting list for Montessori Peaks sparked parents to submit their own charter application and as a result the Compass charter school has been formed. "The birth of Compass and other public Montessori schools is the story of middle-class parents clamoring to gain access to an educational model they like without going broke."

Arizona: Tempe Preparatory Academy was one of only two schools in the state to receive an "excelling" label, the highest performance indicator. That requires a school to meet 90 percent of graduation measures.

Charters (continued)

- Fans of charter schools in **Ohio** recently got a huge boost when the legislature passed a bill allowing for both more accountability as well as more schools. Thanks to the efforts of charter schools and Representatives Jon Husted and Randy Gardner, Ohio now allows any non-profit organization to sponsor charters, and allows for charters not just in the Big Eight school districts, but in any district on "academic watch." Funding is streamlined, as is the accountability of schools to the standards set by the state and the feds. (CER's latest charter rankings at www.edreform.com tell how this and other laws now stack up!) Prior to the passage of this bill, hostilities were high over charters and the following words from the Progressive Policy Institute's 10/20/02 email alert is relevant to any such grassroots effort:

"Charters as an Election Issue?"

"The AFT-affiliated Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT) is blasting Ohio's charter schools, claiming most are mismanaged and waste taxpayer funds. The twist is that OFT is trying to make charters, and support for them, a key issue in the upcoming election. ...The legislature is considering a bill to allow charters in any of the state's 600 plus districts. OFT, in coalition with the PTA, Ohio school boards and ALF-CIO, opposes the expansion and is targeting legislators supportive of charter schools in upcoming elections.

"... Attacks like OFT's only serve to polarize the debate and preclude serious discussion of legitimate issues. And the [PPI] Bulletin can't help but wonder if many working-class AFL-CIO members wouldn't like a shot at more public options for their children. Polls indicate that voters increasingly support the charter concept when they know more about it, so one can only hope that the publicity OFT is attracting to the issue backfires against them."

On Testing

- *Mediocrity Embraced*: If you don't get the Status Quote Weekly from the ELC, you need to go to www.educationleaders.org/statusquote/index.htm for a sad but revealing glimpse into the anti-testing (and beyond) mentality that plagues the nation. Not to be outdone by anti-testing pundit Alfie Kohn, self-described educational researcher Gerald Bracey asks the following question in his annual anti-reform orgy that he issues via the *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine every year:

"What profit it a child to pass the MCAS, FCAT, TAKS or CASE, if he lose his Epicurean aesthetic? Bracey posits.

CER Comment: It's likely that in order for a student to know the meaning of Epicurean or aesthetic, she would need an education that expected such standards of students, because that which is not required is not usually taught. We'd also like to know: What profit a child with an Epicurean aesthetic if she can't identify the culture and the country from which these words derive meaning? The tests Bracey abhors help to do just that.

Testing (continued)

- *Virginia Caving to Pressure?*: The ads used to say that Virginia is for lovers but it's obviously for the faint of heart, too, if recent testing shenanigans are any indication. As the MONTHLY LETTER has reported often, Virginia's standards are widely acclaimed for their rigor and their success in improving student achievement. But they also have been criticized by those who most feel the pain – the administrators – for having too high of a bar. That criticism has resonated with the State Department of Education and thus in recent months, the bar for standards in Virginia have been lowered by as much as 5 out of 50 possible points, or 10 percent.

From the Trenches

- **People like choice.** A fall survey by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that a majority of African Americans support “school vouchers” and prefer them over other possible school improvement plans. This is particularly true among younger voters. For more, go to www.jointcenter.org/whatsnew/103102-nop.htm.
- **Student achievement is still a problem.** In case you bought into the notion that we're witnessing dramatic improvement, look again. In Los Angeles, only 53 percent of schools statewide met their academic targets this year; In Illinois statewide, only 58 percent of high school juniors have the math skills that the Prairie State Achievement exams suggest are needed for the majority jobs.
- **Special Education specially selects.** African American children are over-represented in special education; an issue which — according to the National Association of African American Children with Learning Disabilities — has not received national attention. Even though African Americans represent only 14.8 percent of the population, they represent 18.3 percent in it. The association notes that “school districts nationwide continue to improperly and disproportionately place minority students in special education classes despite an increase in civil rights protections.” What they don't say is that schools often misclassify children not properly taught as children with learning issues. Parents beware; state lawmakers take heed.
- **Not just children benefit from No Child Left Behind.** According to news reports, the Michigan Department of Education is adding 15 new staff members to implement the new law. Senior managers might instead consider changing the current job focus of existing employees rather than adding on people as if the entire effort to have students achieve shouldn't be inextricably linked. Just a suggestion.
- **Lower teacher standards in Nevada?** A move to lower standards for teachers was met with the right kind of response when State Senator Bill Raggio asked instead that the state *raise* standards so as to help students meet higher standards. The outrage is that state education officials actually argued against higher standards, and the state's union said that the state has to be “sensitive to market pressures” Market pressures for mediocrity? Please! Worse yet, the deputy superintendent for the state had these words of comfort for parents: “It's a real balancing act on how high you can raise the passing

score and still get enough teachers... To hire that many teachers, you can't in my opinion be at the very top and compete with California and Arizona..."

- **Bringing History Alive.** *Education Week* reported on a speech given by author and historian David McCullough in which he implored teachers to make history come alive. "Borrowing from Theodore Roosevelt, Mr. McCullough urged teachers to 'embody ghosts, to put flesh and blood on dry bones, to make dead men living before their eyes,' to use narrative and literary forms to help students understand the past. 'For we who educate the young, our part has never been more important. The fact that we are raising these young people who know so little about history is a disgrace.'"
- **Massachusetts Follows Suit.** The state board here has tried hard to enact history standards that indeed follow precisely what McCullough suggests. A new history blueprint finally was adopted after nearly two years of community review and extensive criticism from those in the field, including district superintendents, who decried the standards for lack of focus on "critical thinking." We'd love not only to know McCullough's response to that, but muse that John Adams might respond about that comment that having little to think about would render critical thinking impossible!

Notes and Asides

Lessons from the Old Country: An understanding of how other countries handle and view education could alter education battles. Charles Glenn of Boston University is the nation's foremost expert on education systems abroad. He offers that the concept of choices made available to families in other countries does not compel the kind of antagonism that it does here for a very simple reason: Other countries tend to view the rights of parents as the primary motivation for offering choices. Glenn says that our foreign friends subscribe to a philosophy that posits "there are legitimate differences in educating children."

That's one reason that in Italy, vouchers are evolving in certain regions. (A field trip is no doubt in order to learn more!) For more reading on this fascinating subject, go to www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/ where the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University posts such information from its' recent conference.

America vs the World: American students get more "face time" from their teachers but still perform no better than their international counterparts, says a study from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. OECD evaluated how students from 32 countries stack-up on literacy skills, and found that US students are just about average. What is alarming about this study is that 15 year-olds in the US were found to be among the better performing in the category of complex literacy skills. But it's only 12 percent of US 15 year olds that can do those "top-level literacy skills," hardly enough to suggest we've done anything remarkable.

The OECD study also found that while the U.S. spends more than most, its graduation rates are lower. For more information on this study or on US achievement in general go to www.edreform.com/reform.htm.

Geographically Challenged: Recent surveys by the National Geographic Society shed depressing light on how little progress we've made in getting children to notice the important distinctions in our world and the basic facts that support those distinctions. "Young people" aged 18-34 in the U.S., U.K., Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Italy, and Sweden were asked a series of questions about their attitudes about geography, sources of information, and, most importantly, geographical knowledge. The news is not good for the U.S., which placed second to last overall in geographic literacy, beating only Mexico. Some examples of U.S. knowledge:

- Only 13% of young Americans could locate Iraq or Iran on a map of the Middle East/Asia. Only 14% could find Israel.
- In contrast to their ability to identify important places like those above, a full 34% of American respondents identified the South Pacific Island used for the last season of Survivor.
- On average, young adults in other countries in the study were better able to locate other European countries than American young adults are to locate U.S. States.
- Perhaps the most disappointing result from a personal standpoint: Only 30% of American respondents could identify New Jersey.

Worth Repeating: "Year after year in Philadelphia, they opened schools in September knowing full well children will come out in June not learning more than they came in with. What are the consequences...? No teachers, no administrator, nobody loses their job or money or anything else. That's the absolute [worst] system and it has to be changed." (Charles Zogby, outgoing Pennsylvania Secretary of Education)

Reflections

The New Year marks a milestone in CER's history, when the organization celebrates its 10th year in business. As we look back even in recent history, several key lessons emerge.

The first is that nothing is really ever as it appears. Just as an example, what we learn from the media about Edison in Philadelphia, is really not at all reality. This month the publication Education Next employs one of the media's most objective and balanced reporters, Jay Mathews of the *Washington Post*, in a substantive, in-depth look at the real story behind the private firm's coming and going that would surprise even the most informed among us. (www.educationnext.org)

Of course, the first lesson applies to the lives of education reformers every day. They work hard to do the best they can to develop new and innovative programs, often putting themselves way out on a limb and challenging all conventional notions of what even their friends consider "polite" or "civil" behavior. Rather than join the local organization, they start one of their own. Rather than join the chorus of praise of a particular school leader who has charmed generations, they look through the Emperor's clothes. It would be much easier to sit back and let the status quo reign supreme, wouldn't it?

We've learned, secondly, that the Establishment wants you to believe you are mean, don't understand what's really happening in schools and are wed to the wrong organizations. They also like to talk about how reformers are dividing rather than uniting, and that if we all just came together, we could make beautiful music.

What they would really like is not consensus, but that we all go away. It's convenient and easy never to have detractors. The title of Checker Finn's marvelous Gadfly column reminds us often that we indeed are a nuisance to the Blob. Going deeper, Plato's cave in The Republic reminds us how comfortable seclusion in our ideas really is and that not having to fight or defend truth is the path most easily chosen.

The third thing we take away from ten years of reform is a result of the first two: That there is no spirit like that of the dedicated, passionate, concerned individuals who have decided they will carve out free time from their busy personal lives to start, build and run schools, new organizations, programs and even legislatures, often against the tide and without regard for personal hits they'll take.

I can't imagine ever being in better company and I want to thank you who fit that mold for what you do daily to advance efforts that help children really succeed, not just on paper, but in reality. This is a season of advent and renewal for many and we join you in renewing ourselves to not only a life of service but one of success in our shared goals.

May your Holiday Season be Bright and Merry, and May God Bless you and bring you a Happy New Year!

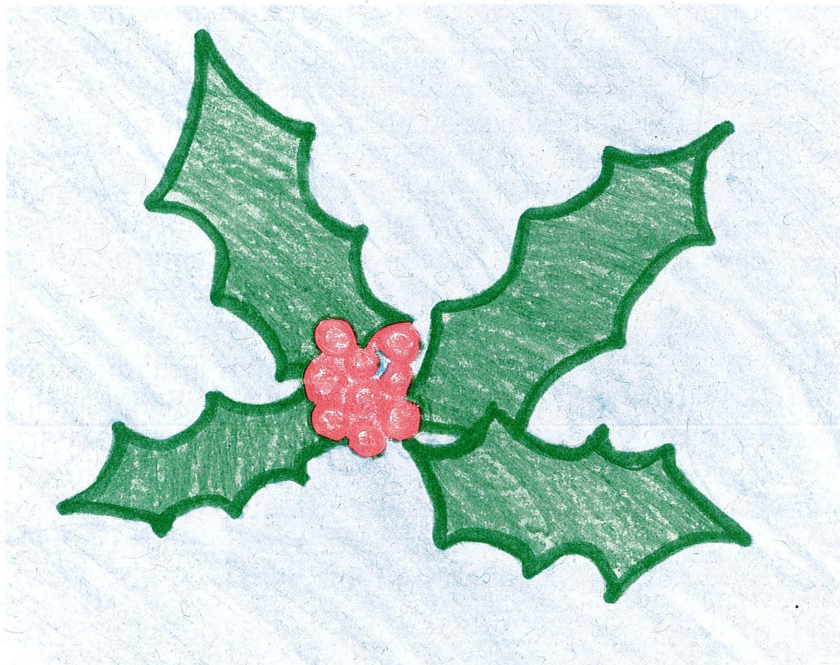
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