

THE Center for Education Reform



13TH ANNIVERSARY

"OCCASIONAL"

Monthly Letter to Friends of
The Center for Education Reform
No. 89

Mid-Year Review
July 2006

Dear Friends:

Notice the letterhead? It's a temporary switch in honor of this October's 13th Anniversary – 13 years to the day that the Center for Education Reform was incorporated, which more importantly gives us 13 new ways to celebrate progress, the people who helped make it happen, and the ideas that power the education reform movement.

Celebrating 13 years on the front lines of our national education debate, CER continues to struggle and make exciting strides to improve education choices for all of America's children. This report summarizes CER activities your support has made possible over the first six months of 2006.

As always, we're grateful for your commitment to CER and promise to continue to focus on our shared education reform goals. If you can, make plans now to join us Friday the 13th of October for our "Lucky" 13th gala event in Washington, DC. We look forward to hearing from you soon!

IT SHOULDN'T TAKE A HURRICANE

Post-Katrina update

It shouldn't have taken a hurricane and devastating floods to expose the truth about the poor educational system in the Crescent City.

About 90 percent of the public schools in New Orleans were performing below the state average. Children were failing to learn the most rudimentary skills, facilities were falling down, drugs and violence were rampant, and teachers often lacked basic credentials.

Months after the hurricane, CER's early efforts to radically change the city's educational landscape through its work with legislators and state and federal education officials is paying off. While conventional public schools in New Orleans remained shuttered, more than 25 charter schools opened throughout the city. The first public school to re-open its doors in New Orleans after the hurricane was Tom and Carolyn Crosby's International School of Louisiana in late October '05. The Crosbys showed by example that charter schools can bring a new life back to the Big Easy and many other independent charters followed suit in late January 2006. Among them: Audubon Charter School, New Orleans Math and Science High, and the Sophie B. Wright Institute of Academic Excellence. Some are a direct result of partnerships CER established, and the federal embrace – morally and financially – of charters would not have happened if CER had not beat a steady drum to look toward the charter concept as the solution.

ACTION IN THE STATES

While charters are our most visible focus, several other critical and necessary issues get CER's attention throughout the year in some subtle, and some not-so-subtle ways. So when several **Massachusetts** charter-school teachers had been called under false pretense to a union meeting to organize charter teachers, they called CER for help and guidance. After researching the options and analyzing the landscape, CER dispatched packets to every charter for their teachers to help them understand their rights, their options for teacher support and benefits that come from non-unions and helped them learn to communicate to others the importance of freedom for educators.

Legislators in **Florida** told CER "we couldn't have done it without you," when they successfully passed legislation creating the state's Schools of Excellence Commission, a new state-wide charter school authorizer that allows municipalities and universities to share in the responsibility and to help bring into existence new, quality charter schools. The bar was set high, the Commission's development is underway, and leaders have called on CER to continue its leading role. Governor Jeb Bush's office asked Jeanne Allen for a quote for the state's official press release. Jeanne said: "This new law ensures that more and better quality charter schools will evolve to serve students in Florida. The new authorizer is a groundbreaking development that draws on our best experiences nationwide and is likely to be a model for other states. It is no surprise that such innovation comes from a state that has led the way in all education reform."

A big fight to raise the caps on charters in **New York** fell victim once again to eleventh-hour politics in a legislature beholden to the teachers unions, despite bipartisan support and CER's determined efforts to support local partners like Chancellor Joel Klein and the New York Charter School Association. From media ads to watch-dogging the opponents and their misleading allegations in the press, the Empire State has been front and center at CER.



A strengthened relationship with old friends in the Volunteer State has led to a newly structured **Tennessee** Charter Schools Association (TNCSA). The Center is supporting TNCSA with a variety of strategic and technical tools so that they'll be able to better focus on supporting their schools and changing a law that works against, not for, its intended beneficiaries.

Tag-teaming with our best friends in **California**, CER worked to challenge bad press and develop new media contacts so that the California Charter Schools Association's leaders could amplify the progress being made among their 500-plus member schools, resulting in a high profile *Wall Street Journal* editorial about Golden State charters.

❄️ Not all that glitters is gold, and the new **South Carolina** charter school law gives only limited new flexibility – without commensurate funding – to any school that goes to the new charter authorizer the law created. CER supported 12 of the 19 local charter schools in their effort to illuminate the difference between a good law and a bad one. In the end, politics prevailed, Governor Mark Sanford got a much-needed political win, the state’s troubled association was able to save face, but sadly, few new successful charter schools are expected. CER’s position was unpopular among other national groups, but as we say at headquarters – we’re not in this to make friends; we’re in this to make good policy for kids.



We could go on with more state activities, but to sum up this year’s other state activities thus far, CER has been called upon to use its established network, expertise and programs – small and large – in the following additional states: **Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Virginia, and Wyoming.**





IN OTHER NEWS

❄️ CER was instrumental in a roundtable of leaders of some fifteen key national and state groups hosted by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to kick-off this year’s National Charter Schools Week. Spellings acknowledged the importance of ensuring that charters get treated fairly in federal law and among federal agencies.

❄️ The Center was well represented at an important meeting on social marketing among 20 or so top national groups that contribute to education reform, thanks to the generosity of the Gleason Foundation. Gleason’s leaders recognize that you can’t make headway without knowing how to create the right messages and understanding the best practices that have created the most successful movements of our day.

NETWORKING AND OUTREACH

From time to time we've received quizzical looks or comments from our friends about how a national group could possibly do grassroots activity. But from the start, CER's "unique selling point" has been its ability to combine grassroots activity with state policymaking to influence change. We provide scores of citizens with advice to turn them into activists, and arm them in making strides in their communities that often turn into tangible schools or successes in changed laws. Just this year alone, more than 700 new people reached out to CER for such guidance, and seeds from those new relationships are growing numerous herbs, spices, flowers and more in dozens of states. Here are some specific targeted efforts we've launched to help needy communities develop effective efforts for change, as well as to help us learn about what works – and what doesn't – in the fight for more quality options for children:

-  CER has turned up its organizing efforts in **New Jersey** with onsite personnel supporting aggressive outreach to parents and other key constituencies to make their case for stronger charter laws in the Garden State. Working with local leader Excellent Education for Everyone (E3) whose well-known efforts have exposed fraud and boosted the voice of African-American and Latino leaders, we are attracting new parental support, helping people understand their options (which are known by all but a small percentage of the state's most needy parents) and raising pressure on lawmakers to account for their estimated \$15,000 a child spent on bad schools. Stay tuned...
-  More aggressive outreach is underway in **Washington, DC** where we've launched an effort to increase awareness of available school options, including the District's federally funded scholarship program. CER is also working to educate and inform the two leading mayoral candidates and to support our charter friends who are still battling zoning commissions, and other District bureaucracies.
-  Later this summer we launch our **California** Bay Area effort to develop community parent networks to take over failing schools under NCLB. Using some of our newly proven grassroots marketing tactics, CER-trained leaders will develop the base of people necessary to help a handful of parent groups take over their schools and turn them into charters that will help them turn around a history of failure.
-  The **Philadelphia**-based Southwest Academy for Boys just received approval to open in 2007, thanks to the tenacity of school founder David Hardy and his amazing board. But Hardy was challenged by local politics and bureaucratic opposition to his single-sex prep school in the heart of one of the most disadvantaged communities in America, so he called on his friends at CER, and Jeanne and Kevin Chavous, our distinguished fellow, provided leadership that contributed to the school's successful approval.

That case is not an isolated event. Helping local school leaders with local politics is one of the things CER does best – and its track record for success is near 100 percent. (Let us know if you want more examples! We have plenty!)

COMMUNICATIONS HIGHLIGHT

The charter school movement – the effort to bring these new public schools to communities across the country – depends on focused communications. The growth and popularity in charter schools – now with more than 3,600 operating serving over 1 million students nationwide – underscores their success.

No program highlighted the competition between charters and conventional schools better than the January 13, 2006 edition of ABC's *20/20* with John Stossel. With CER's help and participation, "Stupid in America" exposed public school failure, the promise of school choice alternatives, and lit a firestorm of reactions on both sides of the debate.

Our web-hits spiked to 14,000 in just one hour upon the show's airing. Hundreds of people contacted CER after the program, and we gladly welcomed them to the growing army of dedicated reformers. They reinforced what we heard when we opened 13 years ago – that they knew there was a problem but thought they were alone; that they were mad and wanted to do something about it. CER quickly followed-up the afterglow by developing an outreach package that included numerous excerpts of the emails we received, 10 steps to take to help change the status quo, and a DVD copy of the program for people to share in their communities. The "dinner and a movie" concept took hold, with at least 12 different active citizens hosting such events in local halls or their living rooms.



COMMUNICATIONS BREAKDOWN

On the heels of the *20/20* program, we excitedly awaited Oprah Winfrey's two-part special on the plight of failing schools that featured some prominent charter school organizers. A promising opportunity was unexpectedly squandered, however, when the words "charter schools" failed to cross anyone's lips during the program. Our friends should know better, and Jeanne Allen held them to task in a pointed ChalkTalk blog.

WHY IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Charter schools aren't possible without state laws that enable their existence. And good charter schools are tougher to establish without strong state laws that allow for multiple authorizers, among other key components.

Reformers must take every opportunity to educate others about charter schools and explain that they're new public schools, free and open to all students, and accountable for their educational and financial performance.





CER sponsored research surveys in conjunction with the polling co.,™ inc. that tell the real story -- fully 80 percent of the public cannot identify charters as public schools. The polls also found that support for charters increases dramatically with knowledge. With such evidence found nationally and in more than six individual states that are representative of the nation's biggest six regions, the CER team stepped up its state efforts to educate lawmakers and citizens, and in so doing raised the visibility of charter schools in a specific, targeted, "on the ground" effort that will continue through the end of 2006.

WHO ARE YOU CALLING STUPID?

In the face of such an insult, a natural human reaction (after denial, of course) would be to figure out how to be better, smarter, and show the perpetrator that it simply ain't so. Yet in education, the trend remains one of denial. After John Stossel's *20/20* show, the unions protested outside ABC and demanded that Stossel come teach. Continual negotiations resulted in them taking back the offer. Later in the summer as the NEA met for its annual convention, more PR and misguided programs were the response to the nation's crisis, with the powerful union adopting a new moniker about great schools that somehow they think will convince the public that schools are in fact, great. The NEA also has a new campaign aimed at abolishing the No Child Left Behind act, which, while flawed, is the nation's only attempt at holding schools accountable for the billions in federal dollars they receive.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Media highlights

-  CER continues to challenge the newspapers whenever they misrepresent education reform. When *The New York Times* published an article criticizing charter school performance, (relying on discredited information produced by the enemies of charter schools). CER's rapid response team quickly put out the fires, getting the real message out on the promise and success of charter schools, by submitting Letters to Editor in every paper that ran the *Times* story.
-  Other media efforts that also combat scurrilous news stories are worth noting: In the first six months of 2006 alone, CER's voice reached more than 33 million people, thanks to the dogged review of media by its communications team.
-  CER's coverage of reform on its website also received accolades in 2006, with Jeanne Allen's **Chalk Talk** blog continuing to win over audiences. In addition to the "Oprah and Friends" commentary, recent blogs included a response the President's State of the Union Address, the literacy problems facing American adults today, and why the California ballot initiative failed.
-  With the help of Google advertising and increased efforts to draw media attention to the issues, CER's website increased its page views by more than 33 percent since last year and has averaged about 2,000 daily visits in the first six months of 2006.

RESOURCES AND PUBLICATIONS

A little known fact is that CER maintains one of the largest research databases in the country, able to access information for its customers on issues ranging from teacher certification to class size to school choice. Its member services team refers people to expert organizations that “do” those issues more than we, helping us connect the dots for many Americans that would otherwise not know where to turn.

This year CER sent “toolkits” guiding these customers to myriad people. It produced several issue-specific publications on charter schools. More than any other national organization, CER is recognized as the expert in charter schools research because we receive first-hand information from charter schools that is not available from any other resource.

In early '06, CER unveiled its *National Charter School Online Directory*, a subscription service that offers up-to-date information with state-by-state listings of all operating charter schools, academic specialty, and enrollment numbers and grades.

The *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools* highlighted the increasing interest in charter schools, documenting waiting lists, and dispelling the myths perpetuated by the opposition that charter schools cream the best students.

CER is recognized as the nation's expert in developing strong charter laws. A key tool for state-level advocates is CER's guide to *Charter School Laws* that grades the strength of state laws by various criteria including multiple authorizers, funding, numerical caps, and accountability. CER produces a detailed version for the policy wonks, as well as a simple summary for regular folks, appropriately titled *The Simple Guide To Charter School Laws*.

And of course, CER's *Newswire* continued to cover all the issues essential to reform, with 32 issues, including daily special reports during National Charter Schools Week, put out through June 2006. All these back issues are available on our website, www.edreform.com, and is one reason you have not heard from us in writing for a while as this much-read e-newsletter took over our need to come to you monthly with these long updates.

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We hope you've found this “Monthly” Letter informative, but more importantly, illustrative of the kind of work that can be done when you support our efforts. We couldn't have it done without you, and we look forward to continuing our shared success in the future.



And please – we have room for 500 of you – mark your calendar now for a never-before-seen extravaganza in policy circles as CER embarks on a major (and seasonally appropriate) spooky gala with scenes from classic horror stories that seem eerily similar to the events we encounter daily. Until then...

For all our CER Friends,

A handwritten signature in orange ink, appearing to read "Jeanne". It is written in a cursive, flowing style.

THAT'S VERY NICE OF YOU TO SAY

We know our supporters won't mind us bragging a bit, but for those of you who may need external validation, here is just a sampling of the very kind words – and rewarding comments – that make our day, and fuel our energies.

"Mr. Chavous was a beacon of intelligent light on last night's 20/20 program. Good work!"

Rebecka R., Parent, Detroit, MI

"You did a great job on the op-ed which appeared in *The Baltimore Sun* today. Every fact was accurate and you made a most persuasive case for the real reform of the schools in Baltimore."

Nancy Grasmick, Maryland Superintendent of Schools

"On behalf of myself and the Educational Council of the Florida House of Representatives I want to thank you for your outstanding leadership in the development of our new charter law... The CER staff's support in reaching out to arrange site visits to other cities, scheduling and attending meetings with other charter authorizers and providing ongoing information and support was crucial to our success."

Representative John K. Stargel, Florida House of Representatives

"Your research on public opinion regarding charter schools is fascinating. It clearly shows that much more needs to be done to accurately inform the public about the nature of charter schools and their potential for helping all children to receive an excellent education."

Janice Riddell, Riverside, CT

"Thank you for your ongoing support. It really means a lot to me to know that others so far away, and who have nothing individually to gain, have taken such an interest in our work."

Chris Barbic, Yes College Preparatory School, Houston, TX

"In cleaning off my desk, I came across your 2005 newsletter and found it to be among the most enlightened discussions of education issues I have ever seen."

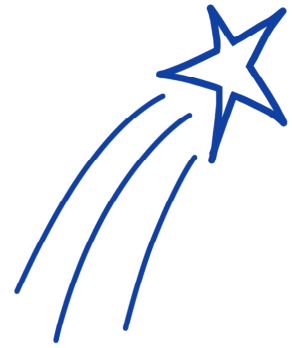
Zachary Abrams, Lake Street Capital, LLC, San Francisco, CA

"Jeanne Allen and her staff at the Center for Education Reform have done their usual outstanding job in providing some excellent resource information on charter schools as part of National Charter Schools Week."

Luke Gordy, Executive Director of the Arkansas for Education Reform Foundation

"This is the best email I've gotten all month! Thanks."

Greg Toppo, Education Reporter, USA Today



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