

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 2**

DECEMBER 3, 1993

Dear Friends:

Each month brings new developments in the realm of education reform. As you may now know from our Special Alert and the subsequent media coverage, the Michigan Assembly passed legislation authorizing school districts, community colleges and universities to grant charters and to develop charter schools when one or more certified teachers or public university professors apply. This legislation clears the way for conference and floor action in the state legislature. Whatever direction these proceedings take, it is clear they will have a great impact on improving schools. There are a number of amendments that can be made to broaden the scope of the program, but barring a victory even short of that, the program is still a welcome addition to the charter school legislation in seven other states, and increases the level of awareness and support from the public at large across the country.

If you would like more information, please give us a call at the Center.



Charters Welcome!

The Town Meeting sponsored by the Center on November 18 in Detroit drew support for charter schools from a diverse crowd, including an overwhelmingly impressive number of teachers and parents. The Center has received over 40 requests for detailed information about charters, from people wanting to start one or help others develop their plans. A significant point for us was that a large part of the supportive audience learned of the meeting from a mention on the front page of the Detroit Free Press, and these "off the street" folks far outnumbered the traditional "choir" folks in the audience. It is clear, from this experience and that of others around the country, that charter schools are eagerly welcomed by rank and file citizens, and that teachers are in the forefront of this support, even as their union leadership languishes on the sideline — heckling.

Detroit's only cable channel taped the meeting, and is airing it in its entirety several times starting the week of December 6. We are preparing a

condensed version, with highlights of discussions from our stellar participants, if you'd like a copy.

California Post-Mortem

Since early November, several meetings and discussions have taken place to assess the lessons learned from the Proposition 174 campaign and vote and to develop plans for future efforts on school choice in California. It is heartening to see that candid and serious discussion is taking place.

While three initiatives have already been drafted and submitted to the state for 1994, there seems to be a consensus building among leaders that 1996 would be the optimal time for our next initiative, because it gives organizers a chance to build key support within communities and among the grass roots from which to counter and defeat opponents' attacks.

There is also a consensus among leaders that we need to bite off a smaller piece of the pie, and should perhaps structure the next effort to involve a smaller group of people, selected according to income, and to be phased in slowly over several years.

This serves two purposes: One, while the opposition will always exist, it immediately debunks the claim that choice subsidizes the rich. It also helps us to build the very true argument that those most in need of choice, those in the inner cities, who are low-income, who are largely minorities, who have the most to gain from choice, will in fact be its largest beneficiaries.

Second, a low-income initiative (with any number of different phase-in clauses for the higher income brackets) can help us make the choice argument to parents who see no need for change, to individuals without children, to the elderly and to parents whose kids are grown. We can argue, correctly, that school choice not only helps entire communities, by building better education, but that it increases the level of control in a school and thus leads to enhanced safety in the building and in the neighborhood. We can also make the good economic arguments about the cost savings involved when schools are forced to compete, and can show good examples of private schools which consistently provide more and better education for less.

While there are lots of opinions on the timing, form and scale of the next move in California, there is an emerging trend towards the focused kinds of approaches discussed above. The only challenge lies in convincing the party faithful that half - a - loaf is better than none, and is achievable.

California Window Dressing

Governor Pete Wilson recently signified his desire to reform education by hiring the Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based organization that works with state legislatures and the education establishment for form consensus on reform measures, to outline a plan for his state's troubled schools. In so doing, Wilson announced that ECS will work "without regard to protecting the special interests of sacred cows."

What Wilson has obviously overlooked is that ECS IS a sacred cow, has effected little actual reform, and represents only the narrowest voices in the school reform debate!

A View From the Blob

This occasional feature will introduce you to some of the more outrageous comments or actions made by members of the education establishment, so aptly called the "blob" by our dear friend Bill Bennett. Enclosed with this mailing is the Calendar of Events of the establishment's major meetings for 1994 — it is truly an amazing document!

The following words of wisdom came from Gary Marx, chief lobbyist for the American Association of School Administrators, and appeared in the November 11, 1993, Education Daily in a discussion about school districts contracting with private firms to manage or teach certain subjects:

"Contracting [outside] for services is certainly a live option, but you can't ever say one approach is better than another."

Not EVER???

Marx later urges school districts to investigate a "firm's 'agenda' to make sure it doesn't ultimately involve providing instructional services or advocating vouchers for students to attend private schools."

This from the mouthpiece for public school administrators, who, we are told, are concerned about providing the best school management money can buy!

AFT - The Myths and Realities of Choice

The American Federation of Teachers has published its own myths and realities about school choice, in its most recent American Educator, the AFT's flagship publication for educators and policy makers.

In this document, the AFT takes great pains to debunk school choice proponents various arguments, although, fortunately, it is easy to debunk the

debunking. Our "9 Lies" piece addresses some of the AFT arguments, and many state policy groups have their own question and answer pieces that cover the same territory. This publication caps a year long effort by Al Shanker and his organization to convince the public that education as it exists has plenty of room for reform. Of course, we already knew that — the question is, what's going to get done, by whom, when?

It is encouraging that the AFT found 1993 to be threatening enough that they would need to put so much about choice in print so fast.

The Standards Debate

Many states are trying in earnest to come up with state standards and testing mechanisms as benchmarks for schools to teach and for students to learn. Oftentimes, as has become increasingly apparent, the legislation gets mired down by debates over the meaning of outcomes-oriented goals and objectives. It is critical for those in the middle of this debate in their state to know the facts and to know what arguments to use to change this course. It is also critical that, in their opposition to objectionable methods, these folks have something else to offer in order to be seen as credible participants in the process.

There are many resources for information about OBE (we have a resource packet for anyone interested), as well as some valuable guides for model standards and assessment. Alabama has a good substitute bill; the Modern Red Schoolhouse, a project of the Hudson Institute, offers very good examples of standards and good assessment tools; and the Edison Project will soon have their own curriculum and assessment methods to share with others. If reformers are to remain part of the discussion on education issues in the states, it is critical that we come armed not only with data, but with alternatives to existing proposals.



You have our best wishes for a happy holiday season. Thanks for all of your nice calls, referrals and good information!

Until next year,

Jeanne Allen
President