

THE Center for Education Reform



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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 15**

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Dear Friends:

We're thrilled with the feedback from our new readers last month. Many of you were intrigued by the developments in reform, and a few were not so happy to hear what we had to say. Look to our comments section for some highlights. This month you'll find more about how states are grappling with reform efforts and some excerpts from *The School Reform Handbook*. Keep in touch!



Why Reform?

Discussions about education reform normally fall into two camps. On one hand, there are those who believe things could be better, should be done differently, and are not going so well. On the other hand, there are those who believe that things are better than ever, that there are enormous obstacles which seriously impair a schools ability to do better, and that change should be approached warily.

While both sides have honest, hard-working and well-intentioned supporters, the essential thrust of this newsletter and The Center is to make schools work better for all children. We are particularly puzzled by those who say that such a mission is overly critical of public education and the good work that is happening. While there are good schools, public education must begin to meet the needs of all children, better. As we state in *The School Reform Handbook*:

Good schools exist. And bad schools exist.

The challenge of school reform is to make all schools good schools. The only question is how best to do that.

Substantive, lasting reform is only going to come from a serious reevaluation of the ways in which today's schools operate. Systemic reform is not about reinventing the wheel or reinventing a system. It is about creating a climate that fosters innovation and provides an array of options within a community. To create that climate, you must understand more fully how schools operate.

So what to do about it? The Handbook has many answers. Among the suggestions in building and growing an organization for reform:

Don't Underestimate the Power of Simple Grass Roots Activism:

- * Set a goal to speak to at least one new person each day about your efforts. Also recruit others to do so.
- * Send letters of support and encouragement to legislators and leaders who take strong positions and positive actions for education reform.
- * Don't give up on legislators and others who are not so supportive; make an effort to provide them with thoughtful information periodically, and follow-up with personal, amicable contact.
- * Always strive to inform your community. Hold town meetings to make sure vital issues get discussed publicly and fairly; write thoughtful letters to the editor.
- * Be positive! Always underscore your commitment to the schools and the children.

The *Handbook* has hundreds more suggestions and anecdotes from people working to make reform a reality in their community. For a copy, please use the order form on back or call us!

State Watch

- **Washington** State residents have recently discovered that "barely half of the state's 11th graders are 'proficient' in the basic subjects of math, science, English and history." These stunning facts, revealed in *The Seattle Times* (2/26/95) were results of the state's Curriculum Frameworks Assessment System. Of the 48,000 11th graders taking the test, a little over half were proficient in English and history, and 42% and 50% were proficient in math and science, respectively. Overall, only 29% of all students were proficient in all four subject areas. Teachers set the standard of proficiency after reviewing the test. About 15,000 students that were either absent, had dropped out or were in special education did not take the test.

Charter school proponents and the supporters of the Education Excellence Initiative (206-789-8776) in Washington State believe that creating a regulation-free school environment and allowing parents a choice of diverse offerings might help turn this around. Many in states with similar educational results believe the same, such as ...

- ... **New Hampshire**, where a charter school bill passed the Senate there last month and whose House will be holding hearings soon;
- ... **Texas**, where on March 27th the Senate passed a broad school reform bill, which includes a low-income school choice pilot project, for up to 10% of the states students in 20 school districts. S.B. 1, would also authorize charter schools and

liberate school districts from regulatory constraints. It provides teachers with their first pay raise in years, while at the same time making it easier for administrators to dismiss bad teachers. While the House Education Committee decided not to include a pilot choice program in their final version of their bill, compelling testimony from the public was warmly received in hearings and may be responsible for turning several no votes to yes when the choice bill comes to the floor of the House, a move which is expected by mid-May. Allan Parker of the Texas Justice Foundation (210-614-7157) has been working with a group of bi-partisan legislators, citizens and educators to convince legislators of this pressing need.

- ... in **Pennsylvania**, the world is turning. The Wilkesburg School Board, representing a small, but increasingly troubled community outside of Pittsburgh, exercised *their* local control and voted to turn over control of an elementary school to the privately operated Alternative Public Schools, Inc., amidst hostility from the unions. The Turner School Initiative will increase the days and hours of the school year, add personalized instruction for children, and bring in new teachers who will be freed from many of the regulatory burdens that hamstring the profession.

Also in the Keystone State, Governor Tom Ridge appointed a real reformer, Eugene Hickok, to the post of Secretary of Education. Hickok is a school board member and college professor with a fresh perspective. Pending the new Secretary's confirmation, Ridge will begin to push his education reform bill, which includes charter schools and a school choice program for children in failing school districts.

- The impact of some reform efforts are being dampened by nervous lawmakers responding to pressure from the education establishment. **Illinois** lawmakers approved a charter school bill last month that would limit the number and autonomy of any newly formed charters. After strong lobbying from the Illinois Education Association, the Senate agreed to add teacher job protections and ensure that union members would have input into school operations. But in order to operate most effectively, charter schools need to operate free from collective bargaining mandates and be able to contract directly with teachers for their services.

By a 31-23 vote, the Senate also voted to launch a school choice experiment for 2,000 Chicago children. Each would be given \$2,500 to spend at the private school of their choice. The House must now vote on both reform efforts.

- **Idaho's** House education committee unanimously passed charter school legislation, but after pressure from the PTA and Association of Idaho Administrators, failed to muster enough votes in the full House. The State Department of Education, and creative lawmakers like State Representative Fred Tilman are optimistic for its passage in January. When opponents argued that charters promote creaming of students, Rep. Maynard Miller told his colleagues about charter schools he's seen that serve disadvantaged kids, and that "those kids are excellent and talented, and nearly 100 percent of them go on to a two- or four-year college."

Miller's right. A majority of the approximately 144 charters that are operating today serve children with special needs, from charters with pregnant teens to those serving dropouts or large numbers of minority children. The National Association of Charter Schools (Lansing, MI) and Charter School Strategies, Inc. (Minneapolis, MN) are both terrific resources for additional information on charters, as are several state-based charter support groups. For a listing, consult *The School Reform Handbook* or call us for a resource list.

As with reform efforts across the country, whether they be charters, choice or standards, superintendents and other educators in Idaho enthusiastically voiced their support for the bill. That is why it continues to baffle these good people -- and us -- when the leaders of organizations charged with representing their interests actively work against the rank and file.

- **New Jersey** legislators heard testimony on a proposed charter school bill there in late March, and several regional hearings are scheduled later this spring. In the wake of a delay on school choice legislation, support has grown among legislators and educators to create other means to allow Garden State communities to create new kinds of programs for their children, and permit parents some options over the schools that educate their children.

- **Minnesota** continues to be on the vanguard of education reform. With the recent release of Project Listen, a series of surveys commissioned by the Choice in Education Foundation, we get a better look at the populist push behind the state's successful reforms. Not only is there strong support for expanding the present choice system, but Governor Arne Carleson is among them, and significantly, 77% of respondents believe now is the time for a fundamental restructuring of U.S. education. Interestingly, a majority of public school employees believe that the quality of education has decreased over the last five years.

Myths and Realities

There's an old adage that says one must first acknowledge that he has a problem before he can begin to solve it. And as our wise mothers have often told us, acknowledging your shortcomings doesn't mean you think you're bad. Yet reformers are ever being scolded as anti-public education for bringing to light some of education's less savory facts. Worse, there is a real state of denial alive and well among the groups who claim to represent the interests of the schools. Consider this from the Michigan Association of School Boards:

"Although many wonderful things are happening in our schools, the average citizen seems to have an uneasy — if not critical — view of public education. National commissions, think tanks and business accuse schools of failing to adequately prepare young people for their roles in society. On the contrary, I'm happy to report, quite the opposite is true! Mounting evidence from reliable research paints a far more optimistic picture ... [such as]:

* SAT scores are going up, particularly among ethnic groups.

* "On recent international comparisons, American students are bright, shining stars." Citing two obscure evaluations, the MASB President says we're actually outperforming the Japanese on math and science.

* And the graduation rate is rising higher, enrollment in AP courses are up, and business and industry are happier than ever with the quality of the workforce.

IN FACT: Ethnic group scores are rising thankfully, but they still lag behind the scores of whites. (For more on these achievement stats, see our Action Paper, "The American Education Diet.") But it's not *their* lower scores that are bringing down the national averages; it is the scores of the college bound, which have fallen, not risen. On international comparisons, the children of the last remaining superpower are middling at best. And surveys of business show that too many of them have difficulty finding applicants sufficiently skilled in writing, reading and math. According to the American College Testing (ACT) service, many high school graduates are not taking a core curriculum, and thus are not "prepared to earn better than a C in college algebra, calculus and chemistry courses" (Education Daily 3/3/95).

Yes, there are good things happening. And in response to the pressure brought about by reform efforts the likes of those discussed here, schools are working harder. (See *In the News* for related story). But when American children are tested on their specific knowledge, and not compared simply on the basis of percentiles, they fall short each time. Don't get us wrong -- numbers don't tell the whole picture. But Americans in survey after survey are fed up with what they see as a failure of students to learn basic knowledge, a lack of discipline in the schools, growing dissatisfaction among teachers who's hands are tied, and frustration among school board members who are saddled with solving all of these problems.

The Public Agenda Foundation, a polling group based in New York, says parents want their schools to focus on ending violence, increasing discipline and mastering the basics. In Connecticut and Michigan, polls show that residents do not think the schools are doing a good job overall. They do, however, want to help them get better, which is a far cry from being anti-education.

A Word to the Wise

"Walk through the department and you can tell the difference between the offices that handle state programs and those with federal programs. The federal ones have the new furniture."

Arizona State School Superintendent Lisa Graham,
discussing her restructuring of the education department to
put more money into programs and less into overhead.

In The News

Newspapers around the country shed light on what educator groups, citizens and policy makers are doing and thinking on the issues.

- On School Choice: The San Francisco Chronicle debunks one of the most popular myths in school reform—when choice is permitted, poor kids will be left behind:

"When Berkeley first proposed a choice program for its public schools, many critics said the system would favor the white and the wealthy because they have the time and resources to shop for an education.

"There were widespread predictions that the program would exclude poor or minority children whose parents speak only Spanish or who are intimidated by forms and school bureaucracies. The skeptics said those parents would never fill out their choice program paperwork and their children would then be assigned to leftover spaces in schools the savvy did not pick ... the critics were wrong.

"Citywide, between 90 and 100 percent of parents honored the deadline. About 4,200 students were involved. The high response rate in Berkeley was the result of an unprecedented school marketing program ... principals who were used to an automatic client list got into the selling business for the first time last month. They dazzled parents and showed off their programs and their teachers at open houses and tours. Some principals even recruited popular teachers away from competing schools in the hope of attracting some students." (2/27/95)

(CER Note: Even the California Education Department is getting in the act. It issued a memo stressing that public school choice is a significant component for educational improvement.)

- On increased parental involvement, from the Christian Science Monitor:

"Across the country, parents are pouring back into schools, questioning what goes on in their children's classrooms and pitching in to fill vacuums created by decreased funding." (This surprisingly does not sit well for the PTA, who responds:)

"'We're seeing this in a lot of different parts of the country,' says Kathryn Whitfill, president of the PTA. 'Parents are becoming part of the equity problem rather than part of the equity solution.'

(What?! The head of the National PTA is actually calling parents involved in fundraising, part of the problem?!))

"At Lafayette Elementary School in Washington, DC, parents are funding an art teacher, science teacher and nurses with more than \$100,000 in donations. Meanwhile, schools in poorer areas of the city simply do without.

"The National PTA discourages local PTAs from funding instructional services,' Ms. Whitfill says. 'We feel that is the function of the school districts.'

"In Montgomery County, MD the school board banned parent funding for classroom instruction after a group of parents offered to pay for a math, science and computer instructor. Such offers are unfair to parents and students in schools that cannot afford to supplement their budgets, says Paul Vance, superintendent of the Montgomery County school system."

Whitfill's solution? "Spend the time now spent on raising money for their own child's school advocating instead for universally acceptable school budgets."

Even Education Secretary Riley thinks this is a bit extreme. "Many parents feel that their right to be involved in school policy, to be full participants in the learning process is ignored, frustrated and sometimes even denied." As the Monitor accurately notes, "This is slowly beginning to change... The recent push for more parental choice in public education and the threat of vouchers to fund private-school tuition have forced once-reluctant public educators to begin listening to parents' concerns."

We wonder -- why did it take such a "threat" to the system?

And why would any program that results in good achievement be a "threat" to anyone.? At the Connect Charter School in Colorado, standardized test scores among the school's 55 original students increased by nearly 8 percent in writing and 13 percent in math between 1993 and 1994. Results like that should make us all work harder to bring all schools - up to par, rather than make us want to close down those schools for fear that others do not offer the same opportunities. The National PTA is headquartered in Chicago at 700 N. Rush St., Chicago, IL 60611-2571. You may want to let Ms. Whitfill know what you think about parental involvement.

And Some Miscellanea

- The Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC has a new report that details the various relationships between the Congress and the Executive Branch and who's responsible for administering \$340 billion in 76 child and family programs annually. For a copy of "Who Controls Major Federal Programs for Children and Families: Rube Goldberg Revisited," call IEL at (202) 822-8405.

- For those of you who'd like a combination of more in-depth reading, and some outstanding news reports about a wide variety on education issues, we call your attention to *News & Views* a monthly publication of the Education Excellence Network, which is co-chaired by two experts, Chester A. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch. For subscription information, write to Network News & Views, 223 N. Guadalupe #305, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501.

Comments

A sampling of irresistible comments from our readers and beyond.

A New Jersey High School Teacher called to say she "can't believe [CER] is saying things in education are abnormal when they are perfectly normal. Everyone is being harassed in education. Teachers earn every dollar they make."

A Pennsylvania school director writes: "Thank you for introducing me to The Center for Education Reform. I recently received your [newsletter] and appreciated the timely reports/assessments of recent educational reforms that are sweeping across our nation... please continue to send this much needed objective analysis of these questionable trends and endorsement of real improvements that restore equity and excellence to education."

And our favorite, which a Michigan educator scribbled across our business reply envelope: "No thanks. My money would be better spent on Dial-a-joke!"

.....

We're thrilled by your response to the "new and improved" Monthly Letter, and that so many of you have asked to reproduce it to send around to your colleagues. There are so many more developments, and we've given you just the highlights. If you need more information on what's happening, please call us.

Happy Spring!

Jeanne
Jeanne Allen
President

The Center for Education Reform is pleased to announce *The School Reform Handbook*. We've been overwhelmed with calls so order your copy today!

Make your check or money order for \$9.95 payable to the Center at:
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