



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

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* **CHARTER SCHOOLS:** Arizona charter schools result in higher student achievement, according to a new report released today by the Goldwater Institute titled "Does Charter School Attendance Improve Test Scores?" Looking at three consecutive years (1997-99) of Stanford 9 test results using a variety of models, the study shows that students attending charters outperformed their peers enrolled in traditional public schools. This is particularly noteworthy since charter schools in Arizona were found to "have become havens for students with special problems." While charter students had lower scores than those in traditional public schools, they had narrowed the gap by 1999. The most critical find: the longer a student remained enrolled in a charter school, his scores improved more than did the scores of his traditional public school counterparts.

* Parents in Vista, California have won their battle to form the Vista Literacy Academy Charter School, but only after a raucous public school board meeting which drove the board behind closed doors and a threatened recall of any board member who voted against the charter. When supporters of the education establishment resisted creating the school and thought they could quietly reject it, more than 100 people turned out at the evening board meeting to demand approval. "We, the Latinos, want our kids to get success, and we can't get it in the (traditional) public schools," said Alejandro Sanchez, who has four children in public school. Dismayed by the turn of events, the Vista School Board moved their final vote to an 8:00 am meeting when most parents would be at work. Parents promptly announced a recall campaign against any board member who voted "No." The final vote: 5-0 in favor. The lesson for parents: Never say die, and be willing to use every tool of democracy to fight for what you believe in.

* **CHOICE:** Limiting options only to public school choice limits parental opportunities, but in suburban Washington, DC a local school board is about to take away even their open enrollment program. Howard County (MD) school officials say such choice is a privilege, not a right, and complain that some don't write the real reason on their transfer forms: Parents don't want their children in schools with limited academic choices or an unruly atmospheres. Instead of solving the problem, the board may vote tonight to simply force kids to stay where they are. This doesn't wash with PTA president Bob Granfield, who declared that open enrollment "promotes accountability, responsibility and a sense of parental choice.

Howard officials should listen to Mr. Granfield and also read today's front page story in their local newspaper, *The Washington Post*, about Milwaukee's more robust choice program offering poor parents the option of private schools. The story, which contained nothing but favorable comments from

parents in the program, notes the effect on the public school system: "The wide range of education options has forced public schools to work harder to attract and retain their 100,000 students.... They have something to sell: Dropout rates have declined four straight years and reading scores have improved the past three." Reading studies have shown the same impact in Florida, and what is becoming clear is that school choice doesn't just help the kids who move to other schools; it helps the kids who choose to stay by forcing improvements in the traditional public school system. For the full story: <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A28115-2001Mar19.html>.

*** SCHOOL BOARDS:** As the National School Boards Association prepares to gather in San Diego this weekend, the Center for Education Reform has developed "15 Questions to Ask School Board Members" underscoring the role local boards can play in demanding accountability from their local school system. A useful tool for reporters, parents, and even board members to use in benchmarking themselves, questions run the gamut from accountability to flexibility, charters to choice to teacher quality. Check out the list of [15 Hard Questions](#).

Meanwhile, we can only hope that San Francisco School Board President Jill Wynns will read our "15 Questions for School Board Members." Ms. Wynns, under fire for trying to shut down the successful Edison Academy Charter School (coincidentally run by Edison Schools, Inc.) has dismissed the attention her efforts are getting with accusations of a "slick" campaign by the school's operators. But the real reason her actions are attracting attention is the cold, hard reality that a school board made up of adults has put its preferences above those of the children. Attention is coming to actions like this because the news media is beginning to understand what parents and reformers have understood for some time: that schools should be about children's needs and not about those of the system. To read Jeanne Allen's response go to: [Charter Schools page](#).

*** FEDERAL POLICY:**

President Bush's efforts to establish federal education reform took a giant step forward with the appointment of Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Gene Hickok as Under Secretary of Education. Hickok is a founding member (and current chairman) of the reformist Education Leaders Council, and his advocacy for real reform has resulted in path-breaking legislation for Pennsylvania, from charter schools to standards to instituting efforts to intervene in failing school districts. His loss to Pennsylvania is the nation's gain.

*** VOICES FROM THE FRONT:**

"We do not appreciate a bureaucratic body thinking they know better than us what is right for our children." - Parent Lupe Hernandez, explaining why she opposes the San Francisco School Board shutting down her high-performing charter school ... and also nicely summing up the essence of educational choice.



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