



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

Newsire - June 20, 2000

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Vol. 2, No. 24

* **SCHOOL CHOICE:** Policymakers wanting to make fundamental changes to their schools need to take a VERY close look at Florida, where the A+ Program inaugurated by Florida Gov. Jeb Bush scored a giant victory recently despite its problems in the courts. Amazingly, all of the 78 schools deemed "failing" after the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCAT) were evaluated for 1999 have passed the writing portion of this year's exam. The writing piece is one of core basics tested through the FCAT. Schools must pass one of three to avoid the F score. The writing scores this year prove that the A+ Plan has served as the catalyst in pushing Florida's public school to do more. Remarkably enough, the average increase was 36.9 points, showing that despite all the talk when the program passed about fatal effects of choice, the program in fact had the effect that was intended. Kudos to the schools and families who worked harder under pressure to fish or cut bait. While the results on the Math and Reading portions have yet to be released, we hope the ripple effect is just as strong as with the writing portion.

The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati, Ohio, is expected to return its verdict on the constitutionality of Cleveland's voucher program later this summer. Outside the Court, parents and children are rallying today in support of their right to choose their children's school. Meanwhile inside the courtroom, lawyers for the BLOB (NEA and AFT) are arguing to take that right way from the parent – forcing children back to a failing Cleveland school system where only 1 in 3 students graduated from high school in 1999. Currently the state provides roughly 4,300 tuition vouchers to some of the poorest families in Cleveland.

* **BILINGUAL EDUCATION:** The READ Institute last week released a report showing evidence that English-learners may be better off in a one-year English-immersion program than an extended bilingual education program. The READ abstract, written by Dr. Christine H. Rossell, a political science professor at Boston University, criticizes a recent study by Kenji Hakuta that claims it takes the average child up to five years or longer to learn English. Dr. Rossell's critique speaks to the fact that our schools need to do better in adopting the strategies that best teach children to learn English quickly and more appropriately evaluate their needs. "Dr. Rossell's chief critique of Hakuta et al's research is that they used parity with the average native English speaker on a standardized test as a measurement of having learned English. This is a standard that half of all native-English-speakers fail.

* **PHONICS SUCCESSES:** Indiana Phonics Task Force discovers state standards "lack focus and rigor" and suggest the use of Phonics Tool Kit, which the Task Force developed, for use in Kindergarten through Third Grade classrooms. The state is currently in the process of rewriting standards for English, mathematics and science. According to reading expert, Sandra Stotsky who has studied every state's English standards, these standards are "Nearly perfect." Another quote: "Far and away the best I have ever seen. They could serve quite well as the basis for teacher staff development in English-Language Arts." --Diane Ravich.

* **CHARTER SCHOOLS:** Mayor Jerry Brown takes on the establishment in Oakland, CA and beyond. Since early last year he's been trying to bring common sense to his troubled city's education system and has proposed a residential charter to occupy land left vacant by the closing of the Alameda base across the Bay. But every charter battle is a colorful one, and Brown is waging the right fight.

As reported in the San Francisco Chronicle on June 15, 2000 (*Jerry Brown Gets Real With Urban Experts Cash is cure for many workers in cities, he says*, by Carolyn Lochhead):

"... Brown also attacked what he called ... an `adaptation to pathology that is a wonder to behold,' referring chiefly to the Oakland school board.

"Brown called charter schools, which are publicly funded but largely independent of the regular school system, `an invitation to creativity that is being stifled by a Soviet model of education ...Everything's got to run through the central authority, and everything is predetermined through credentialing and regulations. The notion that choice can be the basis for quality and achievement is almost an unthinkable thought.'

"Instead, Brown insisted that market principles should apply to schools just as they do to hardware and grocery stores. `Parents are smart,' Brown said, `Let them choose.'

Last week, the board rejected, on a 5-to-5 vote, Brown's proposal for a charter military academy. Brown has pledged to push forward with the plan anyway, either by taking it to the Alameda County Board of Education or another local school district."



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