



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

Newsire - July 24, 2001

July 24, 2001

CER Newsire Vol. 3, No. 31

* **CHARTERS:** The California battle over cyber charter schools is heating up as the state makes plans to reduce funding for home-school charters. The action was initiated largely because of questionable business practices (management fees of nearly 40 percent) by one or two charters serving the home school community. But Senate bill SB 740 would reduce funding by 30 percent, forcing all home-based charters to come before the state board and ask for exemptions from the lower allocations. The bill thus moves down the slippery slope of punishing all such charters because of the actions of a very few. And while California's current state board has a record of being charter-friendly, board composition can change and become unfriendly very quickly.

Public school systems using distance learning report that the cost of on-line courses is about the same as traditional in-school instruction. Non-traditional programs are not necessarily less expensive, and while the state needs to prevent obvious abuses, the tactic it seems to be taking is assuming all home schools are guilty before being found innocent.

* In Missouri, a crowd of parents met in St. Louis to plan a counter-attack against new state Department of Education guidelines that raise the bar by emphasizing new procedural issues and red tape, rather than results-oriented accountability. While four charters have been approved in that city, at least a dozen applications have been rejected and there is increasing resistance by the established chartering authorities against further approval. Led by former State Senator Fran Flotron, who helped get the state charter law passed, the parents vowed to develop and use their political muscle to get more public charter schools open in St. Louis.

St. Louis schools continue to resist the establishment of cost-effective charter schools, despite the fact that the school system has spent \$1.8 million in the last three years in an effort to improve achievement at 11 schools. A recent internal audit concludes that the reform models are failing.

* **POLITICS:** Some NEA members are starting to wonder if they're well represented in the political arena. An NEA-sponsored post-election survey shows that NEA members supported Al Gore over George W. Bush by 59 to 34 percent - about the same level of support afforded Clinton over Dole in 1996 (62-31). But observers point out that more than 90 percent of NEA political funds went to Democratic candidates, leaving one-third of its members essentially without a voice in union political decisions. And the same NEA-sponsored poll shows that 61 percent of NEA members don't believe opposing vouchers is very important - despite the massive level of funding put into anti-choice campaigns by the union leadership. The one-sided support is not so strange, though: Newly obtained

internal documents show that the NEA had a veto over Democratic Party plans in 1996, a degree of control Lawrence Noble, the nation's former top election regulator, said was surprising and striking.

* **TESTING:** As Congress meets in conference committee to iron out differences between the House and Senate versions of the education bill, debate seems to be centering around the use of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP tests, as an audit of state standardized tests.

Liberals seem opposed to anything with the word "test"; conservatives seem to oppose anything with the word "national." But since there is a consensus that the NAEP exams are an accurate reflection of student achievement, shouldn't we be using them to determine which standards work well and which do not?

One example: Virginia, with its rigorous Standards of Learning, reduced the achievement gap between high and low performers in both reading and math during the 1990's, and also reduced the nagging minority student achievement gap. In Maryland, where the curriculum and tests trend more toward the "touchy-feely" constructivist approach, the gap between high and low performers has widened, as has the minority student achievement gap.

Not only is the idea of using the NAEP as an auditing test under attack, but some proposals would allow states to use different tests in different years, thus mixing "apples and oranges" and making it more difficult to see progress - or a lack of it. The ability of a state to compare and contrast is key to being able to focus its resources, and those who care about providing both strong assessment and strong accountability need to support efforts to establish the NAEP benchmark and require each state to choose a single test by which to judge its success.



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