



Making Schools Work Better for all Children

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* **CHARTERS:** Texas charter schools failing? That's what a Texas "right wing watchdog" group is saying. It's rather odd, too, considering that charter schools don't offer an ideological viewpoint. One would think that there were plenty of real "right wing" things to be watching these days. But we can only assume all's quiet on the right wing front, so the Texas Freedom Network has turned their attention to charter schools, drawing national attention to rather unfounded claims about Texas charters being unsuccessful. This group asserts for example, that "the majority of Texas charters suffer from a lack of accountability, poor academic performance, high teacher turnover and mismanagement." But a close look at the numbers and current state audits reveals that only 23 out of 176 are considered low performing, while 44 are acceptable, 6 are exemplary, 15 offer insufficient data as of this point and 23 need peer review. Oh, and 55 are new. A majority are bad? We don't think so.

Some are suggesting that reports like this are politically motivated. The sudden attention to Texas tests, charters and more is indeed interesting, especially when there are lots of other states to write about. Take Tennessee, for example. There are no charter schools there, and no standards, of course, so we suppose there's not much to say. Even Arkansas with one little charter isn't fodder for the critics. CER would rather the reform movement not be politicized, but since it has been, we have to call it as we see it.

For real information about charter accountability, don't forget to watch the PBS special entitled "Charter Schools That Work," starting with a national broadcast this Friday. We're delighted that friends at Newark's NorthStar Academy and KIPP/Houston are profiled.

* **CHOICE:** Speaking of politics, that was a very interesting back and forth last week about research into school choice programs. The research by professors at Harvard, Georgetown University and the University of Wisconsin found gains of as much as 9 percent among African-American children in Washington, D.C., more than 6 percent in Dayton, OH and 4 percent in New York City. Upon the heels of national attention came a peep from the researcher who was contracted to collect and analyze the numbers. Long after the report had been put together, this researcher suggested suddenly that the numbers may not mean what they say. Some of those observers we hear from often suggest that this researcher acted because his company's main income comes from the U.S. Department of Education, which makes no secret about its anti-voucher stance. Nah... that couldn't be it. For more information on these studies go to data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/papers.ht

* **CLASS SIZE:** The RAND report released several weeks ago underwent no such scrutiny in its far reaching conclusions that class size and money does indeed raise achievement more than any other "reforms" at work today. The problem is that when you read the report, and not just the news clips, the RAND authors reveal that they base their conclusions on "assumptions" about the effects of class size as pulled from a report on Tennessee schools called the STAR report. So rather than actually compare state achievement versus actual class size data, the RAND researchers used broad correlations with other research to assert (not find, as in fact-finding) that class size and additional resources is what has led to significant gains among minority students in states like Texas. Interesting that this study hasn't been criticized by the usual suspects.

* **TEACHERS:** Shortage? What shortage? Someone forgot to tell the education officials in New York that they were recruiting new and different teachers precisely because they lack a supply of good teachers. But the New York Post reports that one teacher (they call "Carolyn" to protect her identity) was among the best in one of the less desirable schools in Queens. Because of a budgetary snafu and her newness to the job, "Carolyn" has been pushed out of her job and told to wait until "central" assigns her to a new place. So now it is the third week of school for most Big Apple youngsters, and here's a teacher who, by the way, came to education from a lucrative job in the private sector. Rather than throw bouquets at her, her principal and superintendent allow her to be lost to the bureaucratic shuffle. Why isn't that something the union threatens a strike over? For more on how to help teachers, don't forget the Teacher Quality Clearinghouse at tqclearinghouse.org

* **"End of Class" Notes Dept:** If you detect a bigger than usual snare in our tone this week, you're on to something. While the newswire is sometimes purely informational and sometimes more objective, the reports coming out of the states this week - while much bigger than reflected here - were worse than usual. A Pennsylvania Mom was fined and then arrested for sending her daughter to a school that the government didn't assign her to; an anti-voucher event in California at a charter school that is free from politicking rules incensed some parents; a charter school in Wisconsin is fighting for its security, despite having aced all measures of achievement.

- About choice, Democratic Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist writes to the Wall Street Journal that "the debate is really between those who believe parents should decide and those who, like Gov. [James] Hunt, believe bureaucrats should call the shots."
- In response to critics, Republican Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore tells his state that the Standards of Learning and corresponding tests are what will ensure the health and longevity of that state's public schools. While he respects choices that will be made, most parents fundamentally want to be in good public schools, he says, and the SOLs can make that happen.

* **CONFERENCE REPORT:** We turn now to a brief report on the successful 5th annual conference of the Education Leaders Council, from which we and 400 close friends, observers and critics just returned. The discussions were broad and centered on whether choice works, with a debate on the pro and con, whether we've achieved much with the current standards movement, whether teacher quality issues will come to roost in most school districts, and whether or not for-profit companies are helping the public good.

Three of the ELC leaders offered these words of wisdom in their myriad discussions:

- Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education and ELC Chair Eugene Hickok talked of his experience with the wide array of reform efforts in PA. He views their biggest challenge as the G.O.M., the "Guardians of Mediocrity."

- Arizona's Superintendent Lisa Graham Keegan summed up the attitude of the status quo as one of "spend now, and reform later." "It's like Lucy and the football," Keegan said.
- Finally Colorado's Bill Moloney, ever the sage, opined that we have much to be hopeful for. Noting how very reform-sounding many groups have become, and noting the movement by many organizations to standards, teacher compensation changes, and more, Moloney said, "Make no mistake. The center of the education reform debate has moved."

For more information on the ELC visit: www.educationleaders.org



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