

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 10**

OCTOBER 10, 1994

Dear Friends:

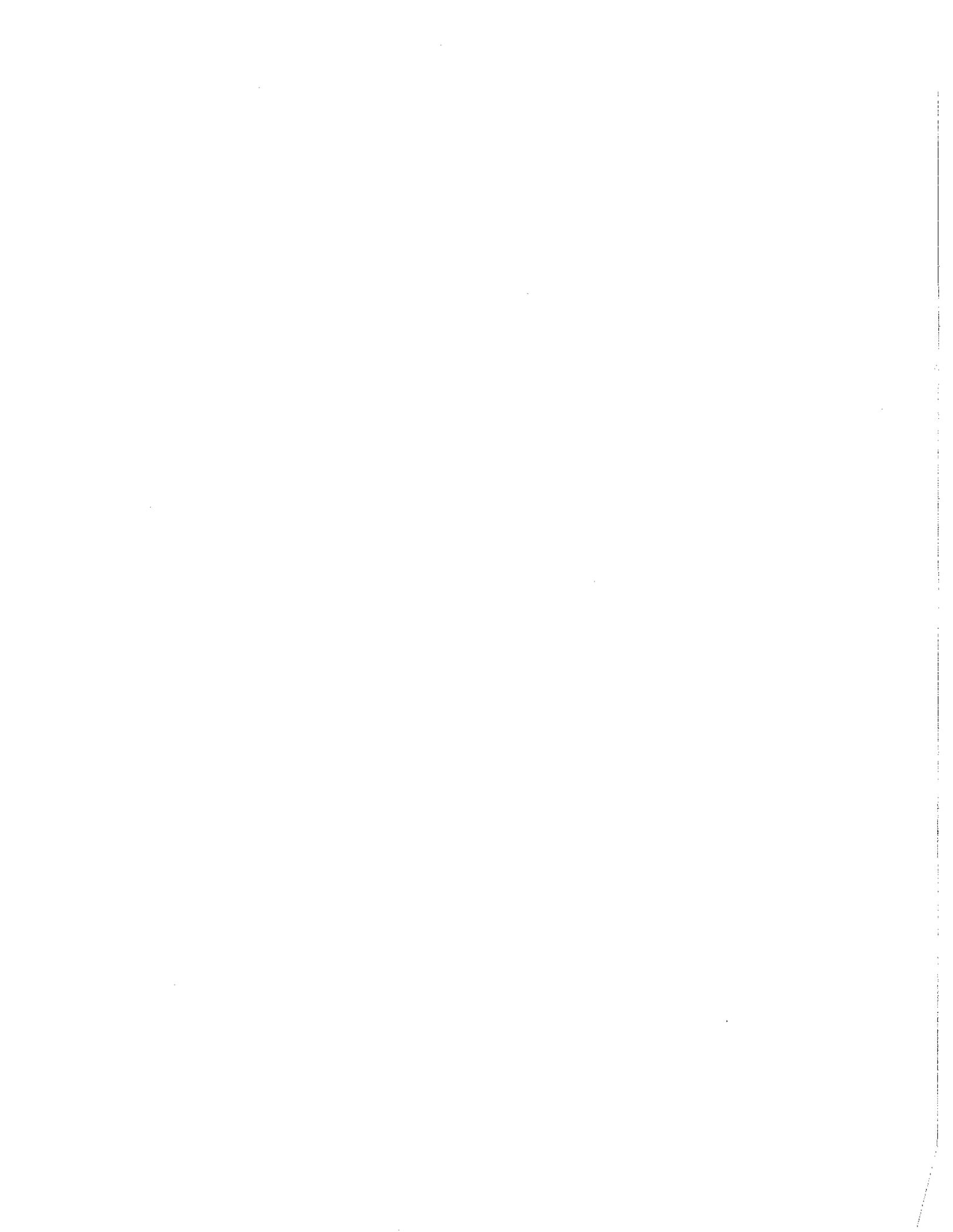
As evidenced by some critical events in education reform -- from Puerto Rico's surge in participation in their choice program to Hartford's embattled decision to put EAI to work in the school there -- education has become extremely topical this fall in all venues. What follows are some highlights of what's happening, some vignettes from around the country, some important statistics, and some ideas for us all to ponder.



From the Front

- The Emperor's Really New Clothes: Public education is in need of support, not repair. Or so says Gerald Bracey, the author of the Fourth Annual Bracey Report published in the October issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* (see enclosed) Bracey is the former NEA-analyst that has now made a living proclaiming the gospel about public education. Even his friends at the NEA, however, found his arguments a bit too impolitic, resulting in his abrupt departure. Bracey says things often like 'schools are not responsible for our economic malaise' - or- "Conditions now allow us to rest, once and for all, the misbegotten notion that schools are dragging our economy down — or, for that matter, pushing it up." His arguments are persuasive to many who do not know otherwise. Many of the state policy groups have been faced with having to rebut his criticisms. Because complacency is the number one enemy of reform, it is critical that the arguments that provide the public with a sense of false wellness be nipped before they spread. We're happy to help with any facts we can, and I know that several of the reform movement's most prominent researchers are working on their rebuttals as well.

- Finally, a definitive answer about school-based management (SBM): A buzz-term for years, SBM has been offered by many education groups as the way to reform the schools, without having to do something as "radical" as institute any parental choice. Most of us have discounted SBM's effects, but now there is empirical data to suggest that such an effort might very well foster innovation but has no bearing on student achievement. According to



the General Accounting Office, among others, SBM can also be expensive, and leads to "petty" disputes among teachers attempting to alter the way things operate in the schools without real autonomy. Local school councils not freed from bureaucracy, as would be the case in a pure charter formula, are susceptible to more regulation, not less, in an attempt to institute control. This was the case in Dade County, one of the first bastions of SBM that was heavily praised during the 80s, but has since yielded little returns.

- More Annenberg money has been committed -- this time to New York City, and a partnership that promises to innovate with Charter schools. That's magic to our ears, but as a good friend would say "The devil is in the details." A number of parties are involved -- not all as sound as the Manhattan Institute -- that might prevent a real experiment with autonomy. We hope it is the opposite, but with United Federation of Teacher's president Sandra Feldman in favor, there might be too many concessions made that make schools there look and sound like a charter, but walk like something completely different.

This of course is the danger with any reform that is implemented in a limited sort of way and where corresponding limited results gives opponents fodder to proclaim the effects minimal. That's not to say we should stop such efforts, but we do need to have the facts at hand to rebut the critics.

- EAI takes over Hartford: EAI's move into Hartford has been warmly received by most parties locally -- save for the City Council there. While the press has had a field day with the P word (privatization for you rocket scientists!), the Hartford experiment has nevertheless generated positive interest throughout the country. The unions have stepped up their attacks, NEA has republished its 1989 booklet "Contracting Out: Strategies for Fighting Back," and the City Council is suing over what they allege should be their decision to make. EAI has not, of course, taken over every dimension of the schools, and the School Board and administrators there still retain much authority. It is a partnership in the real sense of the word, and in reality, the P word does not entirely apply.

- Remember all those "pathbreaking" reforms that were going to be implemented through Goals 2000? How's this for dynamic: Arkansas is using its nearly \$1 million "*toward local school district planning to enhance existing school reform programs.*" I don't know about you, but that one nearly takes my breath away.

- Dismissed from the Courts: two suits alleging that charter schools in both Michigan and Colorado violate the equal protection clause. The NEA has said that the Noah Webster Academy, a home-charter school, may still end up defending itself in court once opponents complete the formation of a corporation that has legal standing in the eyes of the judge.

A View From the Blob

- The NEA's opposition to even the modest charter reform is yet another indication that it is at odd with large numbers of its members. The following abbreviated "conversation" comes from four NEA members conversing via electronic network. See if you can guess which one is the union official:

Member A

I teach in Vacaville Unified (CA) and found out that our district has turned the home study people into Charter School members. A teacher has been hired to work with the at-risk students who have home study. I suppose it's a way to collect ADA (average daily attendance money). But, I wonder about putting money into that. Is it right? Isn't it privatizing public education?

Member B

Charter schools are public schools with a special interest. Does the district get state funding for the students taught in homes when they provide a publicly employed teacher to teach the children? If yes, then it seems the children are enrolled in public schools but not in attendance at what we normally think of as the school building. Do you actually have to show up at the building to be enrolled as a public school student? Maybe not. Maybe we could have public schools where teachers went to students homes and met a class instead of the other way around. We need to decide if [public schools] are the buildings or the concept. If the concept -- everyone helping through taxes to educate all the children -- then we can do education in lots of different places.

Member C (responding to Member A):

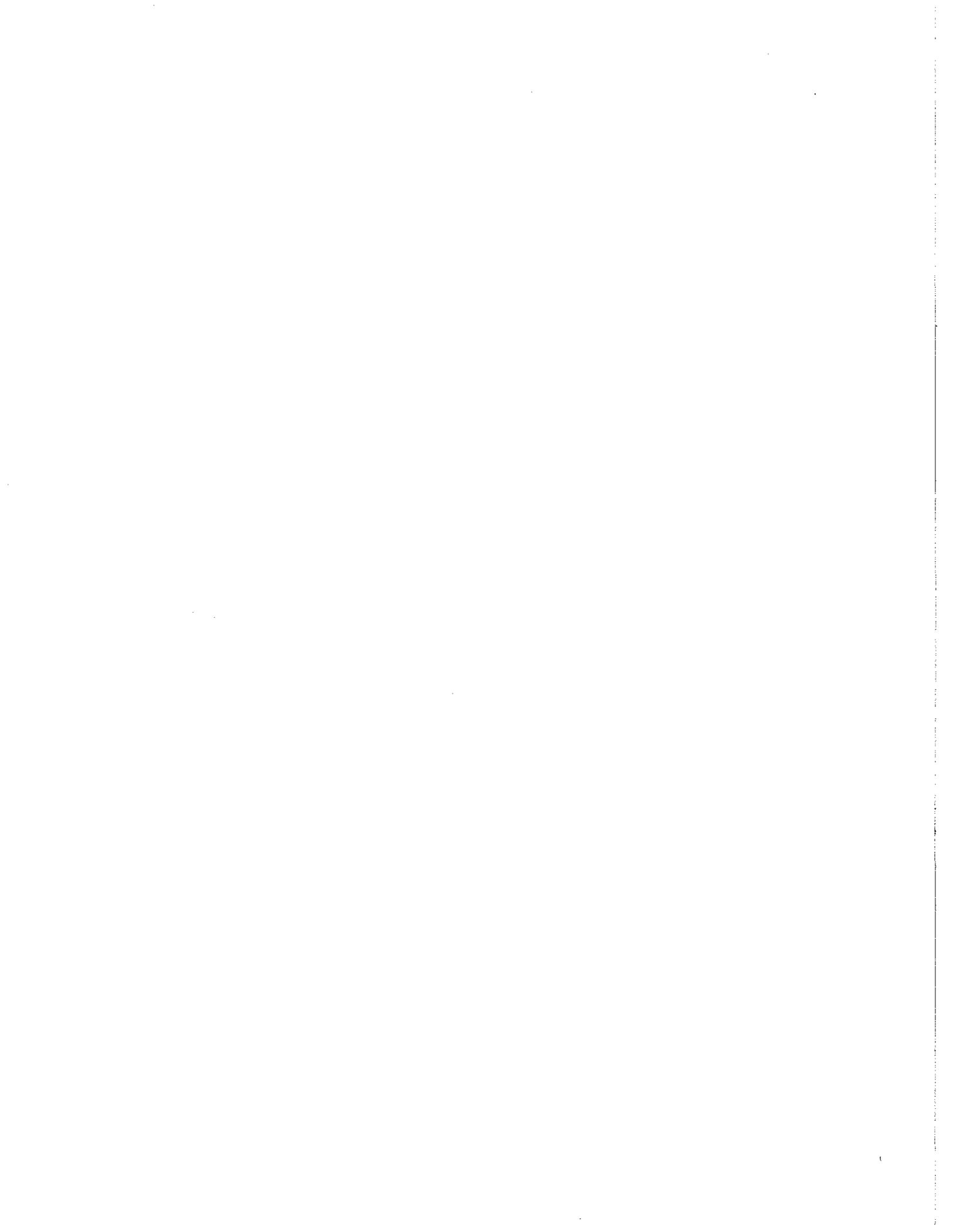
This is one of the downsides to charter school laws. It specifically allows homeschoolers to take advantage of charter status. I'm afraid the best you can do when faced with homeschoolers attempting to get public monies is to make it a community-wide issue so that the public knows how their school tax dollars are used.

Member C (responding to Member B):

I think our members and members of the community must begin to understand what the implications of some forms of charters are to our traditional public schools, especially in funding of them.

Member D:

California charter law requires the local board of education to grant the charter and revoke it if it doesn't meet state goals. One charter school is an



attempt to rid itself of a totally inept board. I hope that the hundred charter schools allowed will provide some fresh direction for our fine school system.

The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing But...

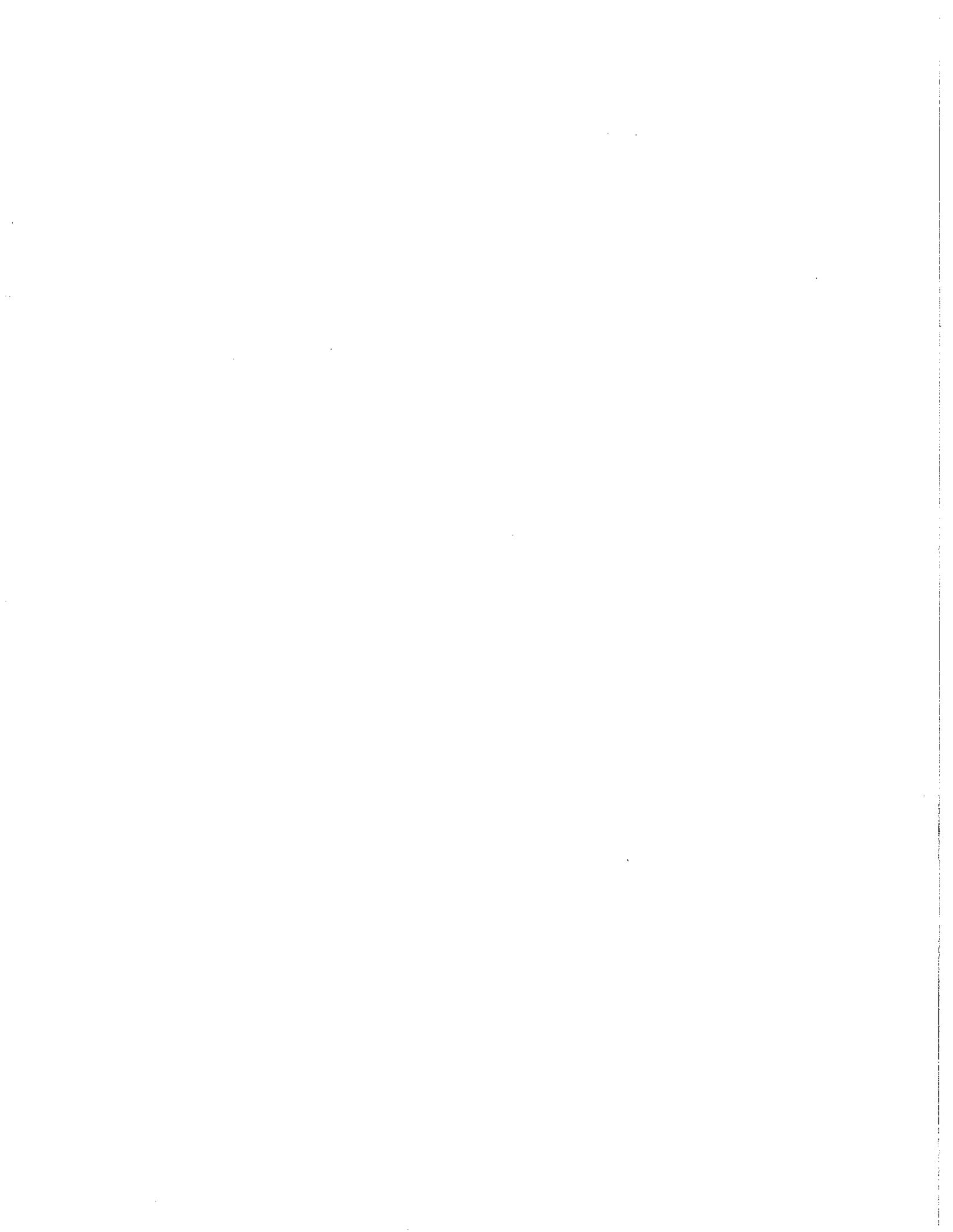
- A *Reader's Digest* poll affirms that strong families have a direct bearing on school success for their children. The October issue outlines the poll, which provides compelling statistics about the influence of three overall factors on academic achievement: family time, eating with the family and talking with parents. The Digest also reported on high school seniors' answers to forty academically-based questions, many of which came from NAEP. While the 2,130 seniors scored adequately, the test revealed other shortcomings: over one third could not find France on a map, and were unaware that the Great Depression took place in this century. Now if the schools could just figure out how to make history stick...
- The AFL-CIO is getting into the education act directly now, rather than just relying on its affiliate, the AFT. In Connecticut (and we suspect other states, too), it is surveying candidates for office. Question number 3 of the survey is "Do you support vouchers for private schools?"

To ensure some counter balance, we've come up with our own candidate survey. It is being distributed nationally to candidates for governor and education commissioner in several key states, and here in the District of Columbia to our mayoral candidates. It is also intended for use in assessing school board candidates, which has been regularly requested. Once the survey is answered The Center will also help "score" the results, as a service in the name of voter education. Give us a call if you'd like a copy.

- Money magazine's recent article "Why Private Schools Are Rarely Worth the Money," is a farce. Not only did the author focus solely on inputs (class sizes, academic level of teachers, facilities and number of courses), but the sample used represents less than 10% of all schools, and only the more effective and elite of all schools. The article says nothing about poor performing schools, except that they are worse than the average private schools. And the recommendations of the piece is to move to better neighborhoods or pay transfer costs to attend their schools. The blob is mimicking it, nonetheless. We urge you to flood the letters to the editor department at Money magazine. The editors obviously need a little educating as to what makes for an effective school.

And Some Miscellanea

- A National Alliance of Business study released earlier this year found that more than half of all small businesses surveyed said they "sometimes" or "usually" have trouble finding applicants who possess the ten basic skills they



defined, including listening, personal qualities, math, speaking, reading, and writing.

Small wonder why the Committee for Economic Development (CED) is now arguing that schools are over regulated, should be free to govern themselves, and should be out of the social welfare business. CED is traditionally pretty soft on education reform, preferring instead to say lofty things about the plight of the poor. It's nice to finally be able to commend this business/education group for their recommendations. Problem is that the NEA's Keith Geiger has also praised CED's latest report, echoing the call for deregulation. Geiger obviously needs a lesson in American Government. While he was praising CED, he was leading the celebration of his organization over the most expansive piece of education legislation passed in decades -- the ESEA reauthorization.

- A glimpse at the list of continuing education courses at Teachers College, Columbia University provides some insight into why our teacher's are shortchanged and underscores the need for reform:

- A Workshop in Motor Learning and Control;
- Exploring America's Cultures: Identity, Culture & Art Education;
- Exploring Imagination: A Search for Alternative Possibilities in Society, Education, and the Lives of Children;
- Managing Feeding and Swallowing Problems in the Classroom and last but not least,
- The Politics and Economics of a Holistic Education.

It would be funny if were not for the fact that many of our public schools award credit for such courses and count them in contract negotiations for teacher's pay levels.

- The Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University has released a terrific policy paper comparing the charter school laws in all of states, and commenting on the autonomy afforded under each state's plan. For a copy, contact Louann Bierlein at (602) 965-4525.

- Later this month, Massachusetts is holding a conference on charter schools to encourage networking as well as to provide technical assistance to people wanting to start a charter. The event is October 22, and more information can be had by calling the Secretary of Education's office at (617) 727-1313.



Our operators are standing by... let us know how we can help you,

Jeanne

