

July
Conferences

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 17**

JUNE, 1995

Dear Friends:

Here we update you on what has transpired since last time we corresponded; tell you what's likely to occur as we go to press; share "random thoughts" on pending research; and, for administrators, provide a good bit of discussion about the streamlining efforts that are going on nationwide.

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A District in Disrepair

- While the District of Columbia has the second highest per pupil expenditure, it ranks 49th in SAT scores. With 100% of the city's teachers receiving at least a "satisfactory" rating in 1993, it's no wonder a recent COPE (Committee on Public Education) report terms the evaluation system "a sham." Classes for the District's 80,000 children will end seven days early this year, 300 teaching positions will be eliminated, and end-of-the-year field trips will be canceled. 8,000 *new* fire code violations were discovered after the schools started the year following a three day delay for violations. After sending 1,000 students to private schools and private service providers, the district faced a court order to pay the costs of service rendered. In the midst of this chaos, the head of the teachers' union has announced her top priority. Surprisingly, it has nothing to do with solutions. Instead, she will focus her energies towards ousting the superintendent because of his efforts to tie teacher evaluation to student achievement.

Meanwhile, the District is being criticized for its questionable promotion policies, in which schools pass onto the next grade all but a few students, regardless of achievement. There is an actual policy in place at 52 elementary schools that prohibits failing anyone from grades K-2, and plans are to place 20 schools a year under that policy until all schools comply. As the *Washington Post* explains, "Struggling young learners are pushed forward in the belief they will fare better academically." But as many parents in the *Post* article and in the real world have told us, there is rarely a stigma for a child held back in the early years, and those who do get held back tend to do better than their counterparts who are passed on despite failure.

An opportunity exists to wrestle this tragic system to the ground and replace it with true reform. Plans include the institution by Congress of an oversight commission, and along with many congressional leaders, Mayor Barry favors charters, private management, and public school choice, and might be open to trying vouchers on a "limited" basis. Superintendent Smith testified last month that he would not oppose vouchers, only requesting assurance that "they wouldn't take money from the public schools."

From The Trenches

- Chicago's schools are plagued with corruption, according to the Better Government Association in **Illinois**. The *Chicago Sun-Times* (5/17/95) reports that jobs and contracts take away money earmarked for the children, property is routinely stolen on "inside jobs" and pricey contracts cost the district millions (around \$40 million to be exact) in overcharge and waste.

- Not to be outdone by the windy city, the Big Apple has its troubles. First, the *New York Times* (2/22/95) recommends abolishing **New York's** Board of Regents, which has outlived its usefulness. Says the *Times*, "Pataki is right," the entire Department of Education, with its 3,000 employees "has become a symbol of bloated, wasteful bureaucracy." On top of that, Mayor Giuliani warned that school vouchers might be a very real possibility in NYC if Schools Chancellor Cortines doesn't "straighten out the school system." Giuliani wants the police to take over school security, a move which the chancellor says is not necessary. But Giuliani replies, "I hope you don't want another 28 percent increase in crime... in the schools." The administration hires "too many people that are ex-convicts and former drug users and people who have a history of sexual abuse," says Rudy.

There is some good news. NYC's new graduation requirements are having an effect. More children are passing the more challenging Regent's level courses, but more kids than prior years are failing, too. Says Chancellor Cortines, "We could have found all sorts of reasons not to take on this program — the children are not ready, middle schools do not prepare them sufficiently for regents courses, we do not have enough resources to give the necessary support. But the truth is, you have to start from where you are and work with what you have."

- Detroit, **Michigan** shares its sister cities' ills. Astonishing as it might sound, the graduation rate there is 29%! No, that's not the dropout rate. Consider this: in September 1990, the class of 1994 had 18,540 students in Detroit Public Schools. In September, 1993, the class of 1994 had shrunk to 5,439. Providing that there are no dropouts senior year, and even taking into consideration attrition by moving or transferring — well, it's not good.

- And not to overdo it, we must point out the city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, **Pennsylvania**, courtesy of Chuck Lewis of the REACH Alliance. In Philly, 51% of all students failed the reading basic skills exam and 50% failed the

math basic skills exam. 49% of all 9th graders flunk, and more than 20,000 a year are involved in a crime or accident; an even higher number are suspended. The solutions? According to local leaders, more schools, less bureaucracy, and perhaps... more choice. After spending \$16 million on school reform there, even the Pew Charitable Trusts blames both the bureaucracy and the union for intransigence on school reform.

Please know that we are not suggesting that the people, or even all schools, are bad. But we feel it imperative that people are aware of what is happening within and outside of their own communities, and how despite all the effort, somehow, improvement is not coming as quickly as necessary.

On Contracting

- The SABIS School Network, an education firm like the Edison Project, signed a 5 year contract to manage a Springfield, **Massachusetts** elementary school as a charter. It joins the International School in Eden Prairie, MN in this international network of schools. SABIS also runs schools in England, Germany, Egypt, and Pakistan. The group will receive the \$5,450 that the district allots per student, and see what it can accomplish in an area with high school dropout rates of 40%. In its conversion from a traditional public school to a chartered public school, SABIS will have the freedom to hire its own teaching staff. Says its director, "we would love to do an [entire] district." (Call 612-941-3500)
- After two years of exploration, the Bibb County, **Georgia** public schools have become the first system in the Peach State to request bids for private food service management. The move is being done to save money, provide better choices for students, and remove a layer of district bureaucracy.

On Accountability

- In a commendable move towards providing accountability, Denver superintendent Irv Moskowitz asked his district's 110 schools to draw plans to boost achievement and literacy. Schools were judged by their efforts and, after the process, 12 principals were removed. The criteria evaluated dropout rates, grade-point averages, and overall school performance.

Teachers' Choice

- The American Association of Educators in Private Practice (AAEPP), one of the fastest growing networks of professional educators, is planning a spectacular conference in the twin city of Minneapolis, MN on July 13-15. They have gathered an impressive array of speakers and are providing informative workshops for educators and interested reformers to discuss the need for more teacher autonomy, the how, why, wherefore of charter schools and lots more. Don't miss this great

networking event with some of America's finest educators. (Call AAEPP headquarters at 800-252-3280.)

AAEPP is one of several bold groups reaching out to our nation's educators as an alternative voice of support. Such groups are in full swing around the country, as educators become increasingly disgruntled with union policy. Consider that the Association of Texas Professional Educators, a non-union group that provides benefits to teachers, has grown to 70,000 strong, averaging 4,000 to 5,000 new members a year.

- The Association of American Educators has been formed to provide an alternative for teachers who want to receive benefits from a non-union organization. With a belief that unions such as the NEA concentrate "too much on national political issues instead of helping [teachers] do a better job in our classrooms," AAE is growing fast. Just over a year old, it already has over 3,000 members nationwide. It offers professional liability insurance, legal assistance protection, teacher networking, and more, all at a fraction of the cost of traditional union dues. (Call 714-582-3206.)

From The States

- *New Hampshire:* Buried beneath a swarm of presidential politics, but not entirely unrecognized, is the passage of a charter school bill that from its inception took just about everyone there by surprise. Conceived primarily by Senator Jim Rubens, the law allows districts to charter schools and enables statewide open enrollment. The State Board has ultimate say over charter approvals. The bill permits local districts the option of capping how many children participate in either charters or school choice, a measure put in as a response to the fears, idle though they maybe, that kids would flee their assigned schools. Thirty-five charters are permitted, but the cap is removed in the year 2000. Several charters are in the design phase right now, hoping to start-up in the fall and the bill is on its way to the Governor as we speak.

- *Pennsylvania:* Once again we may be only moments away from decisive action on education reform, as lawmakers in the Keystone state strive to work out the details of a package authorizing charters, low-income school choice, contracting out for school districts that choose to do so, and a financial commitment to distance learning and safe schools.

- *Illinois:* After passage in the Senate, a bi-partisan proposal to provide a limited number of low-income parents with the choice among both public and private schools failed in the House. For charters, the commitment was there, but the effort lacked desire. House and Senate versions could not be reconciled to produce an agreeable bill. Chicago generated the most reform attention. The city's school board has been replaced by a new five-member board appointed by the Mayor that will have complete fiscal autonomy over the schools. The legislation also included a prohibition on teacher striking for 18 months.

•*Florida*: In a case of politics as usual, lawmakers in conference failed to enact a charter bill even though one passed each house. According to the *The Palm Beach Post* (5/26/95), the "plans were so hotly debated that no bill was passed." Although both bills had their own quality provisions, Florida can now join Illinois in a search for desire.

•*Connecticut*: Connecticut's much watched and awaited reform effort has fizzled for 1995. In a rather abrupt turn of events, lawmakers in Connecticut and Governor John Rowland withheld the proposed local option choice program based on their perceived inability to garner all the needed votes. In a recent newsletter, the NEA even conceded that the bill would pass. And in May, The Center commissioned a poll which found that 81% of Connecticut voters supported the bill before the legislature in its present form. Choice supporters argue that withdrawing a vote so late in the game may have been premature. Rowland plans to make choice a bigger priority in '96 — but so does the NEA.

Charter schools, in a slightly more promising effort, passed out of the Senate, but failed in the House where lawmakers did not believe 60% of per pupil funding was adequate for potential charters.

•*Wisconsin*: Milwaukee's proposed expansion of school choice is drawing continual ire from the education establishment. The expansion would lift the number of participating students from less than 1,000 to a maximum of 15,000 and allow them to choose from parochial schools as well. The measure, part of Governor Tommy Thompson's budget, was passed by the Joint Finance Committee in an 11-5 vote. Its passage, as part of the budget, appears nearly assured by the end of June.

Charter Blacklist

We reported in May that Central Michigan University was one of the more active institutions in Michigan, chartering five schools and considering a possible 33 more. This apparently upset Lake Orion Superintendent Robert Bass, who wrote to CMU to say that the district would not entertain student teachers from the university and would no longer recommend that students attend CMU. Last year, a similar situation arose in Saginaw, MI as the state university there prepared to charter schools. The MEA wrote almost identical threats, and later backed down once they were made public. Is it because there's a demand for new and different schools? Is Superintendent Bass really afraid to let the possibility of good schools fall by the wayside? Kudos to the local board for calling the Bass letter "troubling."

Charter schools continue to gain ground. With the addition of New Hampshire to the field, there may well be more than 205 charters operating by the fall. However, educated bodies of lawmakers, in many cases, are still relatively clueless about what charter schools can do, how they work, and what they accomplish. With outstanding materials available from state and national resources, this shouldn't be so. To provide one more glimpse into why charters are effective, please note the existence of a summary on Minnesota's experience, put out

by the House of Representatives research arm. It soundly concludes that charters are serving special populations well, that parents are attracted by academics and satisfied with their involvement, and that a lack of regulation appears to be a "key factor" in their success.

Random Research Thoughts

We continue to hear the phrase "negative financial impact," from groups, legislators and even reputable officials when discussing charter school proposals and school choice. The response is usually something like this: Well, if we have to try [charters or choice] we have to assure that there is no "negative financial impact" on the public schools. From the get-go, that statement is headed in the wrong direction. Charters *are* public schools! Some of them are new, while some are converted from existing traditional schools. However they arrive at charter status, from that moment onward they are public schools.

Most communities are wrestling with expanding schools to accommodate increasing enrollment; some are already completely overcrowded. What are the alternatives? A community can build new buildings, lengthen the school year and day, or ignore the situation completely, leading to a decline in quality and more families fleeing to less crowded areas. Each option has some financial impact on the district. A choice or charter program is just another option.

We all agree. Every child in the U.S. is entitled to a free public education. That is not affected if twenty more, or two hundred more move into the district. Conversely, if 200 kids leave a district, because their families move, that district loses money. We can't beg those families to come back. Some new families may move in — or, perhaps choice states may permit other to attend with money following them.

Do the stakeholders scream "negative financial impact" if lots of kids leave a district? (What happened when enrollment dropped in the seventies?) With no reform to blame, and no one to blame, schools made due. By bringing in charters or even modest school choice measures, there is no negative financial impact; only movement from children who may have been somewhere else, or may be going somewhere else. That's no different than what happens every day in the nation's school systems.

Everyone's Friend: Local Control

It seems everyone subscribes to the "smaller schools are better" theory these days. We do, certainly, but then we always have. Even with effective schools research dating back to the early 70s, districts still promoted consolidation, undertook to create shopping mall high schools, and to this day, talk about relieving overcrowding by adding. Last month, it was the *Carnegie Foundation's* Basic School concept that was unveiled, with smaller schools as the centerpiece. This month, it's the *Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform*, based in Chicago that said not only do we need smaller schools (no more than 500 students per) but that each school should have complete budgetary and even hiring authority.

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Speaking of decentralization, North Carolina's effort is now taking shape. First reported on here in the January issue, the State Board of Education now plans to cut 303 of the 788 staff positions in their Department of Education, and that combined with other cuts, would yield a savings of \$21 million. Besides streamlining, the board plans to give schools more flexibility in return for success. High performing schools would be rewarded, while low-performing ones would be assisted by experts in designing an improvement plan. Among those who have warmly received the proposal are the principals, many school board members, and educators. In opposition, of course, are the union and administrator groups (not their members, per se) that plan to fight implementation of this solidly local control plan to the end.

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Georgia is also cutting back fat. Superintendent Linda Schrenko got the go-ahead this month to cut at least \$3 million from the Department of Education, eliminating layers of bureaucracy and sending many of the agency's staffers to work in the field to better assist schools.

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How committed the Texas Education Code rewrite will be to decentralizing authority remains to be seen. There are some regulations that are actually reaffirmed in the Lonestar State law (like class sizes). However, the home rule concept has already begun to take root in some areas, including Houston, where one outstanding principal, Thaddeus Lott, has already been tapped to oversee a cluster of newly autonomous schools.

What Americans Think... More and More

Polling data continues to show strong support for school choice. Surveys indicate that the more knowledge one has of choice, the more likely he or she is to support it. A Fabrizio McLaughlin and Associates poll of 400 Connecticut residents is illustrative. In the beginning, voters were asked what they thought of the local option school choice bill before the legislature. Fifty-one percent of respondents supported the measure. After being asked a series of questions to clarify the concept, 82% of the people supported it. A choice poll commissioned by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute specifically targeted African-Americans in Milwaukee. The results of the 1,000 person survey showed that 95.2% believe that parents should have the right to choose their local school. When asked specifically about the proposed expansion of Milwaukee school choice, 70.5% of respondents said they favored the inclusion of parochial schools.

What most find astonishing is that support continues to come predominantly from lower-income constituencies and from traditionally Democratic strongholds. Of course, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the have-nots are looking for a leg up, and that the majority of Americans want to help them. That's why television ads being aired by the National Education Association, the American Association of Retired People, and other special interest groups are not only incredulous, but insulting. Take a look at this one, airing in Pennsylvania this week to combat the voucher mood: (The spot opens with two men on a Park Bench.)

Older Man:

"Hey Mort, how's retirement treating you?"

Mort:

"Ah, just trying to stay one jump ahead of special interests. Ha. Ha. New government program every time you turn around."

Older Man:

"Like that private school voucher plan?"

Mort:

"Yes. School choice... ha. It means they choose to raise my property taxes or some state tax."

Older Man:

"What would it do to public schools?"

Mort:

"Well, they want to take \$42 million away next year from 100 of the poorest public school districts."

Older Man:

"Really?"

Mort:

"Private school vouchers won't help. And what's the rush? They want the legislature to vote on the voucher deal in the next few days."

Older Man:

"Well, maybe they can save money in the long run."

Mort:

"Ha! To start its \$38 million, right. Voucher advocates want to expand the program. Then costs could be \$250-\$350 million before you know it."

Older Man:

"Well you can't fight City Hall."

Mort:

"Yes, you can. We can stop the private school voucher grant. We can write our state legislators and tell them to vote against private school vouchers."

Paid for by the Public Education Coalition to Oppose Tuition Vouchers.

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Next month we salute some of education's heroes working to make a difference, and take a look at what's coming up in the fall. We'll see you in July, probably after the 4th, so Happy Independence Day! Let's remember what it should mean for our teachers, schools and parents!

Jeanne Allen