

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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Dear Friends:

Lots of extraordinary progress made and reforms proposed in just one month! Plus, inside you'll find some more trend data on American education and some tongue-in-cheek reviews of the pundits' pronouncements. Read and enjoy:



Local Reformers Re-elected; Nation's Capital May Soon Bear Reform Fruit

In the November 7 showdown in Wilkesburg, PA and Hartford, CT — pitting reform-minded candidates, who had taken steps to bring in private firms to help manage their schools, against union-backed opponents, who were against such public-private partnerships — despite big spending and nationwide politicking to oust the incumbents, voters returned reform-minded majorities to both cities' school boards. Sources locally tell us the unions are fit-to-be-tied. Hartford's Federation of Teachers actually purchased a \$50,000 bus, the "Education Express," to campaign for good and orderly schools, and to broadcast opposition to the Hartford/EAI arrangement. But as School Board President Thelma Dickerson told us, "...People recognize the value of what we're trying to do and...believe that EAI should have the opportunity to continue with the reforms they have begun."

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a measure that would put the squeeze on the DC School Board to introduce standards, allow for charter schools and enact a public/private school choice program for potentially a few thousand low-income residents. The bill goes to conference where its fate among Senators is uncertain.

Reacting on behalf of the "just doesn't get it" crowd, Council of Great City Schools chief Michael Casserly said in addition to being against the choice part, the bill is not "comprehensive enough" because it doesn't address the health and learning needs of students. It in fact does, by increasing local autonomy to schools through charters, and gives children better options. This is yet another example of the small picture syndrome that is so prevalent in special interest groups.

Hit the Books!, and...

From the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress comes the latest news on student proficiency in history, and it's not good. Only 43% of twelfth graders showed a knowledge of history considered at or above basic for their grade level. Fourth and eighth graders fared a little better, with 60% at or above basic. Earlier last month, NAEP's report on geography also showed that most of the 19,000 students taking that test "lacked even partial mastery" of the subject. Said William Maloney, Superintendent of Calvert County, MD Schools and a member of the NAEP Governing Board, the results "should be cause for serious concern."

Meanwhile, schools like one in Prince George's County, Maryland have replaced traditional grades for 1st graders with 1, 2 & 3, for 'progressing nicely', and 'needs more time.' Says the Superintendent there, "[we are not lowering] the standards, [we are taking] away the penalty." Huh?

...Fix that Report Card!

The midterm report is out, and the bi-partisan National Education Goals Panel, now headed by Michigan Governor John Engler, says the nation is far short of where it should be. While there are indications that math and science achievement is improving, most other indications show that learning remains stagnant or falling in areas such as reading. Even in science, however, while we're up from the early 80s, we're still far below the performance of 17 year olds, for example, in the late sixties. From 1969 through 1982, there was a gradual decline. Achievement today on NAEP is equal with the level of children taking the test in 1977 (NCES, 1992).

(We were happy, however, to see that the report did reach a higher level of sanity this year by not seemingly including in the category of 'children's health risks' having closely spaced births or more than three siblings!)

Back to NAEP and Student Progress: Don't Worry, Be Happy!

But what of the growing, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" crowd? David Berliner, Gerald Bracey, and the latest, the University of Wisconsin's Alex Molnar talk incessantly of a conspiracy of myth-makers conjuring up a "Manufactured Crisis" in American education. Such is the title of Berliner's new book, in which he presents numbers, graphs and analyses enough to convince any but the most astute observer that the system is fine, and the current unease over the education of our youth is a result of smoke-and-mirrors tricks by the enemies of education. Oh, and also poor children, who are making the rest of the education system look bad.

As State University of New York, Birmingham Professor David Stedman points out in an analysis of achievement in *Education Leadership* (Feb, 1995), poor children are not necessarily adding to our decline. It is the decline in achievement,

albeit modest in some cases, of even our "top slice" of academic performers. "What is troubling," he says, "is that the new mythology ignores the vast body of evidence that shows that general educational performance is low and has been for decades."

Molnar told an audience of education writers last month that the 1983 landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, was full of "insupportable information." He broke down into four major categories those who support market-oriented reforms: 1) Segregationists, 2) Free market advocates, 3) Left-wing romantics, and 4) Black Nationalists. And in case you didn't think it could get any worse, he said that we shouldn't be so quick to praise the work of Catholic schools because "[they] don't have arts and music programs, and rely on a staff that is half voluntary." Talk about insupportable information! Oh, yeah, and that was before he called me an "arrogant twit" after I corrected him for telling a reporter that I didn't know my facts.

Keeping pace with his colleagues, Gerald Bracey's fifth annual report in *Phi Delta Kappan* again strives to sugar-coat the sad reality of an inequitable system. He tries to debunk the U.S. Census and Denis Doyle in his oft-quoted report on where public school teachers send their children for school which found that in 32 of the nation's 100 largest cities, over 25% (and in some areas 40%) of public school teachers send their children to private school — twice the national average for public school teachers. But Bracey twists the numbers to suggest that because the national average is low, and because nearly 60% of public school teachers send their children to public school, that this data is somehow misleading. The fact is, public schools are free, providing an inherent market resistance to anyone sending their child to private school (but not resistance enough, obviously, to those most informed of consumers, public school teachers). Furthermore, it is just that significant difference between the national figures, and the figures for urban public school teachers, that makes the numbers so compelling, and telling — particularly when so many of them have personally called to tell us they wouldn't dream of subjecting their own children to the schools in which they themselves teach.

Bracey wrote us to go on record about Denis Doyle's study. Of the study he says, "I had originally titled it 'The Dissonance in Denis Doyle's Head', because I figure he's got to have a terrible migraine trying to deal with how his data conflicts with his contentions." In reality, it is those who have found fame in twisting the numbers to pander to many in the establishment, who are, in turn, only too happy to keep them on the lecture circuit hawking the status quo. Recent Bracey sightings include Indiana's state school board convention, where he regaled them with glowing stories of our schools' successes, any evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. So beware, he may be coming soon to a district near you!

Berliner also "demonstrates" in his new book that the U.S. spends less than all but one nation on education. In fact, the three of them, and numerous others, attempt to shame us all by decrying America's lack of investment in education. While no one questions how important money is to the provision of education, and that many are not getting the money that is reserved for them, it is often the bureaucracy, not mean public servants, that is eating the child's share of the pie.

Let us seek to set the record straight:

- According to the 1995 Condition of Education report (U.S. DoEd) the U.S. ranks #1 in spending for grades 1-12, as indicated by the OECD. The average per pupil cost, when accounting for purchasing power parity (PPPI), is \$6,984 (1991-92).
- The Don't Worry, Be Happy folks say that we come in near last as a percentage of GNP. In fact, the U.S. is 10th in spending as part of GNP, but we also have the largest GNP in the world. Having a smaller percentage of GNP doesn't equate with spending less than other countries. As a percentage of all public spending in the U.S., we rank third, behind Hungary and neck-and-neck with Switzerland.

On the Charter Front

- With the approval of the Nevada County Academy of Learning, California has reached its cap of 100 charter schools. Others were waiting also in the wings for approval, and now it's up to the legislators to lift the cap -- and make the law easier to navigate for those working to start schools, moves endorsed by California's influential Little Hoover Commission.
- Queen of Peace Academy was inaugurated last month in St. Paul, MN, with remarks by the Mayor and the local superintendent. The vital statistics: the academy has enrolled 160 K-5 students, 130 of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch; the student body includes 124 Hmong children, 22 African-Americans, 5 Eritrians, and more. And it almost goes without saying in the charter school arena -- parents are heavily involved.
- This one vignette gives new meaning to the term 'bureaucracy.' The Dakota Open Charter school, in Morton, MN, on the Lower Sioux Reservation, lost its charter because its school district consolidated with another, and the new one doesn't want Dakota to remain open. Given their approval by the former school district, and the fact that it is currently serving 53 students who chose to take their business there, you'd think the state education department would allow it to receive continued funding until it can find a new sponsor. Nope. Officials there say it can't run without a contract — even though it had one, and parents opted to have their money go to that school. We'll watch, and let you know what happens.
- A rather unique setting for a charter school is a motel in Hull, Massachusetts, where the South Shore Charter School finally found some temporary space to land until it could find the right permanent facility. The parents of students there don't seem to mind the new setting, according to the Boston Globe, because they were thrilled to be involved in such a promising undertaking. The headmaster's commitment is both touching and impressive -- he has invested over one quarter of a million dollars of his own money to start the school, and despite his former

employment with the district, has run into continual roadblocks in establishing a site for the school, from the town *and* school officials. "We have kids here who look forward to coming to class, there is a lot of energy here." Said the local superintendent, "...I wish them luck. I wouldn't say we have an adversarial relationship with them, but we feel it's competitive."

Resources. *Things to know, things you may need, things we may need*

- A progress report published by the Center for School Change, a policy group at the University in Minnesota: Under the direction of Joe Nathan, Senior Fellow, CSC works with many schools to develop a variety of assessments to spur student achievement. The report will give you a glimpse of their work and models, and a glimpse of what they will be doing in the future. Call 612-626-1834. Cost: \$6.00.
- *The Handbook of Alternative Education*: Macmillan/Simon & Schuster has published this comprehensive compendium, which is also available in paperback from the author, under the title *The Almanac of Education Choices*. Compiled and written by the Alternative Education Resource Organization, it offers an updated list and description of over 6,000 alternative schools, including charters, and homeschool groups. AERO is selling it for \$20.00, and is also looking for hosts for their workshops to introduce parents to educational alternatives. It's a fascinating group. To get plugged in, call 516-621-2195, or e-mail jmintz@igc.ape.org.
- Some interesting facts to know: Massachusetts has 400 Education Department employees. According to the outgoing Chairman of the Board of Education, 55% are paid for by the federal government's appropriations to support federal programs. The Education Commission of the States has estimated that the figure is as much as 90% in some states. Gee. And I thought that money was supposed to be for kids.
- 48% of those polled by the MN Star *Tribune* support a proposal for public-private school choice, like that advocated by Governor Arne Carlson. 48% oppose it.
- It's 54% in favor in New York, 42% against, according to a poll conducted by the Lehrman Institute and Empire Foundation. Like the Public Agenda poll we reported on last month, New Yorkers also said that discipline, safety and order were the biggest public school problems.

You Know It's Time To Demand Reform When...

- ...Your school board proposes to secure parental involvement by subpoenaing you to parent-teacher meetings (Rock Hill, NC);
- ...The National Council of Teachers of English, contemplating the chauvinistic nature of the word 'English,' ponders a name change to show that they really don't believe English should be considered better than any other language. (Perhaps

they'll want to change the study of English literature to the study of Written-in-one-of-the-Germanic-but-by-no-means-the-best-language literature.)

Pop Quiz: (Read the following paragraph and answer the following true or false question)

Milwaukee's School Board President Mary Bills, a staunch opponent of school choice, (and of former pro-reform Superintendent Howard Fuller) announced plans to expand the public school choices available to parents. "Parents have told us this is what they want," she said. "This is an important step in showing that we are serious about serving our customers better," adds board member John Gardner.

T or F: The Board would have taken this action without the force of the expanded private school choice program recently passed into law and currently in litigation.

Some Words From the Front (and back)

"The world has changed; schools must change; we are changing and still have a lot of changing to do."

-- Sheila Simmons, Center for the Preservation of Public Education, NEA

"You fruit cakes!" Anonymous education watcher, in response to CER's unvarnished truths.

"The golden parachute awarded the Hawthorne (NJ) school superintendent for not working only helps exacerbate the taxpayers frustration ...The state tenure laws continue to cheat the children and taxpayers..."

--Shirley Feldman, president, Bergen County Taxpayers Coalition

(note: referring to an undisclosed enormous buyout of the current administrator, Shirley was joined with countless others in protesting this increasingly outrageous move.)

From the Trenches

- Taking a baby step toward more control, **Boston's mayor** locked horns with the custodial union by declaring that all city schools would be accessible to the public at night, giving principals the authority to keep them open. This strips the unions ability to charge \$25.00/hr overtime. It seems this is the way it should be in all districts.

- And while we're in **Massachusetts**, Governor William Weld wants to consolidate all the education authorities in MA under one's "super board," and tapped Boston University's John Silber to serve at the helm, replacing the current state board chairman, Marty Kaplan, while Weld seeks legislative approval for his

plan. He's also proposing sweeping reforms, such as expanding the state's successful charter law, instituting a statewide public school choice program and providing private options for low-income students as well.

- Speaking of substantial reform efforts, CER has been working with **Ohio** lawmakers and other state officials to build support for charter schools. A very expansive bill passed the House last spring, under the leadership of Representative Sally Perz, and awaits action in the more formidable Senate. However, with the Governor's support, Ohio could lay claim to the strongest law yet.
- Moving next door to **Pennsylvania**, Governor Tom Ridge unveiled his newest proposal for education, that incorporates downsizing and devolution of control to local communities, including charters and school choice for poor children. Working with state Representatives William Adolph, a Republican, and William Keller, a Democrat, CER will be holding a legislative briefing on November 21 to help build support for these critical reforms.
- **Wisconsin legislators** are ruminating on a proposal to open up options to parents who might wish to send their children to a public school outside their district. Chances are good this bill will be passed by the Senate in the near future, and there is interest in improving the state's charter bill to allow for more sponsors, and less restrictions (currently only school boards can approve charters). Currently the Education Department has been consolidated into a new agency reporting directly to the Governor, and the elected Superintendent will be relieved of most of his duties, pending a court decision on the constitutionality of the new law.

One reason for the multitude of reform measures in Wisconsin is PRESS (Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools), a truly grass roots education group, made up of hundreds of school board members, parents, educators and civic leaders that are motivated, dedicated, and truly concerned about their children's education. PRESS started with a handful of individuals, and has grown dramatically in work and influence. If you live there, or want to collaborate on efforts in your own state, call Leah Vukmir at (414) 291-1517.

- **Pizza Revisited:** Last month, we reported on Milwaukee's pizza day to bring in children to guarantee enrollment on the day the district was counting heads for school funding. We since learned of a school in Colorado in which, in order to ensure maximum enrollment on counting day, administrators handed out free coupons for chicken nuggets.

Yet Another Wave of Business Involvement

Business leaders who are taking a second look at reform efforts in their states have concluded that overall they have not gone far enough in joining the fight for legislative reform of the education system. As the nation's governors prepare to convene a March, 1996 Education Summit, at IBM CEO Louis Gerstner's place in New York State, it is worth reflecting on how the tide of business involvement in education has changed over the years, and how many are beginning to put their money where their mouth is. For example:

- In November, Georgia-Pacific, CEO, A.D. Correll, told a group of Southern Governors he was frustrated with the lack of progress he and his colleagues had made and decried the amount of money companies were spending to remediate workers, AFTER having taxes spent to do that very thing in the public schools.

Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice chaired that meeting and thinks he's got a solution. His PRIME initiative, which may be headed for a 1997 ballot asks citizens to vote on a proposal that would allow local districts to decide for themselves the exact kinds of policies and programs they want to implement — from choice, to charter schools, to questions of basic management. The State, rather than dictating form and substance, would be forced to follow the lead of communities.

- Pennsylvania's Paul O'Neil, Chairman of ALCOA and long involved in both state and national business efforts has committed to helping Governor Ridge pass his education reform plan and is actively urging others in his state to do the same. O'Neil told colleagues "it's time to break the mold and move to new ground...because the status quo is clearly unacceptable."

- Pepsi-Cola Corporation has lent its support to a college assistance program and to a private scholarship program for low income children in Jersey City. In addition to its direct funding of the programs (based on the Corporation's sales in the Jersey City-area), Pepsi is also spending money to encourage customers to contribute to the fund.

As the effects of business leaders working at the margins of the system continue to be little felt, many are becoming more progressive in their approach to reform, and joining with those who believe it is time is to bring excellence within reach of all children. The Governors' March forum should reflect the more bold thinking that is coming out from their ranks and from the business community.

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A very happy Thanksgiving to all of you! Thank you for making our work so enjoyable and rewarding.

Jeanne Allen