

Dear Friends:

Welcome to our special combined issue. It's done for two reasons: 1) there is always so much going on during this time and 2) because publishing 10 of these each year (we break in August, too) is enough for anyone! Welcome, too, to the additional 300 readers we have this month. We hope you enjoy what you find here, and that you find yourself wondering what more you can do to speed the pace of education reform!



The Federal Trough

First we had actor Richard Dreyfuss, appearing at the Grammys, lamenting the loss of any amount of federal funding for education, an issue he is now qualified to address because he played a teacher in his recent movie. Dreyfuss said that there is no more important thing we can do than provide enough resources to education (imagine how potent his argument would have been if he'd gone to visit a model school that day, like a charter, or had done some homework into waste and abuse!)

Then we have Education Secretary Richard Riley in his State of Education speech, proclaiming the death of democracy should one measly, school choice pilot project in Washington DC be passed, and condemning those who "seek nothing less than the demise of public education....and that are leading this retreat from support of public education, and the democratic spirit..." with their pointed remarks about the condition of education today. (We suppose he means people like us, who believe that we all need a little reality check now and again.)

It Takes a Village... to Fill Out All the Paperwork, was the theme of a press conference held by the House Education and Economic Opportunities Committee on February 28...which is particularly apt when we hear rumors that even the federal government's charter school assistance program is looking for ways to tie states to more stringent charter rules in exchange for money received. (We're checking into it.)

And then there's the continuing (yawn) Goals 2000 debate, with Michael the Archangel on one side, in the person of Riley, and Lucifer himself on the other, who allegedly has unleashed legions of mighty devils (those who are uncomfortable with Goals 2000) to orchestrate the demise of the noble Goals. One brief anecdote to tell you how ridiculous this all is: One California school district (Poway Unified) is using its Goals 2000

money for counseling and wellness programs. According to the California-based Claremont Institute, "Poway has issued so-called 'wellness' manuals aimed at assessing whether children feel good about themselves and whether they think their parents care..." (This isn't an isolated case either). Is it for this that Goals 2000 is hailed as sparking the move toward state standards-setting efforts? Rather, it is clear from an abundance of evidence that it's become just another aid-to-schools-with-no-results program, with all the same strings attached, of course. So when Riley says (12/95) that "Goals 2000 is the extra money that schools never get to improve themselves in order to reach for excellence" the question on our mind is, "So, why not let all money be that 'extra money,' to be spent anyway a school wishes?" Then, of course, we wonder why the President thinks it is being spent on standards, while Riley is saying people can use the money for anything they want. WELL, WHICH IS IT???

All of this comes as no surprise, of course, to most living things that recognize this is an election year -- the rhetoric is just beginning. Come November, you'll have been nearly convinced that no problem is too great that it can't be solved with another federal program, and that anyone who believes otherwise is just Chicken Little.

"I'm Not Making This Up!"

Where is Ripley when you really need him? Before we get to the really neat things going on nationwide, there are some telling stories that have come our way we feel compelled to pass on:

Minnesota: Every year the state union chooses the Teacher of the Year. Out of the last 15, three have been laid off because of more senior teachers taking their place.

Atlantic City: The head of the local Board of Education called an effort to establish a charter school "a takeover attempt that has everything to do with control and nothing to do with children." Huh?

Hartford: A plan launched to pay principals more if kids do better was met with a suit by the union, who actually claimed in its brief to the court that "independent research has never found a link between teachers and student achievement." What an insult to teachers out there who ARE making a difference!

Portland, OR: The local union asked members to leave work right after school for one week, to show "how much they do for students without pay by sticking strictly in the hours set by their union contract." (*The Daily Astorian*) Such work includes planning lessons and meetings with parents or students. The NEA estimates that 10-12 locales used this "work to rule" tactic each year during bargaining. Maybe Richard Dreyfuss could visit there.

Seattle: "WEA employs velvet glove to scuttle charter schools." (Editorial, *Seattle Times*)
Need we say more?

Washington, DC: A high school student is beaten up twice, and transfers to a "better school." He and his mother say they want him on a college track; the school, however,

places him in: ROTC, computer lab, creative writing, media study, clothing essentials, and gym.

Also in DC: An 11th grader is taking second-year Spanish. His tutor learns he knows no basic verbs, or even pronouns. When the tutor inquires of the principal why he made it into this course with few first year skills, he is told that they let him write his ending year essay in English, although it was a Spanish class.

Why We Call It the BLOB

A few readers have written to say that calling the education establishment the "BLOB" is unbecoming such a staid literary monthly as the Letter to Friends. Too mean-spirited, I guess. Others, in positions of authority within education, sometimes think we are talking about them. Let me explain.

First of all, I did not originate the term. It cropped up years ago when reformers began trying to work with the education establishment and ran smack into the more than 200 groups, associations, federations, alliances, departments, offices, administrations, councils, boards, commissions, panels, organizations, herds, flocks and coveys, that make up the education industrial complex. Taken individually they were frustrating enough, with their own agendas, bureaucracies, and power over education. But taken as a whole they were (and are) maddening in their resistance to change. Not really a wall -- they always talk about change -- but rather more like quicksand, or a tar pit where ideas slowly sink out of sight leaving everything just as it had been.

Now, I suppose they could have been called any number of things: a puddle, a maze, a swamp, a big fat fluffy feather pillow, but blob is what stuck. It's really nothing personal, just descriptive shorthand, like calling accountants "bean counters" and pentagon officials "brass hats," and my friends in the blob (yes, I have blob friends) all seem to accept it with good humor.

Those who we do not consider the "BLOB" are the scores of individual educators, school board members, administrators and the like who toil in the vineyards. On the contrary, they are our unsung heroes and heroines. Rather, it is those at the state and national level, and in whose pockets their dues money rest, who most often fit the "blob" bill.

Still, to avoid hard feelings, from now on when I describe the groups that make up the education establishment, I'll call them the Big Learning Organization Bureaucracies, or...the BLOB. There. That's much better. *JA*

From the Trenches

- The Emporia, Kansas School board denied an application to what was to be the state's first charter school. Kansas' law is barely on the radar screen, allowing only school boards to approve, no appeals process, no automatic waivers from rules, no authority over most funding, no legal autonomy, nada, niente, zip. However, Butcher Children's School, a school run jointly by the district and Emporia State University and originally designed to be a training ground for teachers, dared to dream. The school board rejected the

application, 4-3, disagreeing with the law that they should be held accountable if the school fails -- or as we see it -- if it succeeds, despite total support from parents, teachers and the principal. (Can we take this as a defacto admission that they're also skirting accountability for all the district schools under their watch?) Butcher is the second application to be denied. Kansas lawmakers are talking about rewriting the law, and elevating the approval process to the state board, but it's not clear that the school board association will allow that to happen.

- There are now 18 alternative professional groups for educators who do not want (and are not forced) to join the union. In late January, a Florida group was launched. PEN, or Professional Educators Network Executive Director Kathryn Simmons says their "motivation is to provide educators with the benefits of a professional association without the costs of a national affiliation or the distractions of non-educational issues." Similar groups in Georgia, Texas and Missouri are larger than the combined NEA memberships in those states.

- Polls, polls, polls: Seems like rarely a day goes by that someone is not showing us a new poll. This one from Boston, MA, where safety was named as the main reason Boston residents chose to remove their children from the public schools. (38%). Another 29% worried about school quality, and 86% of the parents surveyed said the private schools were much safer. (No, Al, they don't expel all kids -- they simply enforce decent rules of conduct -- the same ones the public schools would be more apt to institute if there was enough pressure created.)

- Putting kids first, the Bibb County, Georgia Board of Education is looking for a new superintendent with outstanding leadership skills and an inclination to innovate. The individual need not necessarily be an educator, and they are encouraging applications from leaders with experience in both the public and private sector. Nestled in Macon, the district has a diverse student body of 24,964, served through 39 schools. If you or anyone you know is interested, call the Georgia School Boards Association at 800-226-1856 or 770-962-2985.

- If you believe that school board members should have the authority to decide whether contracting out is a viable option, you might want to know that Hartford's HOPE slate of reform-minded candidates who were elected last November are in need of money to help retire their debt. They were outspent by their opponents 4-1, and raised only \$17,650 toward their spending of \$21,000. The Board majority, despite having found it necessary to pull out of their contract with EAI, is still deeply dissatisfied with the status quo. If you want to help, send checks to Citizens for Education Reform, P.O. Box 231242, Hartford, CT 06123-1242.

- Phoenixville, PA is the spot of heated debate over three actions by the school board to strengthen the educational program in schools. Taking a page from California's book, the school board voted 8-1 to make the "comprehensive, systematic use of phonics" a key component of the reading program in grades K-3. They also voted to ban calculators from mathematics classes, to encourage children to learn math in their minds, before they learn it on a machine. Finally, the board voted to adopt appropriate homogeneous grouping, on comments and results that show the current mixing of ability is stifling children's ability to learn. This is a policy endorsed by our friend Al, of the American Federation of Teachers. (See, we agree on something!) Despite making sound policy decisions, the teachers union

in the district is livid, and the PTA has scheduled "emergency meetings" to address concerns, without, interestingly, providing the opportunity for board members to make their case.

- The Center is one of a number of sponsors for an upcoming state-wide school choice conference in Austin, Texas on Saturday, April 13. "Putting Children First: An Educational Choice Leaders Conference," organized by an ongoing coalition of legislators, educators, associations and individuals working to bring choice to families in the Lone Star State, will feature panels by parents, business leaders, choice experts and at least 8 state representatives, as well as words of wisdom from Michael Williams of the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, Arizona's Lisa Graham Keegan, National Teacher of the Year Tracey Bailey, and Allan Parker of the Texas Justice Foundation. For more information, call Patsy O'Neill at (210) 408-7890.

In The News

In this issue, some headlines from across the nation.

Latino Parents, Students to Protest Bilingual Policy by Boycott: Activists mount campaign to have classes at a downtown L.A. elementary school taught in English only. (*Los Angeles Times*, 2/13/96)

A little background: parents' repeated requests for English-only classes had been ignored at Ninth Street School. "We want our children to be taught in English...that's why we came to the United States," said Mexican immigrant Jovita Ruiz. Some estimate that as many as 60% of Latino parents oppose the way the district is teaching their children the language. On February 22, CA Assemblyman Brooks Firestone introduced a bill to improve English proficiency among students, with a wide array of educators and parents backing it. "The current system of bilingual education in California does more harm than good to the more than 1.2. million school children who do not speak English fluently," said Rosamaria Lopez Rossier, a special education and bilingual teacher. "It relegates them to second-class status."

A Study In Sacrifice: Many Parents Struggle to Pay Private School Tuition (*The Washington Post*, 2/18/96)

The Post profiled some parents who, despite low- or modest-means, opt to pay for private school because they "believe it offers the best chance" for their children to realize their dreams. "The perception that the Washington area's private schools are largely populated by real-life Richey Riches is a myth," says the writer.

We'd add that this applies to most of the private schools operating. It is usually about 10% that cater to the upper crest; with a healthy supply in the middle, and often the majority (at the lower end of the tuition spectrum) serving those at the lowest end of the income spectrum.

High Court Rules Teacher Tenure Not Sacrosanct: School Boards' Right to Economize Upheld (*Asbury Park Press*, 8/15/95)

We just came upon this old clip, but it's very applicable today. The New Jersey State Supreme Court ruled last summer that a school board's action in dismissing a tenured teacher in favor of buying the same services at a cheaper rate was perfectly legitimate. The board saved \$12,000 by contracting for speech therapy service with a local agency. The Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission apparently performs similar services for lots of schools, as well as being part of a joint purchasing group that gets discounts on milk, chalk and heating oil. The dismissed teacher was very miffed "What's the use of tenure now?" she asked. Replies a board member, "As in most school districts, money is not an easy thing to come by. We save the district quite a bit of money that we were able to put into things for children. A board member's job is to make these kinds of tough decisions and be fiscally responsible to the people who elected them."

Why Teachers Don't Teach: How Teacher Unions Are Wrecking Our Schools (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2/26/96)

Pegging the unions as barriers to teachers teaching, US News last week joined the growing ranks of many mainstream news magazines showcasing the blight of the unions, and the increasingly bad results of their efforts. The authors argue that "union policies that work against quality teaching are driving many top teachers out of public schools, making it tougher for good teachers who stay to do their best work and leaving incompetents entrenched in many classrooms." The unions counter that tenure -- and their policies -- do not stifle good teaching but protect it from arbitrary and capricious treatment. That may have been helpful and necessary once, but efforts to keep the teaching force above patronage has turned into a patronage system itself. New York University professor Joseph Vitteri comments on the "dance of the lemons," which allows inadequate teachers to land positions elsewhere: "The whole system is corrupt... It says to hard-working teachers that there are no standards, that it doesn't matter."

What You Won't Hear About School Closings in Milwaukee

In the days leading up to the oral arguments presented in *State ex rel. Tommy G. Thompson vs. Jackson*, the challenge to the city's school choice program, opponents did their darndest to paint a picture of unethical little Simon Legrees waiting in line to steal the government's children and place them in inferior schools. Two private schools closed: Milwaukee Preparatory and Exito, due to financial difficulties, not because of improprieties. According to Parents for School Choice Director Zakiya Courtney, these schools (and others like them), fully expected choice students to comprise anywhere from 65% to 100% of their enrollees. They prepared for them, and in fact, welcomed these kids — keeping many who couldn't pay tuition when the injunction limited choice funding to 65% of total enrollment. And while Milwaukee Prep and Exito have folded under the strain, others keep on truckin'. For example, Harambee Community School, Medgar Evers Academy and Woodson Academy are currently carrying non-tuition-paying students. There is a real need to get help for these schools, who were too compassionate to turn children fleeing local public schools away. (See, Al, there are good people on the choice front, despite your claims that private schools live to expel children and do not take care of those who don't fit their monetary and academic requirements. You just need to get to know these good people, and more about what they do! How about a visit to Milwaukee?)

With the first round of oral arguments behind them, attorney Ken Starr and the others expect a decision in 6-8 weeks. The unions were in rare form, but so were the over five hundred residents who traveled by bus to support choice. In the weeks prior, one of the 7 justices, Ann Walsh Bradley, recused herself from participating in the decision. The reason on the street is because of her support from the state union, who lobbied just last April for her reelection, confiding that she'd help overturn the new choice law. Arguing that a "public education friendly" justice is needed, WEAC asked for each teacher to send \$3.33 in so they could provide her with a \$1,000 contribution. I bet they weren't too tickled when she stepped aside. Maybe if they had passed her cash in the envelope, like they used to do in the old days?

Passage of Washington, DC School Reform Plan Unlikely

After three cloture votes in the Senate, the DC Appropriations bill (with charter authority for the District, incentives for instituting standards, and most notably, a school choice pilot project) failed to pass. (see enclosed clippings) As of this writing, Congress will have passed an omnibus appropriations bill for all government agencies not funded. The House version contains no school reform measures, believing that without the choice provision, there should be no other funding for schools. The Senate's bill contains all but the choice provisions, and allocated that \$5 million to other school "needs." The conference committee could technically add the choice program back in. Either way, President Clinton has assured a veto, closing down the government yet again. An aide said, "it's just politics!" So much for the kids.

Charters, Charters, Charters

- **Texas** has approved its first six charter schools, and potentially two more could follow after some issues are clarified. The big event took place on February 16, when members of the State Board of Education entrusted with the approval process reviewed the eight applications. These 'open enrollment' charter proposals from around the state are taken directly to the state board. Two other routes are Home Rule charters, which frees entire districts from rules, and campus charters (conversion charters), where schools are freed from district rules. (Action on these later two fronts has been sluggish at best, because schools are required to have an impact statement from the district, have secured a facility before applying, and in the case of campus charters get 51% of parent and teacher signatures). Among those approved are: the Renaissance Charter School in Irving, which provides an academic and career-focused education with a strong foundation in humanities, science, mathematics and career technology; the West Houston Charter School, which will educate children based on identifying their different individual learning styles, targeting special education children for at least 25% of its student body; the American Institute for Learning, already operating in Austin, which serves dropouts from age 16-24; and the Medical Center Charter School in Houston, which will draw upon employees families for its enrollment, and Montessori methods in its curriculum.
- **California's** cap is technically off, at least on a case by case basis, with recent state board approval of an additional four charters which exceeded the initial 100 authorized. But board members first had to listen to a barrage of objections and technical

bureaucratize from the state's teacher union (CTA) as to why the board really couldn't do what they eventually ended up doing. But despite the fact that a local Berkeley union official protested the start-up of the Berkeley Public Charter School, according to Eric Premack of the CA-based Charter School Project, Berkeley's is the state's only "post-appeal" charter granted by the Alameda County Board of Education. The point may soon be moot, however; at the end of February, reports the *Sacramento Bee*, the General Assembly passed 50-14 a bill sponsored by Rep. Caldera, D-Los Angeles, to raise the cap from 100 to 300. We'll keep you posted on its progress.

- The **Washington** State House has passed "okay" charter language that will get better in year 1999. Why? Well right now, the bill provides only school districts with chartering authority (with no appeal) and caps the number of charters allowed through 1998, after which time the State Superintendent will have the authority to sponsor an unlimited number of truly autonomous schools. This is a result of pressure from Proposition 177, a petition filed by the Education Excellence Coalition, under Jim and Fawn Spady's direction, which will be on the ballot in the November general election. The House, forced to act before it could go to the voters, has sent the measure to the Senate, who at the insistence of Democratic Education Committee Chairwoman Rosemary McAuliffe, has stalled action. Meanwhile, according to Ross Anderson, editorial columnist for the *Seattle Times*, the WEA is secretly digging in for a dirty fight on all fronts: "Just a few weeks ago, the WEA conducted an all-day training
Charters, continued

session for teachers in Kitsap County. Hundreds of teachers showed up expecting classes in computer technology or special education. Instead, they found themselves in a campaign strategy session. According to one teacher who attended, a WEA leader depicted charter schools as 'partisan,' 'anti-government' and 'racist,' a ploy promoted by 'arch conservatives' and the 'religious right.'"(3/3/96) But they'll have an uphill battle, whether the legislature does the right thing now, or voters get a shot at the issue in November. An increasingly informed public is warming to the idea — support for charters in the state has gone from 32% in January to 56% in February.

- **Florida** made headway on March 7, when the Senate passed a weakened charter bill, after a 5 hour debate, 9 amendments, and many more attempted. The bill allows for school board chartering only, based on the premise that the Sunshine state's constitution allows only for school board operation of existing public schools (despite the fact that Florida already has state schools for the deaf and blind, and some directly operated by public universities). The law would set a 200 school cap annually with no more than 7 in big districts, 5 in medium, and 3 in small ones. Teachers shall be certified, no less than 95% of funding will follow the children, and conversion schools would still be bound by collective bargaining, as is the case in NJ. Supporters say it will be most like Colorado's when all is said and done. House action is not yet scheduled.

SPECIAL NOTE: As you will see from the following blurb about Ohio, one of the more vocal critiques of charter schools now being circulated from among administrator and school board groups is that charters will rob the public schools of much-needed money. The theory, of course, is that if many students choose to leave, they'll take the money with them. (The same argument is used against vouchers.) There are two major flaws to that 'logic.' First, when children leave schools currently, or when schools experience significant enrollment changes (as they have every ten years or so), budgets get adjusted and are

stabilized by the end of the year in which enrollment has shifted. School finance is very fluid, but schools are also guaranteed a minimum level of funding by state foundation formulas to provide a safety net in just these sorts of circumstances. Second, while money will surely leave a school or district where children have decided to leave, the question should not be how do we keep the money from going, but how to we solve the problems that made those kids want to leave? And assuming all of us want kids to have a good education, if they choose to go elsewhere, what does that say about the quality of the schools they've left, and why do educrats talk about them 'escaping?' This should be about educational empowerment, not punitive incarceration.

- Some **Ohio** Superintendents think this about charters: It is "one more bad idea that will further destabilize public education by taking away resources and funding. The proposed [schools] will be exempt from many of the mandates and regulations that currently affect...districts.... Why not exempt the public school districts from the mandates and regulations first, thereby making charter schools unnecessary?"

Why not, indeed? The only problem is that every time a legislature has tried to do just that, a zillion special interests (yes, the BLOB) have come out of the woodwork trying to safeguard regulations to this or that program. Arguments are made about public accountability, and when all is said in done, a modest waiver program is enacted, for which schools can and do apply -- to have bathroom specifications waived.

Rather, the approximately 240 charter schools currently operating demonstrate how schools can work effectively by eliminating the bulk of mandates. They are real laboratories of innovation, which unlike the national laboratories funded by the federal government, are actually on the firing line sorting out through real-world application all of the various inquiries, concerns, theories and innovations that are out there. If they succeed, these superintendents will get their wish for less mandates. The question is, do they REALLY want it, or is this just lip service in the face of competition.

On the other hand, the vast majority of superintendents, principals and teachers are quite fine with the whole charter concept, and many of them are champing at the bit to start innovating once a law passes. Many of them are too busy to write lengthy tomes or barrage their legislators with supportive mail to counter the manufactured efforts by opponents, but some have taken the time to call or write to friends there, and to us, telling of their support. Ohio's bill is expected to be voted on by the Senate when it reconvenes at the end of March. It enjoys the Governor's support, and sponsors are attempting to gain the consent of some of the education groups there.

- *Charter End Notes:* Throw **Pennsylvania** in the "unlikely to enact" category, although as usual, that could change. Lawmakers there are offering a weak charter bill, which has not met with the Governor's approval. As it stands, PA's bill would limit sponsoring agencies to local boards, cap the number permitted, tie employment policies to district policies and not grant an automatic waiver from rules. It's a work in progress.

Efforts to lift the charter cap in **Minnesota** were defeated in the House there. The cap has been lifted several times already, but only half of the 40 possible slots have yet been filled. Under a more expansive charter law in Michigan, the number of schools is expected to double next year, from 40 to 80.

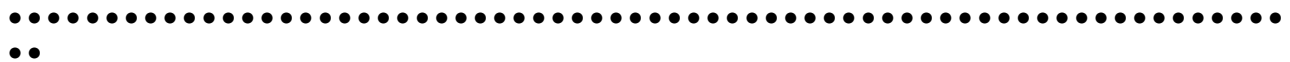
Meanwhile, the **Illinois** House and Senate have passed a bill paving the way for 45 charters in the state, although it allows for local school board sponsorship only. The appeals process does not necessarily give the State Board the authority to overturn local board rulings. In a refreshing twist, the Illinois Education Association came out in favor the bill, despite the fact that charters will be allowed to hire educated, qualified individuals without teacher certification. (Their IFT brethren were not so generous.) A gubernatorial signature is likely any day.

In **Idaho**, two different charter bills passed their respective chambers, but both leave final approval in the hands of local boards and limit staffing to certified teachers. Resolution for a strong charter law looks unlikely.

The **Indiana** General Assembly caved to pressure from the Indiana State Teachers Association, and killed any prospect for charter schools for this year at least. In **Missouri**, a measure is still pending. And in **Connecticut**, a hearing held on a fairly strong charter bill March 11 is paving the way for almost assured action this session.

And in Portland, **Oregon**, school officials want to create the first charter district. Superintendent Jack Bierwith says it's frustrating to try to manage a budget that is increasingly controlled by the legislature. He told *The Oregonian*, "Who sets the rules? The State Legislature, the Department of Education, and we react." Yet despite wanting to include teachers in the planning process, the local union head has balked. "We have choice in the Portland system already," said Portland Association of Teachers president James Sager. Of course, Oregon has no charter law, so the district could not be truly free to pursue its goals. It's a step in the right direction, and skeptics of real charters hope these kinds of experiments will negate the need for comprehensive legislation. It's likely, however, that the public will demand it.

Look for more details of these and other efforts in April.



We hope you enjoy the enclosed update on Center activities and news clippings regarding the DC effort. As always, it's been a pleasure, and we are grateful for your continued support.

Jeanne Allen