

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

The New Year blew in lots of news from the front. You'll find this issue of your favorite newsletter <smile> filled with stories of reform struggles, attempts and successes to do and study school choice, some comments on standards, and some miscellany. Thanks so much for your wonderful response to our last issue. We think you'll find this a good overview of what is to come throughout 1997.



Two Gentlemen of Verona?

Town officials in a real live Verona, (Wisconsin, that is), could learn a little about civility from Shakespeare's famous play. The Core Knowledge Charter School, opened last fall, has been attacked by some as elitist, for having fewer minority or disadvantaged youth. From early on, the school which uses a direct instruction approach received accolades from parents. They are still highly satisfied, and likened their experience in traditional public schools to "hit or miss," while finding that Core Knowledge Charter school emphasizes a critical sequence as well as high standards. A school board member critical of charters has raised the concern that the school is not representative of the district's ethnic and income populations. So the board is raising questions about whether Core Knowledge Charter should be allowed to expand or even receive federal grant money. Organizers say they advertised far and wide to attract parents. And its clear from the myriad of studies that charters are serving well an over-proportionate share of underprivileged children. The fact that the school is working hard to do well by its children should be enough to satisfy district officials, but apparently education is not the officials' main concern. Of course, if the school board would like to pay for a massive PR and outreach campaign to help diversify, and allow school staff to stick to the job of educating, we're sure the Verona Core Knowledge folks would have no problem expanding their enrollment and opening up their doors further.

Winter in New York

Finally, a winter that brings to New York more than the normal snow overload and bad football scores (sorry, Bills' fans)! On January 12, Governor George Pataki proposed a strong charter school law. The legislation would allow a wide variety of groups to start charter schools, and permit not only school boards, but the Regents, and the State and City University Systems to sponsor charters. Union response was typical,

making it sound as if they really do like charter schools, but that Pataki's was somehow an extreme proposal. Pataki's proposal is right in line with the other 14 states that have similarly strong legislation. The proposal has stirred excitement in New York, where several communities are interested in charters, and where legislators are faced with pressure by surrounding charter states. Now legislators need the courage to stand up to the bevy of special interests already working to stop this successful reform. New York State's Empire Foundation is doing much work on this front. Call (518) 383-2877 to get in touch.

From the Trenches

Choice in Baltimore: A private foundation is making it possible for children to attend a safe, neighborhood school, as well as build up a community that had fallen on hard times. If you buy a home in the Patterson Park neighborhood, you will be provided up to 9 years of free education at St. Elizabeth School, thanks to the East Fayette Street Community Development Corporation and the Abell Foundation, which as underwritten the choice effort.

Ebonics, Schlabonics!: As we former New Jerseyans might say, 'Oh, my Gawddd!' We're still stunned, shocked and amazed at the Oakland County, CA, school board's proposal to adopt Ebonics-as-a-second language so as to better train teachers to understand this "language" which they claim comes directly from African cultures. We're gratified that the head of the national NAACP decried Oakland's move as relegating African-American children to a different and lower standard of learning, and by Entertainer Bill Cosby's description of the move by Oakland as "ignoromics". As put best by George Mason University professor Walter Williams (himself an African-American), "Today, people are buying into the nonsense that "_be" talk is a part of black heritage. So-called black English is simply an attempted cover-up of government school and capitulation to mediocrity.... It's not simply a matter of "black English" being hard on the ears. Poor command of Language is devastating to learning potential and reasoning skills. After all, language is how we transmit knowledge and experience. But don't take my word," Williams adds, " Just ax yourself: how many successful blacks be talkin black English?"

OOPS: New Jersey lawmakers gave the go-ahead to a statewide public school choice program to be administered by the education commissioner. This makes NJ the 18th state to permit public school choice, but apparently those most in-the-know were caught off guard by the single sentence that was tucked away in the Governor's school financing bill that passed in early December. The commissioner said he'd probably go for a test in several districts before implementing it full scale. Meanwhile, the new school financing law ties school funding to progress on statewide standards. New Jersey is treading in new (and welcomed) waters by tying accountability to spending. The law provides that schools asking taxpayers to pay more money must define how the new programs help meet the core curriculum. Districts that need it will receive state aid to make up for the newly allotted spending formula (\$6,720 for elementary, \$7,526 for middle, and \$8,064 for high school students). Schools that fail will invite intervention by the Commissioner. Schools that succeed will draw monetary rewards if 90 percent of the school meets or exceed standards. Despite this reform effort, and the fact New Jersey is still at the top of the spending ladder, the money-mongers are not happy. They'll probably go to court again. Wouldn't it be nice if the money they spent

in court and that which goes for their salaries were transferred instead to schools they see lacking?

Speaking of the Garden State, the first 17 charters were approved, and most of them will begin operation in the fall. Most gratifying to see were several given to community groups who worked hard to bring charter legislation to New Jersey; a group of parents each in Hoboken and Jersey City who see charters as a way to preserve and improve public education; the residential Samuel DeWitt Proctor Academy school to serve poorly performing children in grades 7-12, the Sussex County Charter School for Technology, and the LEAP Academy Charter School, founded by Gloria Santiago-Bonilla at Rutgers University. Gloria has devoted much of her time this last year to bringing about the necessary conditions for charters. Our best goes to all of them, and to the Prudential Foundation, for setting up a critically-needed low-interest loan fund to help with bricks and mortar.

Too many teachers lack content knowledge, read a headline in *Education Daily*.

The thrust of a new Ed Dept. report says that as many as twenty-five percent of students suffer from having teachers who are "not fully qualified to teach those subjects." In the lower grades, students taking English and math did not have qualified teachers in about twenty to twenty-five percent of the cases. No surprise that it's worse in poor communities.

Unions Can't Play Politics With Your Money: Such was the conclusion of the National Labor Relations Board, in what the *Wall Street Journal* called "a setback for organized labor." The NLRB was asked to hear a case by a United Brotherhood of Carpenters member, who asked for information (and a refund) regarding the non-employee related expenditures of his dues. His union refused, and he sued. Thanks to the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, which defends aggrieved union members, all workers have the right to full disclosure and even refunds of political expenditures. The Beck decision by the U.S. Supreme Court made that clear, yet it has only been enforced when union practices are individually challenged. That should be food for thought for teacher union members who find fault with the political activities of their association. The trick, of course, for the lawyers, is in being able to muddle through the complicated accounting that usually masks the political expenditures to all but the most initiated in union ways.

Wildcat Academy Succeeds! A much heralded alternative school serving some of New York City's most difficult to educate reported tremendous gains among its students, with lower than average drop out rates among alternative schools and high numbers of students passing graduation exams. And while their overall numbers are still not that of upper-middle class America, Wildcat students are twice as likely to have graduated, and more likely to receive a diploma than a GED. That's quite a testament to the drive of its faculty and its founder, Amalia Betanzos. But obviously the children deserve great praise for overcoming the fate that most statisticians normally reserve for these children. (How many times do you hear the system's defenders cry that society is the cause for their failure?) Incidentally, as you've read on these pages before, Wildcat uses the Core Knowledge Curriculum, which is content-rich rather than process-vague.

More on Charters

- **Arizona** charters have been much in the news lately. Despite widespread success amidst the majority of the state's 164 charters, controversy over at least two schools has generated scorn and pleasure from opponents. Officials closed Citizen 2000 for financial/ethical violations and Dragonfleye Charter experienced governance and administrative problems. But using their experience to identify early qualities it takes to be successful, the authorizing bodies approved so far only another 14 new schools, which will add 4,000 charter children to the already 17,000 served. Among them is the company Educational Alternatives Inc., which has contracted with home developers to build new neighborhood schools in fast growing parts of Phoenix. EAI plans 12 schools over the next 3 years. Hearing this news, however, the education establishment was less than enthused with the private company's entree into Arizona.

Meanwhile, demonstrating that just being a public education employee is not enough to guarantee accountability, a recently-retired school superintendent in Maricopa County was indicted for attempting to bribe a public official. Gerald George, a national education consultant, allegedly conspired with William Dabb, another former superintendent, to get Dabb's job back. Dabb had been fired for "bid-rigging and ethics violations." The word is that as many as another four superintendents are being looked at for similar illegal activities.

- A potential charter operator in **North Carolina** took a long view of the charter wars in her Charlotte district where she is attempting to start the Odyssey charter school for children in grades four through eight. Jean Bolduc, writing for the *Charlotte Hill Herald*, reports that the district superintendent, Neil Pedersen has complained that he'll lose money if the students go elsewhere. Bolduc says, "The same system that pours cash into multi-million dollar buildings while at-risk children suffer and fail, the same system that cries 'overcrowding' every time something negative is said or written about it—that very same system would now have us believe that 200 students out of more than 8,000 present a threat so serious that they should be denied...What will we think when we discover that the same kids, taught in a refurbished old building, or a recreation center, or a barn, do just as well on state tests? What will we think when those same children are free of the mile-wide, inch-deep state standard course of study and they develop in-depth understanding by studying the classics, advanced math and hands-on science? How damaged would Neil Pedersen's career be when parents come to understand and take control of the real power they possess? When parents are genuine partners in their children's education, they never give that power away again...School board member Mary Bushnell talked about charters being some sort of useful bridge, as long as the kids come back to the system. What a bankrupt statement. You can go as long as you return. If you stay away, and thrive and excel, then you have wrecked the system." Sad, but well said, Jean!

- Elsewhere among the **Tarheels**, the *Don't Worry, Be Happy* crowd has gotten into full swing for 1997. The North Carolina Department of Education has plans to pay a consultant up to \$845,000 "to spread the good news about the state's 118 school systems," according to a report in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. This "image building" campaign is brought to you by State Board of Education members. They want to ensure that the public knows about the new ABC plan that will monitor more closely student performance—but couldn't they find a cheaper, and perhaps more objective way to do it?

- And in related news about interesting attitudes toward reform, East St. Louis, **Illinois** was recently the site of consideration of two charter proposals, one by a reputable group that already teaches well non-English speaking students, and the other from Southern Illinois University, with a stress on pre-school through 4th grade, to try to maintain gains made among children in Head Start or other pre-school programs, who normally lose any gains made when they enter school. Though much needed and well-written, the school board, after two minutes, said no to both proposals. Said Board member Marlene Smoot, "We have 13,000 kids at risk. This doesn't solve anything." OK, let me see - So it's not worth starting to help a few... if we can't help them all, %\$##@@ 'em. Geez.

- **Vaughn Next Century Learning Center** Charter School is proving their favorite story lives on. The Little Engine That Could is becoming a steam roller. They broke land again, this time making way for a \$2.2 million facility that will be home to a community library, ten new classrooms, technology and science labs and a teacher training center working with California State University at Northridge. Vaughn's leader, Yvonne Chan, is also credited with helping her students to increase the number scoring above the 50th percentile in 4th grade reading, language and math, and lowering the number of Limited English-Proficient (LEP) students. Chan boasts a 99.5 percent attendance rate for this low-income school population, demonstrating once again that a school's character and freedom is sometimes all you need to help counteract negative societal factors.

- It's just too bad that people in **Virginia** this month didn't have the benefit of Yvonne at a hearing on charter schools, in which an official with the state branch of the NAACP said to the education committee, "We'll be watching you. If you vote for charters, we will come after you. We will get you." When a reporter later asked "Why did you feel it necessary to issue a threat?", the official replied, "Oh, no. It wasn't a threat. It was a promise."

- Joe Nathan, charter connoisseur at the Minnesota-based Center for School Change, has had his new book written up and quoted from widely. **Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education** advises on policy and legislative issues, profiles charter schools, their successes and struggles, addresses the motivation and actions of the parents and policy-makers who sparked the charter movement, and gives words of wisdom for charter organizers. The fast growth in charter schools makes it more difficult to inform each individual school operator about critical policy discussions or resources for help. This is a good starting point for both non- and charter person alike, and worth reading by those of you who think you know enough, too. Call Jossey Bass, Inc. at (415) 433-1767 for info.

More on Choice

- Judge Paul Higgenbotham had another crack at the **Milwaukee choice** program's constitutionality, finding that none of the newly expanded program that would serve up to 15,000 students in both private and parochial schools held water with his interpretation, even though in an earlier ruling in August he had upheld the program for kids going to non-religious but still private schools. Still, the effort lives on. Either side would have appealed, and that's exactly what's happening. The only real setback is for the children, whose current fate is unclear.

- Yet another prestigious university has given a thumbs-up to achievement gains in Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program. **Princeton University** Economist Cecilia Elena Rouse wanted to judge the statistical reliability of Harvard University's Paul Peterson and Jay Greene. Rouse found that choice students "were considerably more disadvantaged than the average students in the Milwaukee public schools (whose average family income was \$24,000) and the average non-choice private school student in Milwaukee (whose average family income was about \$43,000)...choice applicants were more likely to be minority and had lower math and reading test scores than the average student in the Milwaukee Public Schools." Using the original pool of students eligible, Rouse found that "students selected for the choice program scored approximately 1-2 extra percentage points" per year compared to those who were in the Milwaukee public schools. With regard to reading scores, she found little difference whereas Peterson, et al found much. More analyses are planned. However, Rouse affirms that "the mean difference in test scores between those selected [for the choice program] and those not selected was much higher in the fourth year..." A non-biased observer, Rouse says it is important to "piece together evidence from many places" to gauge whether programs like Milwaukee's actually improve student achievement.

- In **Cleveland**, anti-choicers worried that religious schools line their pockets with vast amounts of public money no longer need to fear; a study released by the Ohio-based Buckeye Institute has found that the cap placed on voucher-paying students is actually costing them about \$577 per student. Their report found that the average cost of teaching students at the Catholic schools is roughly \$1,849, 45% more than what they charge. And under the Ohio Scholarship and Tutoring program, the schools are receiving \$1,145 from state aid through each student's parents.

- "**A Better Choice**" scholarship program has made an offer to every student at Albany's worst public school, Giffen Elementary. Through this program, Philanthropist Virginia Gilder has provided each the chance to attend the private school of their choice. Starting in September, as many as 650 kids could have a choice for the first time in most of their lives. We salute efforts to bring immediate relief to children who are by virtue of their economic status, relegated to failing schools. The union doesn't see it that way. They've called ABC "A Big Con."

- Yet another business voice for reform is heard from. **Indiana** Chamber of Commerce President, Christopher P. LaMothe, said that his group would make education reform one of its key issues. "If Indiana doesn't do something very significant and bold with its K-12 education system, Indiana is out of business," LaMothe announced. From the Chamber's standpoint, the state needs a strong charter law that exempts the schools from union rules, parental choice for both public and private schools, and needs to explore private contracting to open up alternatives to the way schools currently do business. The Chamber's new approach is welcome news to reformers in the Hoosier state.

- What a tangled web we weave: The Center's September, '96 *Survey of Americans' Attitudes toward Education and School Reform*, was the subject of the editor's page in January's Phi Delta Kappan. Pauline B. Gough suggests that CER's claims of misguided or "leading" questions in the yearly PDK/Gallup poll are off-base. Gough says our phrasing ("*How much are you in favor of allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted to their child's education, and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing?*") is

leading. The use of poor parents clearly got under PDK's skin, as did the use of failing schools as in "*Should your state legislators adopt a policy to assist children in failing schools to opt out of that school and attend an alternative school, either public, private or parochial of the parent's choosing?*" which received over 70 percent support. To PDK's credit, they acknowledge they are open to "input from readers," on their own phrasing, now at least, that someone else has criticized their poll openly. But Gough misses the real point about school choice-related survey questions: Since school choice as a policy is aimed at helping those who do not have the access to a sound education, and very often *are* in failing schools, asking questions that do not address the key public policy debate is itself misleading. So when PDK asks questions like: "*Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?*" they are asking a question that is not only leading, but doesn't address the substance of public policy. It would be like asking Americans on a survey: *Do you favor or oppose U.S. military intervention in Italy?* which would almost undoubtedly have about 0 percent in favor given that there is currently no Italian threat or public dialogue about protecting U.S. citizens in Italy. The fact is that most believe in some sort of private/public choice for those who don't have it, or are in bad schools. So let's ask the right questions to gauge public policy. Surely CER has no more ax to grind than PDK. At the very least, that needs to be made clear to the public; *then* there will be room for a reasonable discussion of bias and objectivity.

- A **Louisiana poll** commissioned by a consortium of TV stations found widespread dissatisfaction with public schools. Done in early December, '96, over half of the 600 voters surveyed rated public schools not so good or poor, while Catholic schools were rated favorably by 68 percent, and private schools, 74 percent. According to the *Times-Picayune* newspaper, financing, teacher pay, discipline, teacher qualification and parental involvement were listed as problems facing education. And from the media conglomerate survey (with an ax to grind, we wonder?), 48 percent favored educational choice through charter schools or a voucher system. 19 percent said no, and 33 percent said they didn't know. We thought the coupling of the two issues was interesting, and not something we'd have done, but it just goes to show you that you don't have to be advocate to ask good questions about reform.

Governors and Education

Looking at the State of the State addresses of most governors, one would think the 'Govs' were all ready to shake, rattle and roll. But only a handful really talked reform, while some have already embarked on a more widespread policy of bringing local control back to schools. **California** Governor Pete Wilson stressed plans to teach children to read well and called again for lifting the charter school cap and reducing regulatory red-tape.

Idaho Governor Phil Batt is bolding seeking to overhaul tenure laws, and **Georgia** Governor Zell Miller deserves praise for removing an often fractious and overly political state board and appointing a new one to work in concert with State School Superintendent Linda Shrenko to improve the state's standards.

Prior to the New Year, **Minnesota** Governor Arne Carlson unveiled his *STUDENTS FIRST* plan, that responds to the growing concern among business and public alike over stagnant education in the land of 10,000 lakes. The package includes \$150 million in tax credits and deductions for all parents, \$30 million for the state's

EDVest, a tax free savings account for higher ed. costs, a \$50 million technology boost to arm children with computers and access to the Internet, and \$20 million to expand charter and lab school efforts. Charter schools can expect to see the cap lifted, and all education funding will follow each student attending charters. The package also provides funds for better standards and reporting, mandate relief, and reform in teacher hiring and incentives. Legislators of both parties had good things to say about the package. The stickiest point will be the tax-credit expansion, which currently exists but is low, and limited to lower income families.



If you are reading this strange newsletter for the first time, and enjoyed yourself the tiniest little bit, you might be happy to know that we have back issues available, on paper or via the Internet at our home page, www.edreform.com. We struggled this month to give you the best of the best, but could have easily written another 8 pages (if fact, we did, but it only exists on computer). The good news is that as tradition has it, our larger February / March issue will be brimming with more information of legislative trends, grass roots efforts and success in schooling. We'll be here if you need us in the meantime. See you in early March!

Jeanne Allen