

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS
OF THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 38**

SEPTEMBER, 1997

Dear Friends:

Happy Back-to-School season, and our best to all of you who have devoted yourselves to the all-important occupation of working for children in and around our schools! For us, the summer flew, and like clockwork, the day after Labor Day, double-the-activity kicked-in. We're also pleased that the numbers of groups and people working for reform has grown dramatically. To all our neighbors in the opposing camp, we say "watch out!" You ain't seen nothing yet!

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CER Annual Survey of Americans' Attitudes Toward School Reform

For the second year in a row, CER commissioned International Research Communications (ICR) of Media, PA to poll Americans on ten critical questions that reformers face daily. Unlike the most conventional education poll on the market, that of Phi Delta Kappa and the Gallup Organization, ours has strived to put real questions into an actual reform context, and one that people more aptly can understand and grapple with. And, once again, CER finds overwhelming support for school choice options for children (with a record 84% of blacks in support of the option to send their children to the school of their choice, either public, private or parochial). In addition, despite great fanfare from PDK/Gallup that about half of the public gives their public schools grades of A and B, in our poll that grade inflation disappears almost completely when you ask them if they feel their local school needs to be improved somewhat, a great deal, or not at all.

More than half of all Americans also support charter schools, but less clear is their support for a strong federal role in education. Additional findings, which are found at the back of this month's Letter, portray confusion when asking whether teachers should be compensated based on performance, versus whether they believe their teachers are. Finally, unions score high points for their role in reform, a sentiment that we believe reflects both a lack of knowledge and an effect of the zillion dollar PR

efforts undertaken each year by both national and state union affiliates. If you need additional information and summaries not listed on our table here, please let us know. You can also check out our web site at www.edreform.com

They Just Don't Get It!

Selected excerpts of reports, meeting minutes and news that shows just how out of the loop some folks really are when it comes to "getting it."

Because of its concern for public education, (or perhaps in spite of it?), the Phi Delta Kappa organization is holding workshops entitled *Charters, Vouchers, and For-Profit: Why Privatization Won't Save American Schools*, with a lecture by a fairly uncredible U. of Wisconsin Prof., Alex Molnar, who authored a book with questionable facts and conclusions on how private companies (and the right wing, and some left wing, and most people) are trying to take over the public schools.

Meanwhile, we learned of a forum last spring put on in part by former Milwaukee Superintendent Howard Fuller, called "Take it Back: Your Education Belongs to You," in which more than 150 young people were schooled in such subjects as how to use the internet, resources for empowering young people, and how local governments and school boards operate.

Is it any question which group "gets it?"

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"A committee of the Southeast Missouri Superintendents Association is trying to enlist support of fellow administrators to revise Missouri's promising new accreditation standards for student performance. These administrators' issue is that the standards are too rigorous for students who come from poorer districts....they are seeking changes to adjust student performance expectations downward 'for school districts with high concentrations of disadvantaged students.'" (*Kansas City Star*)

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Regarding national test proposals: "Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the ranking Democrat on the education funding panel, said school superintendents want to know how students are doing so they can ask governors and other political bodies for more help." (*ED Daily*) That's funny, most local administrators and school people think that more Washington "help" is precisely what they don't need.

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Efforts are being pursued in California to give teachers the opportunity to check off whether or not PAC donations, agency shop fees, etc. will be made from their paycheck, rather than the automatic and some believe, extortionist tactic of asking them to mark if they don't want it deducted. The California Teachers' Union is appalled. "The initiatives seek to weaken all of our lobbying and political activities, as well as our public relations campaigns; and they threaten collective bargaining, due process and

other rights...These extremist (there's that word again!) initiatives may look appealing to some members because they appear to protect employees' rights. However, these initiatives will severely hinder your right to effectively support your organization's activities through dues payments." Later on, the CTA says that asking teachers to fill out a form directing PAC donations and dues will also "create an expensive, bureaucratic nightmare..." Aaawww!

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One of the items on the July meeting agenda of Pennsylvania State Education Association leadership is as follows: United Steelworkers of America Strike Request: [certain individuals moved and seconded] a motion "that the PSEA write to the chairman of the Mellon Bank asking the CEO to get back to the bargaining table and negotiate a fair and equitable contract including the encouraging of our members to withdraw their accounts...Motion carried." Is there a child-related hook here that we're missing?

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"WHEREAS, the economic and fiscal constraints confronting school districts ...accelerate(s) the trend toward privatization and contracting out of public services as a "magic bullet," ...WHEREAS, AFT members in each region of the country face threats of privatization and contracting out every service...WHEREAS, the AFT and its members are strongly committed to providing the highest quality and most effective services to students and the public...WHEREAS, public sector workers...have demonstrated their commitment to improving the quality of those services and those institutions and are best able to use their expertise...in designing more efficient and effective delivery of services...WHEREAS (a whole bunch of other scurrilous reasons why using contractors is detrimental)... RESOLVED, that the AFT intensify its efforts to combat privatization and contracting out, including expanded membership education and field training, research, development of material, strategic and technical assistance...and that AFT continue to take the offensive for excellence, encouraging the development of proactive strategies by locals to preempt privatization and contracting out..." (1997 AFT Convention Resolutions)

From the States

- What a thrill to be able to say that **750 charter schools** are now open in 23 states, and serve over 150,000 students! We're constantly impressed with the quality of the individuals who labored to open these new public schools, and equally impressed with the drive by so many parents to snag these opportunities.
- What an equal thrill to be able to say that since the beginning of the school year over 18,000 have been generously and gratefully given a choice to attend the private school of their choice, because of more than 30 existing privately-funded scholarship programs throughout the country.

The *New York Times* recognizes the importance of these life saving programs, and on September 4 noted that "another 1,165 students made the leap this week from the

New York City public schools to parochial and other private schools, taking advantage of a scholarship program created last year...," the paper is referring to the School Choice Scholarships Program.

In Milwaukee, generosity has permitted the 4,400 children enrolled in the PAVE program to continue, while the courts deliberate the merits of the legislative program that went into effect for children attending non-sectarian schools in 1991, but whose expansion to including parochial schools was halted by a "big bunch of meanies," as my five year old would say. The Bradley Foundation once again pledged unprecedented support, through a \$2 million grant that will be matched dollar for dollar by other PAVE investors.

And in Indianapolis, the CHOICE Charitable Trust gave an additional 150 scholarships this year, making the total of children it serves 1,150.

- When last we met, several charter school efforts were being debated. **North Carolina** was victorious in its efforts to maintain strong legislation, and **Michigan** charters benefited from a state supreme court ruling that said unequivocally that charters are public schools and publicly accountable, not a result the union-suitors wanted to hear! **Massachusetts** also improved its law with the cap of 25 being lifted to accommodate 12 new schools, along with 13 less autonomous charters.

With the addition of a bill passed in **Ohio** that applies to the state's "Big Eight" school districts, and a law in **Nevada**, the total is 30.

However, as CER's own charter law ranking indicates, aided by the help of some renowned experts, only 20 can be considered real charter laws at all, and the rest are either too weak to deliver significant charter activity, or simply, charter laws in name only, passed, most likely, to take advantage of increasing federal money without having to really give up control.

There is hope on that score as well. Congress will soon be deliberating how best to disperse federal grant money to ensure that it is being used for the purposes intended. We hear encouraging signs that Congress might also be willing to reward those states with laws that lead to greater charter activity.

From the States, *continued*

- A special note is in order on an interesting kind of entity in **Connecticut** that is helping charter schools there. The Connecticut Health Education Facilities Authority has granted a \$150,000 low-interest loan to three charters. CHEFA is a quasi public organization that provides tax exempt financing to public goods. The funds come from the fees of annual clients and serves as a revolving fund.

A Texas coalition has a revolving loan fund, as does Louisiana. There is the Illinois Facilities Fund that provides similar low-cost loans, and the Michigan Municipal Bond Authority is also in the business.

It's a good thing there are these unique agencies willing to help. In states like **Texas**, where 100 state charters are now permitted, nearly 500 applications may be filed for schools, making both the prospects of enormous growth and the need for capital support daunting challenges.

- A political operative of the **Washington** Education Association in August was found guilty by the state's Public Disclosure Commission of "'falsely reporting her employer, 'failing to timely report' her in-kind contributions to defeat state ballot initiatives, and with denying to the public 'knowledge of the extent to which' the National Education Association was involved in state elections.'" According to the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, this employee was "on loan" from the NEA at a salary of \$133,000 a year, to administer the program which is currently under prosecution for serving as a "stealth" political action committee and extracting dues from members for political purposes despite laws that forbid such actions.

A Real Challenge for Public Education

On August 3, Urban League president Hugh B. Price addressed his annual member convention. Here's what he had to say about education; which in our view, is both laudatory and a challenge to keep in mind:

"Convincing our children that 'achievement matters' is Task #1 for the new Campaign for African American Achievement. Task #2 is taking elected officials to task if they don't deliver for our children. As consumers of public education, we can no longer accept the status quo in urban schools. Too many of our kids are served too miserably to allow it to continue.

Let me issue a loud and clear warning to all who preside over urban school systems. The forces for revolutionary change are massing on your borders and beginning to make successful forays.

On one flank is the charter school movement, which even includes some of our affiliates. On another flank are the voucher folk. Some districts even are replacing entire faculties of failing schools.

Public education cannot shield itself from the winds of change that are sweeping across our society. American industry has undergone a fundamental restructuring which has sharpened its focus on its customers' needs, on productivity and on bottom line performance. The results are evident in the strong recovery of the U.S. economy.

It's only a matter of time before the same drive for performance and accountability pushes its way into public schools. The move for tougher standards is merely the first wave.

So I say to the urban education establishment, the era of excuses and inertia is over. We hereby put public school teachers, principals, school boards, superintendents and state education commissioners on notice: If urban schools as we know them

continue to fail in the face of all we know about how to improve them, then your customers will be obliged to shop elsewhere for quality education.

We Urban Leaguers believe passionately in public education. But make no mistake. **We love our children** even more. They, not the schools they attend, are our destiny."

Tests and Politics

The Administration's proposal for national tests in reading and math hit some huge snags when Congress returned from its summer break. And while Members began debating and negotiating, we were struck by several, rather sad facts.

1) The Administration, and the president himself, are doing one of those "who me?" in school after school across the country. The president expressed indignation that the tests were not automatically embraced, and suggested that only Congress was involved in politics on this issue. Left unsaid in most popular press accounts is that the president's drive for testing was borne more out of poll results than out of a concern for whether children have opportunities to excel. If the motives were purely the latter, he would have sought to derail the speeding BLOB train that has taken over the contracts and patronage already doled out. There would have been more consideration, as well, to consult states that already have set new, high rigorous standards and are commissioning tests upon which children's performance will be gauged.

2) The "other" party, however, is not innocent, either. Education Committee Chairman Bill Goodling has been on a roll with nonsense about too many tests. While on one hand he's right that we already know much about how children are doing, the tests we do have locally are mainly norm-referenced and not very telling to either schools or parents. Meanwhile, both Houses of Congress have been paralyzed by what they see as a popular issue, and one that they don't quite understand nor have taken the time to learn about.

3) And then there are very unique views, like that of New York Representative Major Owens, who is reported as saying he would support legislation to curtail all funding on these tests because kids in poor areas need more money first. "We should not be stampeded into testing because it looks good in the headlines," Mr. Owens told the *New York Times*. "For the White House and Administration, I'm afraid it's become, 'Let's do something and get the credit for it,' without thinking about the consequences of what they're doing, or the morality." (see CER point #1)

No one knows at this point what will happen in the coming days. This will be a continuing issue in government appropriations negotiations until it is resolved. Even Peter Applebome of the *Times* said on September 10 that "even if it is approved by Congress [the testing program] is traversing so many political landmines in states, cities and school districts that many experts wonder whether it will ever be widely used."

For those policymakers interested in a solution, you might consult recent statements by Bill Bennett, Checker Finn, and Diane Ravitch, whose press conference at

the liberal Brookings Institution on September 10 delivered a message that unless the tests are made independent of the federal bureaucracy and instead made an extension of a more independent body that currently administers the Nation's Report Card, we should be content to let this issue -- like gas -- pass.

From the Trenches

- **Kids Before Cash!** read the T-shirt of a 14-year old Mascoutah, IL freshman who during the first week of school, rode his bike in front of the picket lines of striking teachers. This news, courtesy of the Illinois Charter School Facts, a product of Paul Seibert, an Illinois charter observer, paints a picture of a local union which broke off negotiations the night before school started. The union was demanding a 2% raise over what was being offered, and more than the 45 minutes prep time each day they already have, along with "duty-free lunches." But the biggest demand appears to have been that the unions want the school to require all district teachers to pay union dues. Non-union teachers would be required to pay 95% of dues; in the past, they have not been required to pay at all. As a "concession" to the school board who stands firm against this, the MEA union said that any teachers whose beliefs disallow joining a union can opt to give that money to charity (but not their own pocket-book). Meanwhile, as Seibert reports, the kid on the bike had plans to keep riding while the strike continued, as his math teacher sat in a lawnchair on the picket line.

- The School Administrator, a publication of the association that represents district-level administrators, recently devoted almost an entire issue to skepticism over **charter schools**. As many of us and others we know were seething over much misleading information, and all too-negative a spin on the issue, we ran across some words from Bill Quinn of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL). Bill put our sentiments into context. Some of his remarks, from Web correspondence:

"I liked the compact list you presented of charter school failures. I would have liked it better if you would have put them in some context -- the proportion of failures to successes, the success rates of monopoly school innovations, etc. It would also have been nice when you cited the criminal or incompetent performance of some charter scoundrels if you had also noted how a few monopoly school officials also find themselves charged each year with criminal misappropriation of public funds.

"Most disheartening, however, was realizing that many monopoly school folks still have not come to grips with the real story here -- why do public charter schools exist in the first place?...The self interest of school administrators is very near the surface in these articles. Just look at some of the titles: Passions Run Deep on All Sides; When a Charter Fails; A Cautionary Word about Charters. There is no discussion to help superintendents understand the real and broad-based dissatisfaction many feel...The lack of insight for the real issue is most evident when outrageous quotes are used to present groundless charges: "In times of limited funding, our legislature and governor have chosen to be free-spending with charters." ...More shamefully, [one of the articles] raises unchallenged racism and elitism charges against charters, quoting the executive director of the Washington Association of School Administrators: 'I'm

concerned that, like a private school, a charter school will be selective in its clientele. Personally I think [a number of charter school organizers] want their kids to be with their own type.' Amazing!"

Adds Bill Quinn, "paraphrasing the AASA deputy director, 'What this country needs is an honest debate about charter schools.' What we have, instead, are anti-charter zealots spewing testimonials."

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

Best Friends: Here's a program worthy of a profile this month that is successfully providing guidance and support to girls age 5 - 12, in numerous schools in over 17 major cities nationwide and more, particularly those where teen pregnancy has been a major problem. It's a program that charter schools might want to look at closely.

The Best Friends program presents a clear message of abstinence from sex and rejection of drug use. By forming a Best Friends "club" and involving girls in both cultural and artistic activities and pairing them with role models, girls find comfort and strength from each other and the results are astounding. Best Friends girls are staying abstinent, graduating from high school, and many are going to college. In the District of Columbia program, for example, there is a 1% pregnancy rate among Best Friends girls compared to 26% among their peers in District of Columbia public schools. In an era when young people need all the help they can get to stay in school and avoid additional pressures, this program, hailed by many a school official, and people on the left, right and in the center, is one of those successes that merits replication far and wide. For information, call (202) 822-9266.

U.S. Senator Bob Kerry, a democrat from Nebraska, had this to say about educating children in a June *New Yorker* article about faith-based institutions and those attempting to duplicate their success in public policy: "If I were running a public-school system, I'd sign a contract with the parochial schools — as Mayor Guiliani wanted to do in New York — and have them educate some of the poorest kids. I don't see the First Amendment as so rigid that it prevents us from contracting with people who are getting the job done right.

Education Expo '97 — this November 1st! Over 2,000 parents are expected at a New York City-wide conference to explore "public and private choices school choices for your child." Organized by the Touissant Institute, founded by educator Gail Foster to educate primarily minority parents about individual public and private schools, resources available, and even how to start their own schools. The conference is co-sponsored by the United Parents Association, the Association of Historically Black Independent Schools, the New York Urban League and the New York Christian Times. Among the influential speakers will be Rev. Floyd H. Flake, also currently a democratic representative from Queens, Larry Patrick, a Michigan attorney, charter supporter and former school board member, and others. Call (212) 422-5338 to join this effort.

The Charter School Workbook is here!! By the time you've thoroughly and pensively read through our Back-to-School issue, we should be sitting on top of boxes of this new CER

special publication, aimed at providing *Your Roadmap to the Charter School Movement*, as it is subtitled. The *Workbook* looks at where the charter school movement is, state by state, and where it might be headed. It is chock full of comprehensive but user friendly information on charter school issues from legislation and school research to school successes and obstacles to how-to and where to go. To reserve a copy please call us or send us an e-mail.

And a final announcement:

The Center for Education Reform is pleased to announce the following winners for the 2nd annual Excellence in Journalism Awards:

CATEGORY 1: HARD NEWS

First Place, "Unhappy Days for CCSD Teachers," Ken Ward, *Las Vegas Sun*
Honorable Mention, "The Blackboard Bungle, Jill Stewart," *LA Weekly*

CATEGORY 2: FEATURE WRITING

First Place, "Why Johnny Can't Add, Subtract, Matthew Robinson," *Investors Business Daily*
Honorable Mention, "Will School-To-Work Work?," David Stamps, *Training Magazine*
Honorable Mention, "Resurrecting a School, Lee Nelson," *Quad-City Times*

CATEGORY 3: OPINION/EDITORIAL

First Place, "What's So Special About Special Education?" John Merrow, *Education Week*
Honorable Mention, "Schools, Educators Need Accountability," William McKenzie, *The Dallas Morning News*
Honorable Mention, "Educators or Lobbyists?," David Dickson, *The Washington Times*

CATEGORY 4: SERIES

First Place, "Testing, What's the Point?," Rob Hotakainen, Mary Jane Smetanka, Maureen Smith, *Star Tribune*

CATEGORY 5: SECTION/INSERT

First Place, "Learning Curve I: A Yearlong Poughkeepsie Journal Project - Performance," Anthony DeBarros, Dean DiMarzo, Larry Fisher-Hertz, Mary Beth Pfeiffer, Craig Wolf, *Poughkeepsie Journal*
Honorable Mention, "School Funding Series," Bob Beasley, *This Week Community Newspapers*

GRAND PRIZE, "Parents Want to Know, Jodi Mailander," *The Miami Herald*



As we said when we began this month, there is much already happening not two weeks after the start of the school year. To keep yourself plugged in, energized and motivated, please be sure to check the calendar of events on our Web site so you can be sure to attend events that can possibly help you in your efforts. Until then, we hope you'll review the CER/ICR survey results on the following pages, and be sure to point out to your local newspapers, school officials and policymakers how Americans really view reform and related issues. Keep in touch!

Jeanne Allen

CER 1997 Back to School Special Monthly Letter;
Polling results follow