

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 39**

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Dear Friends:

Lots of reflections on pending issues both nationally and in the states are in store for you this month. We believe it is important to know what's being said by those fighting change, because oftentimes the realities are obscured by the very nature of the beast. Because most of our readers have shown a compelling interest in being in-the-know and participating fully, we offer a glimpse of political nature of the reform debate, as well as our usual odds & ends.



OOOPS!

Those of you who have been with us a long time are no doubt curious about why you may have gotten your September **MONTHLY LETTER** addressed to the wrong person. You either believed that it was an experiment to see whether you were actually reading us each month, or an attack by the NEA mailing gremlins singing a merry tee-hee as they wound their way into our database. Well, it may have been that, or it may have been one of the computer/human errors that our printer is still scratching his head over, but suffice it to say, we sincerely apologize, and ask that if you perhaps didn't get anything at all last month, give us a call. But as every cloud has a silver lining, we did learn that you in fact are watching — and reading — our monthly diatribes, news and fun. And for that, we are eternally grateful!

Talk Shows, Sound Bites and the Blob

Demonstrating that absurdities never seem to cease in this business, we are awestruck by some comments that are made during otherwise serious and often contentious debates on some of the more high-charged reform issues.

Take the statement by a University of Milwaukee, WI professor, who in a discussion on network television about for-profit companies running public schools, maintained that it doesn't work, that "we've been down this yellow brick

road before,” and that such “experimentation” is equivalent to the Tuskegee experiment (which involved a horrendous long-term experiment of maintaining syphilis in black men).

Not to be outdone by this professor, an NEA Vice President, in a discussion on NPR on public-private school choice (a.k.a. vouchers or scholarships), also made the comparison of such experimentation to the Tuskegee experiment, at which point the program’s host took him to task.

Or, not as serious but just as absurd, the statement by the head of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, who told a state news reporter on the subject of standards being implemented in his state that, “the last thing state government should do is expect too much, too soon.”

Finally, a Deputy Chancellor of the New York City public schools, in a forum on why they should or shouldn’t have charter school legislation, commented that such reform is really not necessary in the city, which is already “the font of innovation.” He added (after of course, the perfunctory compliments to show he’s really not anti-charter school as long as those currently in charge have the authority for approving them), “I honestly don’t understand why this is a topic in a city that has [the likes of this innovation]...It’s a controversy we are engaged in because we have to be, when it’s not clear New York has to be in this at all,” suggesting, of course, that everything is just peachy.

Every side has its share of crazies, but PUHLEASE get these guys out of the public lime-light!

Impact

- Demonstrating the impact of **Milwaukee’s own school choice plan**, school board member and self-described radical John Gardner argued earlier last month that the board would not have done the things it has (higher standards, rigorous testing in the basics, more stringent evaluations of teachers) had it not been for the force of the city’s voucher plan, which still exists, in a modest form, pending review by the state supreme court. Said Gardner to radio host Charles Sykes, school choice “has meant a new spirit of aggressive cooperation. Some of the most anti-school choice members of the board have been the most effective and aggressive at approving options within [the Milwaukee schools]. So, I think, in that sense, the competition argument has worked. And it’s incontrovertible.”

- And the **Milwaukee school board** did something else of great interest last month; every member of the board signed a fundraising appeal for the city’s privately-funded scholarship program, which currently pays for half-tuition for 4,500 children to attend a private school of their choice. “Parents have the right and

responsibility to determine the course of their children's education. As members of the Board of MPS, our task is to support them in carrying out that responsibility.

“Regardless of our views about school choice, we believe PAVE's effort to afford disadvantaged families their first choice for quality education is a critical initiative — **not only to help thousands of poor families but to support the reforms MPS is trying to make.**”

- In Albany, similar happenings stunned and gratified reform-watchers nationwide. After a philanthropist offered scholarships to every one of the 458 youngsters at Giffen Elementary School, thought to be among the worst in that city, more than twenty percent of the student body accepted the scholarships. And, the following occurred: Giffen replaced the principal, two assistant principals as well as 12 teachers, the PTA president accepted an **ABC scholarship** for her child, and the head of the Albany NAACP said that “ABC made them take a look at what was happening, or not happening, at Giffen, and take actions they may not otherwise have taken.” (For more info, contact A Better Choice at (518) 383-2977.)
- We suspect that the increase of **1,000 DC schoolchildren** who will benefit from the generosity of an additional \$6 million in the DC private scholarship program may also begin to have an impact on business as usual. Then again, the publicly-funded program being debated by Congress and for which the president has issued a veto threat will no doubt have an even greater impact. Let's just hope the kids have a chance to show us all. (Applicants are urged to call 202-U-Choose.)
- A very popular and nationally recognized charter school is taking its share of hits, with allegations of test tampering being this year's attempt to reduce the credibility of Vaughn's Next Century Charter school, while last year, it was musings about test score declines, without mentioning that special ed and limited English children were now taking the same tests and being counted with others. With little merit to go on, there is a silver lining, once again: as charter expert and Californian Eric Premack suggests, “What is perhaps interesting about the Vaughn situation is that this is probably the first time in California history that anyone [cares] about test scores or whether children are learning. In the rest of the public school system, nobody seems to care that the test scores in too many schools are in the pits and stay there for years (Vaughn was in the sub-basement for decades prior to restructuring and charter efforts)...If folks are starting to pay attention to student performance in a substantive way, **this is perhaps the most important 'evidence' we have seen to date that the charter reform concept works.**” (*Editor's note: not to mention the 'support' the concept immediately engenders in any public forum where people now would rather lie than admit they're not charter fans!*)

Election Time

It's nearing election time in just a few days, and Washington is working over time to push its programs on otherwise unsuspecting Americans. Because the president's testing plan is in jeopardy, for example, and has been opposed by both friend and foe alike, officials have stepped up the rhetoric once more (see earlier references in previous **MONTHLY LETTERS**). Rather than taking into serious consideration the very valid concern that the Department of Education is not capable of administering a rigorous test free from political interference, and that states are very capable (as demonstrated in a dozen states from Virginia to Colorado) of doing the job themselves, Secretary Riley, et al. have taken to the air claiming opposition to these tests will hold our children back, and stop progress in its tracks.

In launching an unprecedented attack on school choice and its multi-dimensional backers in Washington, in inner cities, and beyond, Riley's Department also issued a "white paper" outlining its opinion that (surprise!) vouchers don't work. Riley made comments that what works is spending money on programs like Success for All. Not said is that such programs have been around for many a year, and available to purchase to any school, yet because of a lack of incentive to do so, too many schools have gone about business as usual. Then another publication released on October 20 by the Department concludes that tougher math courses mean more learning. (Tomorrow they'll discover that the sun rises every day!)

So what's our beef? We have and do know what works, and there's no dearth of know-how, programs or research that tells us what we should be doing. The point is, with all the human effort, money and time expended, in too many places it's not happening. The reason — as many a charter school today knows — is because of the lack of authority, incentive, and consequence, combined with bureaucratic interference. Which is why the quest for expanding educational opportunities to children is not only important as an end in and of itself, but as a catalyst for change that is currently changing the landscape of school reform.

The same people who fight reform take up the flag now for high standards, ensuring high-quality teachers, and "proven" programs. Perhaps the rhetorical change is a result of the obvious frustration — and growing impatience — of a public tired of business-as-usual. One could argue that even the muted call for reform wouldn't exist were it not for those who challenge the status quo. One could also argue that it sends a signal that despite less money, less organization and less clout, the reform movement is giving the establishment a run for their money. Well, we all need a little exercise now and again!

From the Trenches

- What's so interesting about the same 12 groups forming yet another alliance and declaring themselves ready to reform public education? Look for **The Learning First Alliance** coming to a community near you, replete with not only the big-eleven education organizations, but the addition of the Education Commission of the States to boot. A look back in the past shows that there have been several such incarnations of these groups, including a '95 Education First Alliance, yet this one made national headlines because this time, they have a paid staffer. Go figure.
- Phi Delta Kappa, a professional society for educators that does the yearly polling with Gallup (that CER's surveys trump!) had set up two half-day workshops for Topeka, KS and Springfield, IL entitled "**Charters, Vouchers and For-Profit Education — Why Privatization Won't Save American Schools.**" Problem is, they had to be canceled for a lack of enrollment "enthusiasm" (only three people were signed up for each!). Take heart, though: they will offer the same "seminar" in the spring, April 27-30, in NC, GA, IL, and WI.
- **Clueless in Idaho** (like Sleepless in Seattle — get it?): Despite a wide array of experience and research attesting to the effectiveness of charter schools, some key lawmakers in Idaho oppose charters. Senate Democratic Leader Marguerite McLaughlin worries, according to the *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, about elitism, and about attracting large number of privately schooled children to charters. "If our public schools aren't addressing and meeting the needs, we need to make the improvements there first before we go and create a new district in a school district." "Responded Freshman Sen. Jack Riggs, a Coeur d'Alene Republican, 'Haven't we been doing that for a few decades?'" And not to be outdone, Moscow, ID Superintendent Jack M. Hill told a legislative review committee that charter schools might conflict with the state constitution.
- Mesa, AZ puts best foot forward: In ads run throughout the state, **Mesa public school officials** invited children to come to the "best public schools" in the state. Acknowledging charters as the essential reason for the ad campaign, other districts also conceded the need for some healthy competition. "It's just like any other business. If we just sit idly by, they're (charters) going to be in the public eye and we won't. We have to stay competitive.
- Where's the Outrage??: On a map in the October *American School Board Journal*, showing the 13 states that "now or soon will require their high school graduates to pass exit exams before receiving their diplomas. The exams are BASED on at least **10TH GRADE** academic standards." **Diploma = 10th grade??** No wonder colleges have to offer remedial education.

- School Boards worried about losing money on charter schools — or whining, as is the case in some jurisdictions that don't understand **money is for children**, not systems — should quiz the Beaufort County, SC school board, who is currently wrestling with the state over the approval of SC's first potential charter school. Despite being a state with a relatively strong law, the Palmetto State is not likely to see much charter activity if the following shenanigans continue. Beaufort didn't like Lighthouse's proposal, so when Lighthouse appealed the denial, the State Board overturned it thereby giving Lighthouse the green light. But something happened on the way to the reform movement: The county board decided to challenge the State Board's decision in both state and federal court, and to date, has spent over \$200,000 to do so.

- **On the dumbing down of American education:** A three-part series in the *Washington Times* this month provides yet another reality check for those who still see no problem in public education. One article begins thusly: "A baffled Pennsylvania parent called a member of her local school board about a math paper her child brought home. The paper explained that there were four birds in a nest and one flew away. The question: How do you think the bird felt that flew away from the next? 'Who cares?' snaps Fran Bevan, the Norwin school board member who got the parent's call. 'Why even ask this question?'"

Why indeed? But as Marianne Jennings, Arizona professor and mother recently remarked in the *Wall Street Journal*, fuzzy math has taken over. She found her daughter was getting an A in algebra without knowing the equations. But upon close examination of her daughter's Addison-Wesley text, dubbed the book "rain-forest algebra," according to the *Times*. Former Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd took to his Senate chamber to rail against what he called this "odd amalgam of math, geography and language masquerading as an algebra textbook."

Not to be outdone by these "fuzzy" stories, I asked a superintendent friend why, upon seeing my third-grader's math text, there were over 21 'multicultural advisors' listed on the credits page. He remarked that publishers need to ensure their books get adopted in states like Texas and California which have large numbers of minorities. I remarked that the book doesn't need pictures and multi-cultural math to be effective. It happens also to be an Addison-Wesley text.

- Speaking of dumbing down, there was once again talk of "turning the corner" on the road to nationwide school improvement this month over National Assessment of Educational Progress **science achievement scores**, despite a rather alarming picture. Looked at in the proper light, one-third of 4th graders, 40 percent of 8th graders, and 43 percent of 12th graders lack basic science skills. Proficiency, defined as having competence in challenging subject matter, was obtained by only 27 percent of 8th graders and 25 percent of 12th graders. Students in the District of Columbia scored the worst, with 81 percent of 8th graders scoring below basic.

Selected other 8th grade scores (by percentage):

Alabama:	53 below basic;	47 basic;	18 proficient;	1 advanced
California:	53	47	20	1
Colorado:	32	68	32	2
Indiana:	35	65	30	2
Mass:	31	69	37	4
Rhode Island:	41	59	26	2
Texas:	45	55	23	1
National:	39	32	26	3
National 4th:	33	38	26	3
National 12th:	43	36	18	3

- The **Association of American Educators**, a non-union alternative for teachers, offers the following insights into a survey of 3,272 of its members:

- 82% thought block grants to the states a good idea;
- 51% liked school-to-work programs with Germany as an example;
- 46% did not feel national standards and measurements were needed;
- 71% like uniforms;
- 47% think the “army of volunteers” to help reading is a good idea;
- 62% say Yes to vouchers;
- 50% like charter schools (and 33% are unfamiliar with concept!);
- 45% are in favor of alternative certification; and,
- 43% think competency testing would be effective.

A very diverse set of attitudes, showing that there is definitely room for more than one organization to represent teachers, and definitely more diversity of thought among teachers than one would think from traditional unions.

Poetic Wisdom

“In recent years, I have had prime rib in Washington, swallow’s nest in Hong Kong...Yet the most memorable meal of my life consisted of a bowl of rather basic bean soup. The year was 1945. The place: Budapest, Hungary. After several months spent in cellars, more than a million people tried to figure out how to live in bombed-out buildings without windows, water, heat, food, electricity, telephones or transportation...At last a footbridge was thrown across the...Danube. Near the bridgehead on the Buda side, three old ladies set up a couple of vast cauldrons in which a soup of beans was cooking. Thousands of us stood in line to get a bowl — our only meal in the middle of a cold and windy day of pilgrimage. Such was life when, a few weeks later, the schools reopened. I sat with dozens of other hungry nine-year olds in a classroom with no windows or heating — only a blackboard and

broken pieces of chalk manipulated by our teacher, who, like the rest of us, had one faded outfit to wear. But she knew a great deal, and how to pass it on. In three months, we covered the curriculum for the year. From that class came world-renowned musicians, a chief surgeon at John Hopkins, a department chair at Dartmouth...to mention but a few.

“Given the foregoing, it is difficult to view our ongoing debate on education as relevant. Money? All the riches of the planet could not solve our problems. Standards, testing — how will those help when it is the framework we have lost altogether? To restore it we will need many more parents who take an interest, teachers who have knowledge to impart, and students who are told in no uncertain terms what is expected of them. What we don’t need is a Department of Education that spends its time and our money on ‘enforcement’ (what in heavens name has enforcement got to do with education?) and on churning out thousands of pages about speech codes and sexual harassment. America used to be a country where children walked miles to a little schoolhouse in which dedicated teachers guided them to self-sufficiency, producing the kind of self esteem which comes solely from work well done. Families used to make do with less...That was when education was an opportunity and not a ‘right...’

“The reality is that money has come to stand in the way of education. Remember the saying ‘it’s worth as much as you paid for it?’ Because we make it appear as if there was unlimited money — other people’s money — to pay for their basic education, our children are wasting their formative years. If citizens paid for it directly, they would make sure teachers are competent. If citizens paid for it directly, they would make sure the curriculum reflects common sense. Those prospects ought to be worth supporting school choice...

“It seems that politicians are discussing everything under the sun, except the two points that, alone, matter: What are our children to learn, and who is going to teach it to them? In this most hypocritical of ages, it is as if we were debating the pros and cons of “haute cuisine” while our children are no longer even provided bean soup.”

Excerpts of a piece by Balint Vazsonyi, concert pianist and historian, and senior fellow of the Potomac Foundation and director of the Center for the American Founding, in an op-ed in The Washington Times, September 23, 1997.



This month marks the beginning of the Center’s fifth year, and we want to say how much we appreciate all you do to make our work possible, rewarding and fun. We are fortunate to have a wealth of resources and good information to draw on in our efforts. When we celebrate, you’ll be the first to know. See you next month!

Jeanne Allen