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MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 4

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Dear Friends:

As we went to press for this issue of the Monthly Letter, several efforts were still pending or about to be unveiled. You'll find information about specific state efforts, some Congressional rumblings about education, and progress made in promoting reform to the media.

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State-Watch

We reported last month that the Arizona legislature was on the verge of going into a special session to consider an education reform bill that would, among other things, extend the provisions of a little-known law allowing public school students to use a voucher at the private school of their choice. As the month opened, the leaders of the reform movement in Arizona were still one vote short in the House and three votes short in the Senate of the number needed to win.

Several Republicans whom national and state choice proponents tried to bring on board did not budge. Thus efforts have been shifted to Hispanic Democrats to bring in the needed support. Proponents from both within and outside the state have been making some progress with these individuals who understand that it is their constituents who have the most to gain from school choice. The Center has helped put the Arizona leadership in contact with several key choice-supporting Hispanic legislators and leaders from other states who share the concerns of their colleagues in the Southwest, and has been brainstorming with them on how best to bring their constituencies to support the issue.

On February 15th in Connecticut, Democratic Majority Leader Tom Luby will stand with Democratic Representatives Eddie Garcia (a police sergeant in Hartford) and Andrea Jackson-Brooks (an African American legislator) to introduce a school reform bill that permits local districts to decide independently how and whether to implement school choice. This is

one of the most promising coalitions we've yet to see; and so far their bill is solid, too (should be, since yours truly drafted it).

Washington Woes

Just when you thought it was safe to ignore Congress, this august body moves on two separate fronts to undermine state reform proposals and efforts to strengthen our education system.

First, President Clinton's Goals 2000 has just about sailed through Congress untouched. When the Senate got hold of it, they introduced several amendments to make the federal imposition of new rules weaker, but all failed. Most remarkably, an amendment to authorize \$30 million of the bill's \$500 million for six choice demonstration projects failed by a 42-51 margin. Voting for the Dan Coats-Joe Lieberman amendment were Democratic Senators Sam Nunn of Georgia, Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, Robert Byrd of West Virginia (Chairman of the Appropriations Committee) and Bill Bradley of New Jersey. These Senators should be congratulated by letter and phone for their choice support, and encouraged in their efforts. The Center has sent a letter with some information, and we encourage others to do the same.

As Goals 2000 was being considered by the full Senate, the House Education and Labor Committee was meeting to decide the fate of the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). NAGB is the bi-partisan body that oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the nation's only barometer of student progress. NAEP recently set proficiency levels of what children ought to know by certain grades, which obviously did not sit well with the education establishment. Thus when Clinton's reauthorization of elementary and secondary education programs was considered by the subcommittee with jurisdiction, NAGB was axed and authority for NAEP was given to a mid-level bureaucrat within the bowels of the Department of Education. In another unusual alliance (these are getting more usual all the time), Republicans were planning to introduce an amendment restoring Clinton's original language continuing NAEP and its governing board, which he, his First Lady and his Secretary of Education heartily endorse. At press time, the committee was in need of three additional Democratic votes to secure NAEP's autonomy. Center Board member Checker Finn did a marvelous piece for the Wall Street Journal on this subject. It is enclosed in this mailing.

The good news is that Congress is not entirely without some valor. The Senate on January 25 held a hearing to explore the private contracting-out movement, and testimony was provided by Education Alternatives, Inc., Chairman John Golle and The Edison Project President Benno C. Schmidt, Jr. Senator Arlen Specter, who presided over the hearing of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Education, told a Washington Post reporter that schools

"should explore all options." The Administration also said that it wanted to give these possibilities a chance. The only wet blanket on the day and the issue was the American Federation of Teachers' Bella Rosenberg, Mr. Shanker's right hand. Rosenberg told the committee that private ventures have no track record, are likely to lead to financial scandals, and are not necessary given that there are "widely acclaimed" models of school reform around the country. Where?

Thankfully, the AFT and its colleagues in the establishment are alone in their skepticism. The private contracting-out movement is growing by leaps and bounds. Janet Beales of the California-based Reason Foundation has done a remarkable study on this phenomenon. She can be reached at (510) 930-6027.

Kudos to Mackinac in Michigan

Michigan's premiere think tank, the Mackinac Center, did a wonderful thing late last month. It praised the Michigan Education Association for "Management Excellence." The MEA apparently has a number of contracts with both union and non-union private firms to provide food, custodial, security, mailing and other services.

The MEA was not too thankful for the praise, calling it a "left-handed" compliment. We think Mackinac's timely praise is worth copying in every state, and encourage other state policy groups to provide our friends in the media and general public with a more realistic account of how the unions operate. While they crusade against such entrepreneurial enterprises, they are often contracting out their own services, or sending the children they've given up on to private schools to do the job -- better for less.

This hypocrisy is our best weapon in the battle to debunk their politicking. Good job, Mackinac!

Speaking of Unions...

- The NEA has created the Center for the Preservation of Public Education (CPPE) to "centralize the fight against voucher proposals nationwide. [CPPE] will continue to monitor developments in the states, formulate strategies, provide technical assistance to NEA affiliates, and serve as a clearinghouse for information. NEA members who are confronted with voucher initiatives in their own states or who simply want more information about the national voucher movement are encouraged to contact the Center for the Preservation of Public Education at NEA Center."
- The California Teacher's Union has warned its local affiliates that "Charter Schools Can Cost You Your Job!" They've issued tomes on the effect

of Charter Schools on employment practices, union rights, curriculum and governance. The message: Charter Schools are not regulated in these areas, and such issues are left to the individual school's discretion. Therefore, such schools must be bad for you.

This sort of propaganda is not new, but it's the latest example of the ridiculous becoming the absurd as the NEA stands alone in its vehement opposition to all Charter School legislation. The more this extremism is conveyed to the public and to teachers, the easier it will be for real reform to be accepted and encouraged by these folks.

Selling That Message

Last but not least, we'd like to tell you what the Center is doing to sell the message of reform. We've implemented an aggressive public relations strategy to get reform covered more broadly and fairly in the popular press. Through the last two months, we've met with key reporters from over a dozen newspapers and journals, including USA Today, National Journal, and U.S. News and World Report, and have begun to make the rounds among the more formidable family publications, such as Family Circle and Family Life. While we've already met with the producers at MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, our next target audience is the news magazine shows.

Our message to these folks has not been simply to promote the Center. I doubt we'd have seen as many for as long. Rather our message has been to sell them on outstanding examples and revolutionary precedents in education reform to encourage their coverage, and to put them in touch with the knowledgeable people who can discuss these subjects. Few knew, for example, the breadth and depth of the Charter Schools movement, or that dozens of community people of all walks of life are working together to organized these new schools. None of them knew at all about the 15 private scholarship programs around the country -- one of our goals is to get a story on these programs placed.

We continue to provide our contacts with critical information about reform and new hooks to grab their attention. Thanks to one of our press alerts, Mary Jordan of the Washington Post picked up the story about private contracting-out and used much of what we gave her to formulate her story. We hope to continue to have the same behind-the-scenes impact. We'll keep you posted.

Keep your fingers crossed on Arizona!



Leanne