

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

The election is over, Thanksgiving-time is upon us, and much work remains to be done to educate people as to why we have the problems we have, what we can do to solve them, and how best to travel that road. That is, of course, unless you have *NO* concern for making our schools better, for returning power to people, or for energizing the public to take action to transform public education.... which means, of course, you shouldn't be reading this letter. But if you are, you're doing something right, and rest assured, you'll find something here that makes you stand up and want your voice to count.



An Election Sleeper

Nearly invisible from any national news exposés on the elections (which, quite frankly, were as uninspiring for us as the elections were for the 60% of people who chose not to vote) was a nice little education reform-friendly success way out in the wild west, in Colorado.

While various interest groups tried to convince political news commentators that they succeeded in knocking down tons of people who dare to upset the status quo, Colorado's newly elected Governor and Lt. Governor couldn't be farther from the status quo. Governor-elect Bill Owens is best known as the "father" of charter schools in the Golden State, while Lieutenant Governor-elect Joe Rodgers is an attorney who is involved in a lawsuit with the state on behalf of over 3,000 minority Denver parents who want choice for their children.

Now, granted, the NEA and its friends were focussed on defeating a tax credit initiative on the ballot, but if they really had the clout and power they claim, would Owens and Rodgers now be planning their inaugurations?

Of course, there is the dynamic duo of Bush and Brogan down in the Sunshine State. Jeb Bush, someone both committed to public education and opening up choice to those less fortunate is a charter founder, an ally of the little guy, and not exactly what

you'd call the unions' cup-of-tea. Frank Brogan, the Education Commissioner, led the fight in Florida for tenure reform, charters, more choice for parents, and so on.

In fact, there aren't many politicians that found themselves out of a job *just* because their views on education were at odds with the local union or school boards association. Lots of people lost state and national races, but the vast majority were defeated because they had other baggage or didn't have a solid educational plan, not because they liked real education reform.

This provides a valuable lesson for people who care: the opponents are often paper tigers (snarl), and honest, sincere education reformers who connect with people, articulate their vision and demonstrate leadership will command the American people more than empty rhetoric and negative advertising from the interest groups. Think about it. Please.

The Return of the Jedi....

A major victory was scored last month when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a June decision by the Wisconsin Supreme Court which validated Milwaukee's nearly ten-year-old, evolutionary parental choice program. Like the famed Jedi warriors of that modern folk tale who survive and flourish because they're employing the powers of "the force" in the furtherance of right and good, the Milwaukee reform has continued to bounce back and survive repeated threats to the educational survival of scores of children. While the lawyers report and hope that the high court will eventually take up and rule positively on one of a number pending choice cases working their way up the judicial ladder, this one, folks, stands as the law of the land.

...and The Empire Strikes Back

Having decided that the fate of their own interests is in peril from motivated parents, passionate civil rights activists and disenchanted teachers, the Blob* has co-opted some leaders of the mainline Protestant churches to denounce real power for poor people, i.e. full school choice.

At their annual conference November 11, leaders of the National Council of Churches organization voted to denounce the concept that vouchers bring educational hope and opportunity to deserving people, and to pronounce that "public money should go only to public schools." This puts them at odds with several other religious organizations. Equally important, it puts them at odds with most Americans.

We'd like to break bread with the National Council of Churches, and suggest some additional resolutions to make their new position wholly consistent. Herewith (that's resolution-speak for "time to get serious, buddy") we propose the following resolutions for their adoption, and ask that you take this to your own local pastor or church leader for their reaction:

- We hereby pledge to require all congregation members to send their children to only the traditional public school to which they are assigned, including public school teachers, private school teachers, all clergy and laypeople, AND
- We hereby pledge to close the doors to any person, individual, or child whose tuition at one of our member schools or other educational operations is paid for in whole or in part by any scholarship which derives a tax deduction from regular tax payments. We further pledge to reject tuition which is paid by income derived from public jobs (i.e. any government subsidized job directly or indirectly, including public school positions), welfare, aid to families with dependent children, etc., AND
- We hereby demand that public schools stop buying anything privately invented, invested-in, or generating any profit for anyone, including but not limited to: textbooks (especially Addison-Wesley math), bricks and mortar, pencils, pens, paint, paper, bulletin boards, educational software, computers, desks, dress-up clothes for 4-year olds, science lab equipment, musical instruments, song sheets, football uniforms, and, as Yul Brenner would say (in "The King and I"), "etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."

****Why We Call it the Blob***

Back by popular demand, here's why we feel justified, happy, and even a little giddy about using the term Blob to refer to our well-intentioned but wholly misguided friends in the education establishment. We wrote this back in the February– March 1996 *Monthly Letter* – with many a mention of the Blob in *Monthly Letters* before and since — and given that our readership and friends continue to grow (and that even the old-timers' minds can use a refresher every so often) we thought we'd remind you. Note: This is just an excerpt. The full text appears on our web site at www.edreform.com/letter/Febmar96.htm, or is available in print for a large donation by calling the Center. So, the term Blob...

“...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.”

In the Trenches

- **Gains for Poor Children...**A major study by a Harvard professor and the Mathematica Research group found that poor children who transferred to private schools with partial, privately-funded scholarships performed slightly better on standardized tests from last year to this year. Some 1,300 children whose names were chosen by lottery and thus are part of the New York City School Choice Scholarships program were compared to a random sample of 1,300 children who applied but were not selected, thus ensuring comparability between the two groups. The study's directors said that more such comparisons are needed to determine where the success is coming from. These results, however, are cause for cautious optimism.
- **Charter School teachers...**A November 13 *Raleigh News & Observer* article entitled “Most charters fall short of teacher standards,” fell short of the facts, due not to shoddy reporting but to the state's shoddy information. Writer Tim Simmons said that “...In the first statewide evaluation...state educators found that half of the 235 teachers working in charter schools last year were not licensed. State law requires that 75 percent of the teachers in each charter elementary school and 50 percent of the teachers in each charter high school be licensed.”

Several charters immediately challenged the state's figures. “... Regarding Healthy Start Academy [the state's most successful charter school, serving more than 90% at-risk children] the report was completely false. Last year, at Healthy Start Academy, seven out of nine teachers were certified... This academic year, 11 out of 14 teachers are certified at Healthy Start Academy. Also, our teachers have an average of six years experience, not 1.8 as reported. It is frightening to note that the mathematically-challenged bureaucrats at the Department of Public Instruction are the ones who set math standards for public schools. In our opinion, they flunked. We demand an apology from the Department of Public Instruction, and we challenge them to stop looking for ways to close down charter schools.”

And Raleigh's Magellan Charter “[has] no more than two or three unlicensed teachers, while the state claims six of ...17 are not certified,” according to a teacher from another charter. He adds, “It is questionable logic to link percentages of certified teachers directly with classroom excellence. The whole idea of charters is to find innovative and effective ways to teach and learn. It is possible that non-certified teachers who have expertise in a subject, a desire to teach and the ability to inspire young people may succeed at least as well as a teacher with official certification.”

Needless to say, the union was ready to pounce. And supporters of charter schools in NC, who are overwhelmingly Democratic, are hoping the states' newly constituted legislature will not fall prey to blob-promoted proposals to limit the growth

of charter schools to 4% of district enrollment and other damaging stuff. All eyes are on State Senator Wib Gulley, a sponsor of the largely bi-partisan 1996 charter school law.

- **Progress in one of the nation's weaker law states...**The Idaho *Spokesman Review* this month reported that the Moscow Charter School received school board approval last week, while the "Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy organizers plan to open a college-preparatory high school for 200 students in September. They say traditional public schools don't give students the academic rigor necessary to compete at the nation's top colleges. Academy students will have longer school days and school years, wear uniforms and be discouraged from having after-school jobs... Lang's charter was not approved by the Moscow School Board until the day before school started. But that wasn't the only thing that made it difficult to start the school. Idaho's charter school legislation, some experts [that's us!] say, is among the worst in the country for starting up schools."

- **Parents like America!...**We wanted to pass on the following news from historian and school reformer Diane Ravitch: "Public Agenda's latest report is titled 'A Lot to Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children to Learn about America,' and it is superb. It documents tremendous patriotism among parents who are African-American, Hispanic, and recent immigrants. They believe that it is 'a privilege' to be an American, and they want the schools to teach their kids about what we all have in common as Americans. It also finds widespread antipathy to bilingual education among all parent groups, regardless of their ethnic background. It is really a fascinating report from the nation's parents to its policymakers. It should soon be on Public Agenda's website at www.publicagenda.org."

- **For parents wanting to know more about reading and math...** and other important subjects and what's good and what's not, there's a new book out from the California-based Hoover Institution at Stanford University by Williamson (wild Bill) Evers, entitled "**What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms.**" Nobel laureates and school officials alike have praised it, and our favorite chapters carry the reading and math debacles and important research into how children learn. The research and evidence is compelling and easy to read, and you should plan on copying key pages to your favorite teacher, school or policy maker. Call Hoover at 650-723-3373 to get your copy.

- **In the News...**Our beltway reading produced (among other things) two news stories that are indicative of why so many feel obligated to act on alternatives to the status quo. Very brief excerpts follow:

Mother Challenges Law of Students as Graders, The Washington Post, 10/14/98

"....A [Tulsa, OK] college-educated mother of four was not familiar with the common practice of students grading each other's work until she moved to this area...last year. But when her 12-year old son came home humiliated after classmates ridiculed him for scoring 47 percent on a student-graded quiz, she learned all she need to know."

The district's response, unsatisfactory in the mother's estimation, led to a lawsuit: "It is really a matter of local control. This district would be pleased to work with the parents on an individual basis to deal with a particular child's reaction. However, they will not do away with a procedure for all teachers and students that is an effective classroom tool."

Who Will Teach Johnny to Read? Wall Street Journal, 11/9/98

"About 30% of first-time college students take remedial courses because they can't read, write or do math adequately. At community colleges, the percentage is often much higher — and rising."

Advise and Consent

Each month the *American School Board Journal* poses a question to its readers, and later prints responses to help guide school board members through often "prickly" situations. For instance last month, they asked, "What would you do if...a parent asked you to challenge a teacher's grading scale?"

Well, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so starting this month, and a few times each year, we're going to do our own Q&A series devoted to helping reformers try to figure out what to do about "sticky" situations. This month we have three, and here are the rules. Please mail, e-mail (cer@edreform.com) or fax (202-822-5077) your response (no longer than 5-10 sentences in length please), and we'll print the best. We will not print your name if you so request, but we must require that you include your name with your submission, as well as contact information, for verification and all sorts of other legal reasons that we can't even begin to understand. So, to any or each one of the following, please write your best advice to share with our tens of thousands of readers:

Scenario One:

A school boards association helps to start a coalition to oppose charter schools in its state. They take valid information published by another group, and twist it and take it out of context in an attempt to discredit the state's charter law. They misstate the facts and analysis (supplied by a pro-charter group) so that lawmakers mistakenly think no one nationwide likes their charter law. They distribute this misleading information at legislative hearings, public forums and to the press.

Scenario Two:

A school boards association director spends most of his time trying to discredit pro-reform groups rather than educating his members about important policy decisions they may have to make and how best to govern a school.

Scenario Three:

A school board member (or several thousand actually) gets elected, thinks he or she is going to make a difference in the lives of children, only to find out that the association to which he or she belongs is more interested in preserving a failed system and jobs than in helping members be the best school board member they can be – by working to bring the best education to their community’s children.

What would you do — or perhaps already have done?? Hurry! Operators are standing by!

Happy Birthday to Us

We just celebrated our five-year anniversary. We were joined by a few hundred valiant and dedicated individuals for a special dinner tribute to some of reform’s unsung heroes and for an inspirational conference highlighting the stories, the struggles and the hopes that reformers nationwide share. Next month, we’ll be bringing you our special anniversary double-edition of the *Monthly Letter* (which corresponds with No. 50!) with a complete report on our birthday events, excerpts from CER’s outstanding national conference and highlights from our Salute to the Nation’s Unsung Education Heroes. But before that happens it’s time for...

The Annual Fund Drive!!!! (sort of)

Jerry Lewis is back stage, and Sally Struthers was occupied this year, but for those of you constantly wondering “how can I help that great group?,” don’t forget we give you that little tidy envelope for a reason each month, and even if you can’t contribute financially (*please* — **we don’t expect you to if you can’t**) perhaps you can give us the name of someone else who will benefit from our message. Remember, we extract no dues and sell our publications at or below the cost of production and mailing (and donate many as well), and while we have benefited from the generosity of hundreds of people like you, as well as various foundations and companies, we could always do more with more. You won’t get this appeal very often, but it is near the end of the year, and some of you, I’m sure, could use a write off!

(And by the way, will the blob guy who keeps writing these anonymous {it’s always interesting when they don’t sign their name!} notes get a grip and recognize that our message and our work is supported by thousands of very normal, ordinary individuals. No skeletons, here, Joe! Try the conspiracy theory somewhere else...Word has it that Ken Starr needs one!)



In the meantime, let us give you Thanks for all *you* do in the life of your children, those you serve and those whom, by your interest and commitment, you might never meet but who nonetheless reap the benefits of your effort. Till the next holidays are upon us,

Jeanne Allen