

Monthly Letter to Friends of
The Center for Education Reform Special Anniversary Issue
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5th Anniversary Celebration
& Salute to the Nation's Unsung Education Heroes

and
American Education: The Next 15 Years
A national conference

October 27-28, 1998

Introduction

Five years ago, the Center for Education Reform opened its doors. We recognized that parents all over America wanted the best education possible for their children. But we also knew that parents often lacked the information they needed to transform schools caught in a one-size fits all trap. They wanted innovation, and change, and they wanted choices.

Throughout the country, parents by the thousands were coming up with new ideas, challenging the educational establishment. But sharing that valuable information from one community to the next was a hit-or-miss proposition. What was needed was a place where people could come to learn from one another, to give each other encouragement and support.

The Center for Education Reform stepped in to fill that void and today, more children than ever before have a choice. Parents are discovering that they can have an impact. Teachers and schools have better programs to choose from. Stronger standards, more accountability and bigger rewards for success are becoming the norm, rather than the exception.

On October 27 & 28, 1998, the Center celebrated five years of progress, and the efforts and accomplishments of those thousands of dedicated people all

over the United States who have given of themselves to improve education everywhere.

In particular, we celebrated the work of seven very special people who represent among them the breadth and variety to be found in the education reform movement today.

You will learn about those people and others, who most Americans don't know about, at least not yet. But they're heroes of a reform movement that's now moving the very foundation of American education in communities from coast to coast.

We are pleased to bring you this special anniversary, expanded edition of The Monthly Letter to Friends highlighting the achievements of reformers nationwide, and in salute to your own commitment and dedication to the children you serve. R

Pictured on front cover: The Colin Powell Academy Children's Choir members Eddie Beale, Devon Person, and Toney Turner.

The Case for Radical Reform

By Howard Fuller

Howard Fuller, former Milwaukee Superintendent of Schools and founder of the Institute For the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, issued a dramatic wake-up call for the conference and called us to recognize the urgency of school reform. In the following excerpts from his speech, Dr. Fuller offers eight points setting the framework for the reform debate.

Number One: Our struggle has to always be about children.

While I believe that the current system works well for many kids the current system DOES NOT work well for a significant number of kids, many of whom are poor and are kids of color. We cannot lose a single one of these kids. As long as there is a child out there who cannot read, who cannot write, who cannot compute, who cannot think, who can not analyze, we have to do this work.

Number Two: In order to help those kids who need help the most, we need a

radical departure from our current system of education.

We have to create an entirely different system. The most powerful innovations in education must occur in the classroom between teachers and children. In order to be a successful teacher today, you have to break rules to educate children.

Number Three: There are a myriad of strategies out there that could make a difference for our children. Their potential impact will be diminished if we do not find ways to empower poor parents to be able to exercise influence on the nature and direction of their children's education.

The height of hypocrisy in America is for people whose children are taken care of to oppose choice for poor parents. They argue that to let these people go means that you would destroy the system. The question is — Is it about the system or is it about our children? Choice is not the issue in America. The issue is who has choice.

Number Four: We must be totally committed to empowering people who now lack power. We must change the complexion of the debate.

We have to bring people to the table whose children are affected everyday. We have to understand that when you have a strategy of empowerment it means you truly do hear the voices of the disenfranchised.

Number Five: We must work as hard on ensuring that we have excellent options as we do to make sure the options are available.

We have to be absolutely clear and firm that this movement is about improving student achievement. It is not about making excuses.

There are 3 things you must have if a system is to be accountable:

H Standards. It is actually possible to write them in a language that people can understand?

H There has to be a way to assess whether the standards are being met.

H Consequences. You don't have a system of accountability if the only people held accountable for bad teaching are the children.

Number Six: This is going to be a long struggle, and the protectors of the status quo are not going to go quietly into the night.

For them it is about power and about control.

Number Seven: We must understand the impact of things that are happening to our poorest children outside of the schools.

While poverty cannot be used for an excuse not to educate our children, you also cannot ignore the impact of not being white and poor in America. It does have an impact on your life's chances. Poverty, crime, hunger and gangs are all factors in these children's lives, and those of us who are out here for them have got to fight to deal with those conditions as hard as we fight to deal with those conditions once they get into the building.

Number Eight: We must tell no lies and claim no easy victories.

The difference in our movement has to be "If you do not succeed with kids then you should not exist." What we have to do is, we have to tell the truth about what is happening. Every time we don't tell the truth, we play a part in destroying these kids' lives.

We are committed to the truth — to our children — and to the notion that they can learn, and that we can turn this around for all of our children. R

(The entire text of Howard Fuller's speech is available from the Center.)

Stories From The Front

Chester Finn, Jr.
CER Director, Moderator
Norman Atkins
North Star Academy Charter School
Jackie Rosswurm
Lighthouse Charter School
Ray Jackson
ATOP Academy

The trials and tribulations of opening and operating a charter school were

gleamed from three vastly different stories. Yet each of our “Stories from the Front’ demonstrates that with perseverance, dedication and hard work, charter schools succeed in providing even the most needy students with the kind of education they deserve.

To establish Lighthouse Charter School in Beaufort County, South Carolina, Jackie Rosswurm said the most vital step was in building support in the community. “It needs to be a movement about a large group of people,” Rosswurm said. Six meetings and hundreds of supporters later, the charter application was written for a school serving 414 students in grades K-8. It eventually solicited 520 applications for those 414 slots.

But the overwhelming support of parents and the community was not enough to allow Lighthouse to prevail. What began with a dream is now locked up in the court. First, the school board denied their application, forcing them to appeal to the state board, where it won unanimous approval. The local school board then appealed to the circuit court, where the state board’s decision to permit the charter was overturned. Attempts to work with the school board were in vane. Finally, recognizing the power struggle was about more than just opening one school, Rosswurm and her fellow-Lighthouse organizers have appealed to the state supreme court, where it has yet to be heard.

Reflecting back on the two-year process, Rosswurm concluded, “Yes, we’ve made mistakes, but I don’t think any blatant errors. If we had it to do all over again would we? In a heartbeat. Have we made a difference? Conversations about education that have never taken place before in Beaufort County, South Carolina have taken place now [and] we look forward to becoming a charter school in the state of South Carolina.”

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After trying to get practices he developed in successfully turning around a South Phoenix (AZ) school implemented in other schools in Phoenix and being told he was crazy, Ray Jackson quit the traditional public school system and ultimately opened the ATOP Academy, one of Arizona’s original charter schools. “ I paid a dear price because people went after me and tried to destroy my reputation and my commitment for practicing education.”

Today, the ATOP Academy has two campuses, over 360 students in grades K-8 (80% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch), a 95% attendance rate, and a student body that truly understands why they go to school.

“At ATOP Academy, our children come first, even if you look at our

organizational chart,” said Jackson. “All children can learn. All children - irregardless of their ethnicity, irregardless of their socioeconomic status, all children can achieve academic success once you teach them how to learn and how to use a standard set of tools. ...We teach children a very systematic way for actually approaching learning.”

ATOP’s approach merges the cognitive and effective domains of learning whereby children come to school “to learn how to learn,” a concept which is reinforced through a daily script by each teacher each morning. “We teach them how to develop questions using who, what, where, why and how,” he adds.

Jackson, who has spent much of the 28 years he has been in the education business being frustrated by traditional education, offers the following advice: “If you’re not committed to this don’t be in it. It’s a lot of hard work. I have a lot of sleepless nights. ...You [have to] believe in change. We have a lot of people who like to talk about change, talk about kids reading, talk about kids writing, talk about kids doing math, and they’re still coming out after twelve years in our system functional illiterates.”

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At the North Star Academy Charter School, some of Newark, New Jersey’s poorest children and their families are breaking the traditional dismal records of inner city schools in attendance, parental involvement and learning. The one-year old charter school runs for 11 months per year and the students are taught in innovative ways through state of the art technology in a culture of community.

Norman Atkins, a journalist and educator, co-founded the school in 1997 in a renovated office building with assistance from the private sector. “The hardest part of making the charter school a reality was finding the place to put the school in.” Atkins found getting the charter, unlike Jackie Rosswurm’s experiences in S.C., was actually one of the easiest parts of the process in N.J.

Atkins cautioned however that “the great myth of charter schools is that they are regulation free ...The charter schools are more buried in paperwork than the existing schools.”

“I made a pact...to dance with the Blob, ... to make nice with the bureaucrats because ...we have the autonomy to use fairly decent resources. ...And with that money, we can make the kinds of decisions that create the kind of school environment that I just described.”

Despite the onerous regulations and difficulties in getting the doors open, Atkins is confident in the power of the charter movement. “The charter school laws are the best way in which we can make small, mission driven schools, serving low income kids, [that are] put into place in the public sector. ...The great challenge that we have before us is ... how to convert all of these inputs into the kind of student achievement that is meaningful.”

Atkins himself is a leader in New Jersey’s charter movement, often traveling to Trenton to argue with legislators or correct misunderstandings about the depth and breath that charters like Northstar afford some of our forgotten children. b

The Quest for Better Schools in Three Cities

The Honorable Pete DuPont

Moderator

Mary Tanner

Lehman Brothers

Mirlanda Allende

The Mother’s Alliance

Michael Joyce

The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation

Reflecting the diversity as well as the passion for children’s welfare that bind education reformers on every level in every state across the country, this session, led by the Honorable Pete duPont, gave the audience an in-depth understanding as to the movement afoot in three vastly different cities.

Mary Tanner from Lehman Brothers in New York City brings the perspective of 25 years of investment banking experience to the school reform debate. She presented a compact review of the climate in which this debate is taking place in New York and a review of changes that are currently taking place within the public school system itself.

Taking a bit of poetic license, Tanner used the acronym “SUPRISE “ to explain the current forces that are shaping the issues of school reform in the city and state of New York today.

Scale

Union

Private Schools

Religion
Incentive
Suburbs
Entropy

Four areas of reform now bring promise – and a challenge – to New York schools:

- 1) Students are required to pass the New York State Regents Exam in order to earn a high school diploma.
- 2) Chancellor Rudy Crew's efforts to replace lifetime tenure with 3 - 5 year renewable contracts.
- 3) The efforts of individuals like Larry Tisch, John Walton and the Archdiocese of New York to provide scholarships to the most needy children to attend schools of choice.
- 4) The commitment to passage of a strong charter school law.

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Bringing an entirely different perspective to the table was Mirlanda Allende, a single parent from Miami, who spoke eloquently of the sacrifices her parents made to allow her to attend a private school as a child and the same sacrifices she is currently making for her own son.

Well aware of the deplorable test scores and drop out rates of Florida's youth, Mirlanda helped found a new grassroots organization called The Mother's Alliance, which CER is proud to have helped develop. It is "a group of mothers who share the same vision when it comes to our children and education. We are not afraid to take a stand, in fact we are trying to rattle things a little. We are mothers from different cities, Denver, Detroit, Milwaukee, Washington and Florida. The main goal of the Mother's Alliance is to find and nurture a support network that helps leaders and lay people sustain and win the struggle for education reform. By having team work and commitment we can aggressively direct our energy to combat the social ills that plague our communities."

The Mother's Alliance is clearly tapping into one of the most powerful and frequently overlooked sources of political influence in this country, mothers with moxie.

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"For me and for my colleagues at Bradley Foundation August 31 was a particularly gratifying moment. For after 13 years of struggle and over ten million dollars of investment, we had helped to take what had been an abstruse

intellectual construct, a talking point, and translated it and transformed it into a concrete reality. A powerful educational reform involving real flesh and blood human beings exercising freely the bedrock principal of a self governing republic — that the parent is the primary educator of the child.”

This was Michael Joyce of The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation reflecting on Milwaukee’s historic decision to allow parents to pay religious school tuition with public funds, thus allowing true parental choice.

Joyce sees the simplicity and truth of the parental choice question so clearly that for him there is no question at all. “It’s time to face the fact that parental choice in education is a policy about common sense. Bureaucrats and Academics may get all confused about it but when you are talking to real parents, the freedom and power to choose is not a difficult concept to get across.”

Since CER’s conference in October the Supreme Court has indeed upheld the lower court’s decision to allow parents to use public funds for tuition in religious schools. Mr. Joyce mused, “The U.S. Supreme Court decision will send a message to the whole country that vouchers are here and now a reality of American policy and it won’t take long for the people to figure out that government schools are no longer the inevitable destiny for their children.”

Joyce urged choice supporters to recognize how much progress the people have made toward that end. He closed with the statement, “Freedom is not a gift, vouchers are not a gift. Use them freely and widely. Use them as if they were your own.” R

Bringing About Charter Schools: Three Success Stories

Jeanette Mitchell
Helen Bader Foundation, Moderator
Bill Manning
Red Clay Consolidated School District
Laura Friedman
Missouri Charter Schools Information Center
Sally Perz
Ohio State Representative

The conflicts and successes involved in charter school development and legislation was the focus for these three pioneers whose experiences across three states are cause for optimism and are invaluable for their lessons.

As a “renegade school board member” and board president, Bill Manning has made a difference in education reform, specifically in the development of “The Charter School” in Wilmington, Delaware.

Manning believes an important key of education reform is to form relationships with people of power. Because of a “deal” he created with his district and the governor of Delaware, he quickly worked through the red tape and antagonism many school reformers grapple with interminably. And yet Manning takes little credit for the feat, owing it mainly to the sad fact that the “the schools were crummy.”

Manning acknowledged that most education reformers do not find support so easily; however, he does not believe the “unions should be wrestled in warfare.” Ultimately, Manning believes a tone of cooperation is more effective than one of intimidation. Likewise, Manning believes the most effective school reform stems from “electing people to school boards who have the commitment to deal with [school reform].”

In the case of his constituents, they obviously knew the formula. The district is not only recognized for high standards, but The Charter School, Delaware’s first, is a success. The school has a waiting list of more than 100 students, the highest scores in the state on the Delaware Writing Assessment, the highest school attendance in the state, the highest SAT scores of any school in the state, and 100 percent of the senior class matriculating to college.

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After a twenty-year political career, Laura Friedman, a businesswoman and Democratic committeewoman, now carries a strong legislative voice for education reform in Missouri.

Friedman became interested in education reform after learning some dismal statistics. Her St. Louis district was in the bottom five to ten percentile of statewide testing and had a staggering 75 percent dropout rate, while at the same time, the district received \$11,000 per child, one of “the highest per pupil expenditures in the entire nation.”

This blatant irony compelled Friedman to develop and pass a charter school bill.

If you're so inclined, we'd highly recommend her four steps:

Reformers should first “understand the legislative process,” and then work to create allies in the legislature to foster a better understanding of the issues and dispel the myths.

Second, Friedman suggests that reformers “build as many coalitions as possible, not only in the legislature, but also with lobbyists in the capitol.” While Friedman does believe that “all alliances are important,” she “never lost sight of the fact that legislators have votes and nobody else does.”

Third, because much of the information the media receives from the school board association is often “erroneous and inflammatory,” Friedman believes it is extremely important for reformers to give the media information that is as accurate as possible.

And fourth, reformers should keep control over the legislative wording because “it is important how the bill reads,” adding how critical it is to “make use of the experts, like CER and other organizations.”

The bill just passed in May 1998, so watch for additional tales of success from Missouri's first charter schools and stay tuned; this story is to be continued.

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Coming from the other side, Ohio State Legislator Sally Perz spoke of the challenges and in fact, the bureaucratic fumbling that plagued her eventually successful efforts to pass charter school legislation in her state.

Ms. Perz, who came into politics from a private business background, found the education debate in politics obscure for many reasons, but especially because “no one talked about the kids.” She was “disturbed about [education] statistics, disturbed about a lack of solutions to change anything,” and disturbed that the schools wanted more money “when the money that was spent last time didn't make any difference.”

To tackle this, Perz sought a more fundamental reform solution in charter schools. She put together a working group of six people, researched laws, conducted interviews, visited charter schools, and went to conferences.

When after six months the bill they thought was a “a stellar piece of legislation” reached the House, “anyone who had been asleep woke up.”

To satisfy the sudden surge of concern, Perz rewrote the bill nine times, to no avail. Undaunted, Perz requested help from the governor of Ohio, and after more rewrites and some “deals” with the unions, the charter school legislation finally found a home in the governor’s budget bill. Additional struggles ensued when the senate president rejected the charter school pilot project, but after landing a spot in conference committee, the charter school legislation finally passed.

Since this struggle, five charter schools have opened in her county, and sixteen others are opening in the state. CER offers much acclaim and admiration to Sally Perz and her resilient and dedicated pioneering spirit. R