

**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 5**

MARCH 14, 1994

Dear Friends:

As the old saying going, Nero fiddles while Rome burns. Such is the most fitting description I can give to the state of education as concerns the U.S. Congress. This, of course, is nothing new, but when their policies begin to impact on state reform efforts, it is critical to take stock. This last month was full of more Hill mischief and great establishment anecdotes in power grabbing. There was some progress made in the states, and some new efforts unveiled. To protect this progress, we must turn our heads more fully this month to the sad state of affairs in our nation's Capitol.

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State-Watch

- Arizona still rumbles as we head toward the middle of the month. Legislators there continue to press their colleagues to support their reform bill with the choice provisions intact. These individuals should be commended often for their hard work.
- Connecticut legislators are marking time after a joint session of the House and Senate Education Committees held hearings on March 3 to examine proposed legislation for school choice, charter schools and alternative certification. Engineered by Connecticut Republican Assemblyman Tim Barth, and championed by the state's Democratic Majority leaders, the proposed legislation is expected to be drafted and introduced as an amendment to another bill within the next thirty days. Typically, the education committees have pronounced that choice legislation will never be passed. This bill will bypass the committees and go directly to the floor for a vote. Rep. Barth predicts it will be close, but winnable.
- Wisconsin legislators have proposed expanding the Milwaukee choice program to sectarian schools. Michael Dean, Executive Director of PACE

(Parents Acquiring Choice in Education) reports widespread support and is organizing coalitions to advance this new legislation. Initial attempts have been stymied by procedural moves, but plans are underway for a statewide effort. The PACE number is (414) 821-1140.

Nero Fiddling ...

It is now well-known that the homeschoolers and friends of private education successfully beat back efforts by the House of Representatives to regulate certification for their teachers. In a floor fight over HR 6, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), California Democrat George Miller claims his amendment requiring all teachers with a local education jurisdiction to be certified was simply a way to ensure better accountability. Sorry, George, we might be innocent, but we're not dumb!

Even though the House adopted Texas Republican Dick Armey's amendment protecting home and private schools from the legislation, the ESEA is still a problem for public education reform. First, it strongly suggests (and nearly mandates) that states receiving federal Chapter 1 funds must execute state standards that will be reviewed and sanctioned by a newly created advisory committee. It authorizes the use of so-called "opportunity-to-learn" standards as a criteria for whether or not a state is succeeding properly. For example, if the federal government is getting ready to disburse Chapter 1 funds to New York City, the district must furnish information as to whether or not all students had an opportunity-to-learn, i.e., whether their class sizes were small enough, whether all had equal access to textbooks, qualified teachers, nice buildings, etc. Given that New York City spends over \$9,000/year per student, one would expect these things to be well provided. However, few acknowledge the fact that less than 33% of the dollars spent reach the classroom — not to mention the fact that there is little correlation between spending and achievement. To say the least, ESEA is misguided and harmful.

Perhaps the more important aspect of the ESEA that deserves our attention is the attempt to make the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and its politically independent Governing Board (NAGB), more or less impotent. NAEP is the only real form of national assessment the U.S. has. It's non-threatening, anonymous, and remains a solid gauge of student progress. NAGB's major accomplishments include the imposition of achievement levels that measure not only how well student do, but how they are performing in relation to how they should perform. NAEP also now provides state level comparisons. Both efforts caused those elements of the establishment "particularly allergic to testing," in Checker Finn's words, to work for its dissolution.

This is not an issue that anyone reading this should ignore. Reformers often get criticized for opposing standards. While states are clamoring over OBE, we should be arguing that standards are important — so important that a national assessment that provides solid data should be maintained. This is a perfect spin for OBE opponents, people concerned about standards, and overall good folks. The ESEA is scheduled to be marked-up in the Senate sometime in early May. If you'd like more details, please let me know.

... and Rome Burning

So much to report about the Blob this month:

- Check out these words of wisdom from the March issue of the Phi Delta Kappan:

"The language of education reform is still dominated by the harshness of bureaucracy, control, competition and intervention."

- From our friends at the Pennsylvania Leadership Council, enclosed you'll find a remarkable document from their NEA affiliate that is a call to arms for their members, as a result of recent "serious threats to our union and to public education. Our adversaries have organized at the grass roots level to an unprecedented degree." Read on. It's good stuff.
- The American Association of School Administrators met in San Francisco last month, and were reportedly dismayed that more school districts were not pursuing school reform. Education Daily reported on a survey sent to over 10,000 high school principals. "Fewer than half of all public high schools are using such techniques as cooperative learning and standards-based mathematics education, and barely a quarter are experimenting with outcomes-based education or school-to-work transition programs.

Thank God for small favors!

- And this from Rick Nelson, president of the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers, regarding efforts to bring back merit pay: "... Fundamentally, we believe that teaching is about love, not money. Merit pay has no place in schools." Huh?
- Saving the best for last. The following excerpt from the March issue of NEA Today shows just how craven our friends in the blob are:

A Battle for the Soul of America

The 30 percent of Californians who last November voted for Proposition 174...are sending a poignant message to the NEA, declared NEA President Keith Geiger in speeches this winter.

"Many of those who voted for Proposition 174 are the very parents we have fought hardest for in the past — at-risk families, the indigent, those with special needs," said Geiger.

He went on to say that those who voted for Proposition 174 did so out of frustration. "They've been lied to. They've been given promise after promise — and seen promise after promise broken."

The result? "We face a deadly coalition for future battles on vouchers," he asserted. "We need to win everywhere, in every place, every time. In this battle for the soul of America, a 99.9 percent success rate won't do."

Polls and Things

A poll taken by the Kansas-based Emporia State University found that more than half of Kansans surveyed — over 60% in urban areas — support school choice. Contrary to some indications elsewhere, private school parents are overwhelmingly supportive of a choice program.

And in Minnesota, the Center of the American Experiment reports 61% of respondents to their recent poll (66% of those with children in school) support a voucher program which would enable them to send their children to the public, private or parochial school of their choice. This poll confirms that the public has misleading impressions of terms associated with school choice. A full 70% of respondents support a fundamentally identical choice plan when the word "voucher" is not in the question, and when no specific mention of government allotment of money per pupil is made.

A talk show host opposed to choice recently objected to my use of the term school choice when talking about choices among private schools. He insisted that I use the term vouchers. This poll, and other evidence is proof that the 'V' word does in fact, still carry heavy negative connotations. We should use the word little, if at all.

Until April,

