

Dear Friends,

The annual rite of spring has come and with it extraordinary news on people, schools, and reform efforts blossoming. Among the busiest months for determined policymakers, these two saw a number of reform initiatives take center stage. Accountability, choice and charters drew the most attention — and heat — among lawmakers and in one particular school board race. But first, some mild humor...



The Grammys of Math Reform

This little ditty comes courtesy of Dan Hart, a High School math teacher in Los Angeles, CA, frustrated about the mischief wrought by whole math:

Sung to the tune of Smile, by Charlie Chaplin

Smile, when your calculator's breaking,
Smile, when you don't know what mistake you're making,
When there's a use for pi,
You'll wonder why

If you smile, no need to borrow
Smile, a wrong answer's no sorrow.
You'll see our NCTM vision come true,
The Standards are you.

Fill up your portfolio with gladness,
Don't abide mathematical nonsense,
Although a sneer may destroy your math veneer,
That's the time you must keep from computing,
Smile, what's the use in tutoring
You'll be assessed to be just fine,
If you just smile.

(Dan is happy to share more serious views he's developed about how children learn math today, and he loves to hear from similarly outraged people. Contact him via e-mail at dhart@lausd.k12.ca.us.)

Wipe Out!

The Milwaukee school board's most ardent supporter of school choice — and four other candidates — slammed union-backed candidates in an historic race April 6. The group with the name "People for the America" something, and the unions, traveled to Milwaukee from all over the country, but failed...**wiped out...blistered...took a beating... tanked...crashed and burned...lost big, etc...**while Milwaukee's citizens and their children triumphed.

Incumbent John Gardner — a long time labor organizer and self-described radical leftist — stood publicly for full school choice *and* improving public schools. His race brought the tanks in from the union trenches, and with it, \$500,000 in anti-Gardner and pro-union spending. Our local observers report that a month before the election, People for the American Way began staffing a "voter education" phone bank to promote the union slate in Milwaukee, and — talk about top-down attempts to influence local elections! — the national organization later sent a representative to the city to implore pastors to pump for its candidates in their Easter Sunday sermons! Never had Milwaukee voters seen so many yard signs and TV ads, taken so many telephone calls and been so inundated with glossy literature ... and all for a school board race!

The union's message was not about school choice. For the most part it was pure dirt. The most sensational of it was a series of near-cardboard weight, spare-no-expense smear literature featuring ... guns and drugs and alcohol! Gardner was portrayed as friendly to kids having guns and drugs and alcohol in schools because he'd once voted against a feel-good zero tolerance policy.

The Paper Tiger is purring, and ringing its hands. The anti-reformers will be back with a vengeance, no doubt, and they've already set up shop in Florida where millions of dollars of propaganda over the airwaves are transmitting messages of doubt and doom over the Bush-Brogan school accountability plan.

More on this and the march of other states toward educational choice and accountability is to be found elsewhere in your reading today of the *Monthly Letter*.

The Score on Reading

The 1998 reading report card has been out a few weeks now, and sadly, the results are still nothing to get excited about. At the national level, when compared to 1994 results, fourth graders' scores remained about the same, and eighth graders performed somewhat better at their grade. But temper the kudos. Only 23% of fourth graders overall are proficient readers. Seventy percent of our nation's fourth graders are still below "proficient," (39% "below basic and 31% "basic.") Only 28% of eighth graders possess proficient reading skills.

Even though the scores were nothing to crow about, observers thought both Secretary Riley and Vice President Gore's presence at a red-carpet affair to unveil the scores was a bit much, particularly when they attributed the ever so slight "increase" in scores to their own education policies. As scholar Diane Ravitch points out, "students in high-poverty schools are now reading no better than in 1990, and that 70 percent of children in such schools are still scoring 'below even the basic level of reading.'" She

adds: "Something dangerous is happening when government officials begin to spin federal data about education for their political benefit or to convince the public that things are better – or worse – than they actually are."

On Content

- ***Ouch!*** Milwaukee public school officials are also suffering this week from a loss of National Science Foundation money for failing to improve math and science test scores and a "lack of vision of reform."

- ***School systems failing to teach even the basics*** might do well to try the program known as Direct Instruction. Recent praise for Direct Instruction and its high achievement gains has come from a coalition of establishment groups which found it one of the three most promising reform "models" currently used in schools. From *Education Week*:

"Direct Instruction grew out of studies on the teaching of beginning reading that Siegfried Engelmann began at the University of Illinois in the 1960s. Thirty years later, only 150 schools across the country use on a schoolwide basis the program he developed...Thousands more, however, use Direct Instruction's commercially produced materials — usually in remedial classrooms, special education resource rooms or special programs for disadvantaged students.

'We were sort of like the plague for regular education. [They'd] have nothing to do with us. It wasn't until the last few years that we started to break the mold.'"

But Engelmann argues that the Direct Instruction materials and approach works with all children. "There are no dyslexic kids — only dysteachic teachers," he told *Education Week*.

Contact the Association for Direct Instruction, P.O. Box 10252, Eugene, OR 97440, (541) 485-1163.

- ***Core Knowledge*** is again being praised for its results. It is one of the three — besides Direct Instruction and Success for All — out of the 24 reform models studied that showed promise.

Researchers at John Hopkins University and the University of Memphis found that where Core Knowledge is implemented as designed, children's achievement is improved.

As always, more information about Core Knowledge is available through their web site at www.coreknowledge.org or in related information through CER's site.

Those with a desire to learn more about this program and the Core Virtues character program should mark their calendar for an event sponsored jointly by CER and the Link Institute, on July 30-31 in Alexandria, VA, moments from our nation's capitol. Check out details on the web.

- **“Phonics Foot Draggers”** With its prestige and clout amongst opinion leaders the world over, *The Los Angeles Times*’ devotion to the use of phonics as the method for reading instruction is stunning. *The Times*’ March 15 editorial should be required reading for all educators:

“Change is hard in education...That’s why too many teachers still cling to the so-called whole language method of reading instruction... The holdouts [of whole language] lost their argument years ago, when student reading scores in Los Angeles and the rest of the state slid to the bottom of the national barrel.

“Scientific research on how children learn to read supports the primacy of explicit, step-by-step phonics instruction, which teaches the relationship between letters and sounds. In spite of that, intransigent support for whole language continues in schools and in college teacher programs... in defiance of new state and school district policies.

“Los Angeles schools chief Ruben Zacarias discovered the gap between policy and practice in his district when a teachers who helped craft the state’s rigorous new language arts framework complained about the incorporation of many whole language practices in new teacher training materials used to help primary students who fall behind... The materials developed by district reading specialists included...methods that have been discarded from state curriculum guidelines. The superintendent needs to find out how this happened and put a stop to the wrong-headed defiance it exhibits.

“Phonics is the foundation of reading instruction and teachers, especially those with responsibility for developing instructional materials, must get on board or get out of the way.”

- **More on the Basics:** Concerned about reading and what you can do to help your child get the best kind of instruction? Then you should know about two important publications:

- The first is a book, called ***Straight Talk About Reading***, by Susan L. Hall and Louisa C. Moats, Ed.D. These gentlewomen provide the definitive information about reading instruction so that parents can make distinctions about how their schools approach this important basic. Parents can also learn about how best to complement or offer reading instruction. The book contains useful tips, useful ideas and a bevy of strong, hard evidence as to what is happening in schools and why. If you order the book through Amazon.com, be sure to say the Center for Education Reform sent you.

- ***Parent Power! Helping You Make Sense of Schooling Today*** is HERE! This new service of the Center for Education Reform debuted this month in thousands of mailboxes nationwide. *Parent Power!* is targeted to helping parents navigate the most basic programs and practices of schools. It is simple, direct and non-policy wonkish. And you’ll get your own free copy later this month when the May issue is sent to you for your referral to a parent or friend you know. For information in the meantime, contact the editor, Cathy McKenna at Cathy@edreform.com or on our toll-free line at 1-800-521-2118. Subscription information is also available on line at www.edreform.com.

From the States

As you read about your neighbors around the country, note that for each state discussed, you will find the current statistics on American student's reading prowess, from the recently released National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

- **New Mexico** Governor Gary Johnson has taken on the status quo with gusto, threatening to hold up key budget measures if he doesn't get satisfaction on this proposal to allow poor parents to choose a school for their child – be it public, private or parochial. So far, he's been offered a consolation prize, by opponents, of an expanded and strengthened charter law. Johnson says that's nice, but not good enough. [24% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; 22% for 4th graders.]
- **Pennsylvania** Governor Tom Ridge is working to advance his academic accountability plan which gives school districts in trouble a chance to dig out or face the loss of local control. Under the proposal, school districts on a "watch list" for failure to perform would gain powerful new tools to turn themselves around. Students that are in districts that fall far below adequate levels would be permitted to attend the school of their choice. The plan awaits a hearing by legislators, who should note that Pennsylvania's poor are so interested in school choice that more than 25,000 applications were received by the local Children's Scholarship Fund – for just 1,200 slots. [No NAEP results.]
- A **Maryland** proposal to allow charter schools to exist is making some modest progress. Most charter fans, however, concede that it's a very weak proposal, which would permit children on welfare to attend charters that were established under school district control. It seems one of the nation's first colonies can't quite make it out of the colonial mindset. [31% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; 29% for 4th graders.]
- The mindset of negotiators for charters in **Tennessee** is also slightly off kilter, with a very prescriptive bill being heralded by the Governor and the state's Commissioner of Education. They hail from different parties, but have both put their stamp on a charter bill, which restricts the legal and financial autonomy of charters significantly. One hopes they'll have the good sense to reject the measure. [26% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; 25% for 4th graders.]
- And while we're on the subject of good sense, the **California** legislature appears in desperate need of some. The Assembly Education Committee passed a bill to require charter schools to become part of the district's collective bargaining unit. While the charters, the business community and others in the Golden State are up in arms, the bill is likely to be on a fast track unless the union train is somehow derailed. Stay tuned. [22% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; only 20% for 4th graders.]
- Not to be outdone by their West Coast colleagues, the unions in **New York** are at it again, this time trying to undermine the recently enacted charter law in a series of "educational" efforts designed to confuse teacher applicants. Among the "assistance" to be provided by the New York State United Teachers union, it plans to "assist locals in organizing employees in new charter schools," develop and negotiate "contract language to protect members in potential charter school situations." And as they try to

weasel their way into the charters, they are also going to “address legislative changes to the current charter school law.” That’s all. In Rochester and in the Big Apple, the status quo is attempting to route all charter applications through union-dominated school boards or committees, even though the State University of New York and the Regents have their own chartering authority. The unions are hoping their teachers and members don’t know the law. The good news is, those individual teachers are smart cookies. [34% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; 29% for 4th graders.]

- “Vouchers are, in truth, neither heaven on earth nor the apocalypse now. They are what they always have been: an intriguing education theory that deserves to be rigorously tested.” Thus wrote *USA Today* columnist Walter Shapiro upon a visit to Tallahassee, the site of the current statewide battleground for school choice that will likely make **Florida** the first state in the nation to enact a state-wide program. Said one supporter, Miami Democrat Beryl Roberts, “I have heard that it is fundamentally unfair for us to give public dollars to a private institution. I want to tell you what’s fundamentally unfair – for parents to [spend] tax dollars to send their children to schools for long hours to only find they cannot read and they cannot write.” [33% of 8th graders at or above proficiency; 23% for 4th graders.]

Mea Culpa

I’m sorry. Really. I’m really, truly sorry. I promised myself that in this beautiful season of spring I wouldn’t obsess over the unions. But I can’t help myself. You see, teachers if they are nothing else to our children are supposed to be truthful. The thousands who we consider friends here at the Center, while we may not always be in 100% agreement, are at least truthful. Most teachers are. But former social studies teacher Bob Chase, who also happens to be the president of the National Education Association, knowingly misleads the public in one of his latest missives in the press.

Chase says, “Today’s big new god is called the voucher,” and that “it is irresponsible to indulge in expensive, divisive experiments...” [Even though there’s nothing new about this choice concept]. Contrary to reality, he says “there is no solid evidence a voucher will improve student learning,” citing shoddy analysis by a Wisconsin man as definitive proof that school choice doesn’t work to help children. Then a couple of weeks later, in an opinion piece about charter schools in Tennessee, he deliberately misled readers by using a rhetorical switch game on the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ as commonly used to describe charter school laws. Chase said that weak laws are those like that of Arizona and Massachusetts, while the strong laws are those that the NEA endorses.

It’s a shame that a person who claims to represent teachers — and is himself a teacher — doesn’t hold himself to higher standards.

...Kind of like in New York, where Rochester teacher union leader Adam Urbanski, who helped fight the charter bill, has forged an alliance with the school board to cajole all charter applicants in the area to go through a committee with anti-charter people on it.

... **A Washington, DC teacher writes:** "We DC teachers ... wonder where all the money goes. That is because it doesn't get into the classrooms. In fact, it doesn't exist to us at all. It is eaten up by the overwhelming, inefficient and sometimes incompetent bureaucracy that supposedly supports us."

New from the Center for Education Reform

Accountability: The Key to Charter Renewal, by former Hudson Institute fellow Bruno Manno is now available on line through our web site www.edreform.com/pubs/charter_school_accountability.htm.

The latest, greatest *National Charter School Directory* is now available from the Center. The 188 pages provide school by school information on 1207 schools and overall national trends, numbers and data on the charter school movement, which the Center's own official estimates pegs at nearly 1,400 scheduled to be open this fall... and counting. Call or e-mail your order now.

And, If you're not satisfied getting monthly updates from us, perhaps you'd be interested in the **CER Hotline**, a weekly report, via phone, of current trends, events and progress in education reform. Check out the toll free service at (877) 433-8228.

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Food for Thought

Brookings Institution scholar Paul Hill and his colleague Mary Beth Celio have penned a neat little missive, *Fixing Urban Schools*. Their work is important for any avid reformer. Bruno Manno, a senior fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation reviewed the book recently:

"...The key to changing these schools involves what the authors call 'a thorough rethinking of the way the school system does business.' In order to have coherent and productive schools, a public school governance system must foster strong and distinctive schools that respond to the varied needs of today's urban families. This approach views a public school as any school that accepts all comers, is paid for with public funds, and is accountable to a public authority for its results (student learning paramount among them). Families should be free to choose among different and autonomous schools."

Hill and Celio prescribe how to get there, and what pitfalls leaders should avoid. For anyone that has been led to believe that reform is somehow a radical and illogical quest, this is an important read.



There are two tenacious little beavers who've been chewing up a few of Washington's prized Cherry Blossom trees. Thousands of people visit the beautiful blossoms daily in early spring, but no one has been able to catch up with him. Animal experts say that such behavior signifies he probably plans to stay a long while.

I can't help but see enormous parallels between the beaver and the tenacious reformers who've been chewing for so long at the big tree ... and are now here to stay. Well... maybe it's just spring fever. Have a happy!

Jeanne Allen