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MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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What a month! Andrew Young joins the school choice train; a Colorado Springs NAACP board member follows suit. Denver teachers adopt a merit pay plan in sheep's clothing, and the SAT gets worse! And it's barely fall! Join us in a review of what else is happening, but first, a welcome message to...

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...One Thousand, Six Hundred and Eighty Charter Schools!

From the first in 1991 'til today, each charter opened has had a commanding effect on education policy in this country. Congratulations and welcome to all the newcomers, whose numbers and quality have exceeded all previous estimates and expectations.

Unlike even a few short years ago, today you are firmly planted in the mainstream. Real, more rigorous standards are now taking hold; teacher quality issues and performance contracting are being taken seriously today; choice is so prevalent even those who oppose it can no longer say so in polite company, and parental demands are finally making a difference.

From *60 Minutes* to *Essence Magazine*, the efforts charter schools have chosen to enjoin are being taken very seriously. You'll feel great and beat at the same time, but your success matters a great deal to so many children. The Center and its tens of thousands of friends and members from all 50 states wish you luck and Godspeed and invite your questions, comments, input and support.

More on Charters

The Verdict is in! When the Thurgood Marshall Charter School was conceived, never in a million years did Cordia Booth think that the Colorado Supreme Court would eventually be summoned to decide whether the school board should be required to allow the charter school to open. Booth is a public school teacher who founded the school, which for a time was the subject of a melodrama which pit school boards against charter schools. Now her son and nearly all the other enrollees of Thurgood Marshall

Charter School who she sought to help have graduated. There is a rainbow at the end, however. The verdict is in and according to the state's high court, nothing in the charter law violates the intent or design of the founders of public education in that state, paving the way for Thurgood Marshall to open, if the board members so choose.

The same message — that charters *are* constitutional — has been played loud and clear in states such as Michigan and New Jersey, yet the litigation doesn't stop. Suits are pending in Missouri and Utah over state issues, and several more local issues are throwing charters for a loop in various school districts.

The Fate of Thomas Jefferson. In this case, we're speaking not of the founder, but of the pioneer charter school in Illinois whose history has been visited on these pages over the last couple of years. The school was turned down by 12 school boards, eventually allowed to appeal to the State board, then permitted to open but obfuscated by city councils, zoning boards and others possibly under the influence of unions.

Now the idea that was born four years ago by a group of veteran parents and teachers — a non-radical concept where they'd teach Core Knowledge and Direct Instruction and be free from bureaucracy — is finally becoming reality. After being forced out of all the suburbs, and out of District 59 where it was finally authorized, it opened mid-September in a huge downtown Chicago public school on the Northwest side. There Thomas Jefferson Charter School will occupy a few classrooms for at least a few months, until they resolve issues concerning having a permanent home.

The charter owes its success to sheer tenacity. Most people would have packed up and gone fishing. There's no doubt what all the obstacles thrown in the founders' path were intended to do. But these folks mean business. They want a chance to demonstrate that they can and will succeed before they see another generation lost to the kind of political, non-substantive and bureaucratic bickering that is so plentiful in the districts these teachers and parents chose to vacate. We're glad to see TJ Charter finally opened. As increasing numbers of teachers challenged in court and from the bureaucracy will tell you, it's a shame that in some cities, it has to be that way.

California Dreamin'. The fates of the charter and university by the same name have unknowingly been tied throughout their formative years. San Diego's Thurgood Marshall College is now home to the dream its president first conceived — to bring a rigorous charter school for disadvantaged children to the University. Finally, this year, Cecil Lytle's dream came true. The Preuss School — named after its prime benefactor — opened this month to 150 out of the 500 students who applied. Over time, this college prep charter will serve more middle and high schoolers, and is set to expand as the new building gets completed.

Like many charter-starters, Lytle faced many challenges. We recall the efforts of friends at another San Diego organization — the local Urban League — to maintain a charter in the movement's earlier days, only to have their charter pulled by over zealous school board members. Here's hoping that the Preuss School thrives in a more open environment. Congratulations on your success.

Take Your Marbles and Go Home. Americans United for Separation of Church and State brought new meaning to this phrase when its director declared on national radio that the group also now opposes charter schools, in addition to full school choice!

A Tale of Two Moms

Even Dickens could not have imagined the plight of two vastly different mothers whose children are pawns of impersonal state operations:

- Few stories this year have been as bleak and cold as the tragedy of one *Rutland, VT mother* who, after choosing to homeschool her son — now 15 — about two years ago was harassed by education officials claiming that the son's special needs were not properly served at home and demanding to see and test him. The son in fact was succeeding, having demonstrated great improvement. Yet the mother saw no reason to have him tested and hid her son out of fear. Still nursing a two year-old, she was thrown in jail for ten days and her baby placed in foster care. Although she's home, she is required to pay \$100 a day until her son is presented. Where is the outrage?? This is the fastest growing segment of schooling and yet these folks are still treated as pariahs.
- Perhaps not as severe but still a case for righteous indignation, *Rochester Hills, MI mom* alerted CER to a flier she received from her son on the first day of school. The flier, authored apparently by the Michigan PTA, was an anti-voucher tirade that was sent home no doubt to build allies against a pending choice effort there. This parent was outraged after reading the allegation that choice is intended to segregate the races, and all sorts of other lies and false innuendo about school choice. The handout made her son a political pawn, a fact that, sadly for her, she won't soon be able to forget. (CER has posted the text of this flier and some of our responses on the web.)

A View from the Blob – Southern Style

Some of the nicest people I've ever met come from Virginia. Thus it's quite a puzzle how Virginia school board members could tolerate the shenanigans of its paid staff manager.

Frank Barham, the VSBA director, has long tried to convince his colleagues that Virginia has a perfectly fine charter school law. It's so fine from Barham's perspective, that only a few school boards have decided to consider proposals and after one full year of being on the books, only one school has even signaled any interest. Because the Department of Education has been giving out charter money more generously than in the past (see related story p. 6), Virginia received more than \$600,000 to put in its treasury to await those applications. The money has nothing to do with the strength of the law (it's *really* bad), but Barham declared that the "application once again illustrates that Virginia has the best charter school law in the Nation."

Even though such statements are typical of the establishment, we were quite taken aback by a later communiqué to VSBA members in which Barham tells what he

(Virginia, *continued*)

would do for public education if he were a dictator for a day. In the editorial, he tells us that charter schools (and home schools) are something really bad for kids. Barham writes that if he were the dictator,

“School safety and violence would be reduced and eliminated. Any student who could not recite the Scout Law daily would be *exiled* (emphasis added) to the nearest Charter or Home School for a year. They would have to pass a re-entry test for re-admission to a public school.”

Just to make sure we are all absolutely clear, let me restate the obvious. This taxpayer-funded staff member of the Virginia School Boards Association, on behalf of all school board members, is saying that charter schools and home schools are places to which children should be banished. It is unlikely, therefore, that under this guy’s leadership, school boards would allow a normal, traditional school to open as a charter. Rather, as we’ve predicted and seen in weak law states, school boards will use charter schools as a way to get federal money, to banish “bad” kids, and perhaps, kids they don’t want for any number of reasons.

Barham’s group lobbied heavily for the current weak, charter law, arguing that the only democratic way to provide public education is through the school boards, which take their job seriously. Perhaps Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore and lawmakers should reconsider their arrangement with school boards, and do what most other states have done. That is, they should allow other public authorities with real interest in child-centered reform to be allowed to bring about charter schools, without the kind of prejudicial attitudes against charters that the VSBA obviously possesses.

If you know of a Virginia school board member or two that would like to see a better law, or parents and teachers who want to start charters, let us know and we’ll gladly get their stories to those concerned about children in Old Dominion.

Headlines

The flurry over the traditional back-to-school polls, press coverage of education and the like have come and gone, but the issues and the people remain. While the Center has used modern technology to keep both web visitors and our fax constituents abreast of hot developments, we wanted to briefly review the month for those of you who don’t obsess like the rest of us:

- **“Please sir, can I have some more?”** That line might as well have been uttered on the streets of Cleveland when Judge Solomon Oliver ruled against the children in the city’s school choice program. Then, overwrought by bad publicity and an emergency appeal, Oliver recanted for those already in the program. As of August 30, nearly 4,000 children enrolled previously in Cleveland’s scholarship program were allowed to remain, but 568 new children are being helped only by the good graces of the schools which opted to let them come, money or no money, while the court battle ensues.

• **SAT. Sad And Tired?** For the third year in the last ten, the public learned of more problems with the once-renowned SAT for college bound students. First there was the switch to easier sections, more time on the test and the removal of particularly challenging sections. Then there was recentering, where an artificial average propped up everyone's scores. Now it appears that all along they've been purging certain test questions that may offend this or that group of students; like asking students to choose appropriate analogies. One of those they purged for potential bias is "dune is to sand as... drift is to snow." (ETS, the SAT's designer, says the answer to questions like this escapes too many minorities! The question is — should it?)

• **Research on choice.** One of the long-term myths used by opponents of school choice is that the private schools will take all the "best" students (whose parents know better, it is supposed) and leave all the "worst" students behind. The so-called "creaming" argument was even used, in obvious error, by U.S. Senator John Kerry the other day, despite his call for greater choice, competition and accountability in the public sector. Yet a new study of the 800 children in the San Antonio Horizon program contradicts the pundits. The independent research by Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University found that voucher kids were entirely comparable to the children "left behind." Other studies have produced similar results. Does that mean the creaming argument will go away? We'll see.

• **"Voucher students do better."** Now if we said that, we'd be called radical (or worse!). It's a good thing it was the *Cincinnati Post* and *not* us who reported on an independent evaluation of Cleveland's third and fourth grade scholarship students. What the Indiana University study found was 12.5 percent and 11.1 percent higher scores in English and science, respectively, than public school students.

• **Shake that man's hand.** A former aid to Martin Luther King, Jr., former Mayor Andrew Young has promised to take his support of vouchers for poor children directly to the membership of the NAACP. Young's support has sent more shock waves through establishment leaders in the African-American community. Not shocked of course are the tens of thousands (and perhaps more) of minority advocates for choice who have long understood that the status quo has preserved inequities for too long. Thus when Colorado Springs NAACP executive member Wally Breazell stepped out onto the school choice platform, too, it became clear that this was more than just a full moon. (Breazell was forced to resign). CER introduced many of its stalwart civil rights friends who support greater learning opportunities for children to a broad audience this summer. That coverage — as well as recent articles about Young, Breazell and others — can be more fully accessed on our web site, at www.edreform.com.

• **Strike Out.** If only the Michigan PTA had turned their anger to the Detroit teachers strike on the first days of school! The strike left over 172,000 children without the coziness that back-to-school brings. Individual parents, on the other hand, tired of business as usual, sought solace from non-striking public charter schools, which offered them a viable, non-political alternative at a crucial time in their child's education. Unfortunately, the charters could not accommodate most of their requests, as they were already full and have waiting lists. That fate, incidentally, is shared by 70 percent of other charters. Not a bad situation to be in! The strike was a wake-up call to parents

(Headlines, *continued*)

who have been committed to the traditional system. Belinda Howard Baker told the *Detroit News*, "The way our school system is now, we're in the dark trying to find the light. We need another system to give us some choices."

- ***Lip Service.*** The Department of Education made its annual distribution of federal charter monies to states, thanks to authorizing legislation improved by Congress in 1998. States with and without charter schools got to split the funds this time. So did Puerto Rico, interestingly enough, which doesn't have a charter school law, only a system that considers some state-designated schools to be charters for the purpose of qualifying for the extra funds. Each year the Department hands out its funds with much political hoopla, as if it's all new each time, and quite meritorious. Some people even think the money is delivered to states based on merit, when in reality, all one has to do is have a law that they can cogently argue will lead to some charter activity, even if it is weak or beset by myriad obstacles.

- ***"Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics."*** Mark Twain no doubt included polls in his definitions when he repeated Disraeli's famous statement. A spat of back-to-school polls gave us conflicting answers on several issues. We attribute this to the false choices many pollsters give their unsuspecting prey. Take, for example, the annual PDK/Gallup poll, which asked people if they'd prefer improving public schools to giving parents vouchers. Of course, overwhelmingly Americans said yes to improving schools. But what if PDK had asked Americans — as we did two years in a row — how much they approved of giving parents the money allotted for their child's education to spend at the public, private or parochial school of their choice? That question would (and did) yield far different numbers — over 70% in support of that concept.

Regarding how well schools are doing, Americans also told PDK/Gallup that most of them still think the public schools deserve a grade of 'C' or less. Americans overwhelmingly told the Democratic Leadership Council, *Life Magazine* and others in the same month that schools are in bad shape. At the same time, the public says it supports public education. So is public education and choice mutually exclusive? It depends who — and how — you ask.

- ***A Rose by Any Other Name*** is still a rose, but a bonus system is not a merit pay plan. That's the message coming from Denver, where a pact between the district and the union is being heralded as a major new step into making teachers accountable. In reality, the plan guarantees participating teachers a \$500 bonus, and provides for an extra \$1,000 for teachers when a majority of their students show improvement. The concept of performance contracting or merit pay actually requires that teacher's salaries be set and raised based solely on their "value-added." That is, that the criteria used for judging a teacher's reward be based on the student gains for which they are responsible. So it's a nice system that Denver is trying, and it's a bit better than uniform salary schedules, but it's not merit pay.

The Ten Most Serious Afflictions Among Educators (partial list)

Courtesy of New Mexico-based education leader Gary Gruber

10. **M.A.B.S.** – Myopic, Apathetic Blame Syndrome. This disease is characterized by lack of vision, indifference and the attempt to shift responsibility to other people.
9. **P.E.S.T.** – Plasmapheretic Educational System Transference. A condition recognized in those who drain the organism and then because of inactivity offer bureaucracy as a reason for the illness.
1. **S.O.S.O.B.** – Same Old Same Old Beliefs or in medical terminology, Systemetic Osteolysis/Schizophrenic Obsessive Burnout. Those fearing change become stuck hard and fast in their way of acting and refuse to consider new paradigms. The result is finally just giving up and giving in rather than learning something new and improving both self and system.

Miscellanea

- The Orlando conference of The Education Leader's Council — a membership group of state and national elected and appointed education leaders in more than forty states, and an affiliate of the Center — announces that its Hurricane Floyd-deterred conference will occur in Orlando, FL on December 3-4.
- Some groups don't get much credit for their good work in stirring policy changes. We wanted to recognize some old friends at the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (www.lapar.org) who earlier this year won the Governmental Research Association's "Most Distinguished Research" award for its study tracing school reform in Louisiana. Noted for its thoughtful and timely analysis, the report recommended a pilot to test the viability of school choice in the Pelican state.
- Congratulations to Ms. Bonnie Levar from White Plains, NY, our August contest winner who guessed that Nat King Cole in 1963 did "Those Lazy, Hazy Crazy Days of Summer." Ms. Levar is enjoying a week in Palermo, Italy compliments of CER! (Not!)

A Friend In Need...

Our thoughts and prayers go out to our friends who've endured the storms and now find themselves homeless and without schools. We know of one charter school in particular — the largest in North Carolina — that lost everything. The Rocky Mount Public Charter School needs help. How's this for an idea? If every charter school teacher and parent contributed just one dollar, it would go a long way toward helping Rocky Mount get back on its feet.

Send your dollars to: The League of Charter Schools
200 Stags Trail
Chapel Hill, NC 27516

"...To Dream the Impossible Dream..."

Why don't parents feel a partnership with the schools? Perhaps because of the reception some of them get when they heed the clarion call for "parental involvement." The Del Paso Heights School District in California wishes parent Ronald Lee was a little less involved. Lee visited his son's fifth-grade classroom and found an inexperienced teacher who offered the students nothing but reading and writing all day — no math, science or social studies. Lee complained, but Principal Ken Kolster says that "for a brand-new teacher, he's doing an excellent job." The Lee children brought home no textbooks and little homework. Lee complained again, but the district staff development specialist says the school's reading program "shuns traditional textbooks." The school has test scores as low as the 15th percentile, but the principal says, "I feel this school has just wonderful programs and wonderful teachers. I really think this is an excellent school."

So Lee stopped complaining. Now he spends his mornings picketing the school. "My children deserve better, and so do all the other children," Lee told *The Sacramento Bee*. "I'm going to be out here every day until something changes."

from the Education Intelligence Agency (EIA) 9/20/99



It's been a busy autumn already. We plan to contribute to that flurry and look forward to hearing more from you and serving your needs. Please keep your eyes on your mailbox, where CER's first-ever SURVEY OF REFORMERS will soon be placed. In the meantime, enjoy the new season and everything fresh that it brings!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeanne".

Jeanne Allen