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**MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
NO. 60**

FEB/MARCH 2000

Dear Friends:

A warm hello to all our friends and colleagues whom we've followed with admiration and who have taken the time to share so many nice thoughts and comments. Our annual Feb/March issue is chock-full of what you need to know about what's happening around you. You'll also find some comments from the real people. These comments reveal the devotion — and the frustration — that's often reflected in national polls and surveys. We hope you find them helpful in your efforts and your understanding of why we need reform.

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Lost in LA

The LA schools superintendent, Ray Cortines, and his chief operating officer, Howard Miller, are working on radical solutions to the radical failure of LA schools. Several proposals are in planning that will be presented to the Board of Education on March 14. Among them:

- Major cuts in administrative overhead: As many as 1,000 positions may be cut, which Miller says are intended not so much to save money as to remove the interference that so many of these positions cause with the delivery of education to children;
- Dividing LA into 11 different school districts and making education truly local by vesting authority and money in the hands of individual principals;
- Performance-based pay of the real sort – not the kind sought by the unions that peg money to things like National Board certification or simple bonuses.

Results matter, says Miller. "Everything that is done in education must be related to performance," he told a group gathered at the University of Southern California for a public policy forum. The LA plan is commendable, as is the COO and his superintendent's grasp of the problems plaguing the district. But lest they confuse their job security with educating kids, the union boss showed his priorities with this reaction to the Performance-pay proposal: It will be a "cold day in hell" before the union goes along with that, said Day Higuchi, the president of the AFT-affiliated United Teachers-Los Angeles.

Lost in LA, indeed.

Washington State's Charter School Follies

The title "borrowed" from the *Tacoma News* says it all about the state's most recent parlay with this burgeoning reform. Far from being influenced by the states that surround it, Washington lawmakers just can't seem to get it right. Despite added muscle from Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's current company, a more compromising proposal and more Democratic support, the bill was topped with last minute parliamentary maneuvers and back room disagreements over union participation. So the WEA once again breathes a collective sigh of relief, but not for long. Supporters have drafted an initiative to take directly to the people that clearly mirrors the charter laws in more than a dozen states with significant charter activity. Anyone wanting to help or give money to defeat the titans should call the Education Excellence Coalition at (206) 634-0589.

More on Charters: **Kansas City's charter effort** is having a positive impact on public school enrollment, according to analyses by the KC-based Learning Exchange. Since 1970, KC enrollment has been on a steady decline, going from approximately 72,000 to 32,000 children in this year. With 15 charter schools serving 4,354 students, enrollment is increasing for the first time. When combining both charter and district enrollment for the year, public school enrollment is up by 600 students compared to last year.

- The fact is that charter schools nationwide are drawing back to public schools about 10% of children previously enrolled in private or home school environments. This is one jewel in the recently published book entitled *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education* by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno and Gregg Vanourek. *Charter Schools in Action* is a tremendous asset to concerned citizens trying to better understand charter schools.
- So is CER's latest report entitled **Charter Schools Today: Changing the Face of American Education**. This report paints a clear and vivid picture of the charter school movement in the United States, including how these schools are having a dramatic impact on competing schools in their communities. It costs \$19.95 plus s&h. Call CER at (800) 521-2118 or order through our website at www.edreform.com.
- Showing a little competition is good for government. The US Department of Education (ED) also released its annual report on charters. It found similar statistics about charter schools as the previous publications mentioned and, analyzing CER research findings from the fall, the ED reveals a 40% growth in charter schools over the last year.

These three entries into the information stream should help put most people's concerns to rest. Those like the school officials in Brentwood, New York whose alarm over the opening of a charter school in Central Islip prompted a PTA-authored circular to children in public schools, (see related story on Page 3), should find solace in these reports.

- Some **South Carolina** legislators are working to remove racial quotas from the state's charter school law. They cite the quotas as a major reason for the low number of charter schools that have been established so far, because it's next to impossible to guarantee that enrollment will reflect the same racial balances as other schools. African-American lawmakers in S.C. are opposed to the removal of the quotas, saying that this move could result in segregated schools. Yet this argument assumes that neither the sponsoring agent nor the state oversees the school. However, that is not how charters work — and the evidence shows otherwise.
- And **Maryland's** efforts have dashed the hopes of some outspoken public school teachers who were hoping to open the first real charter school in Maryland! Teachers Bob Mathis, Julie Greenberg and Frank Mancini led the effort to establish a high achieving 6-12th grade school, and decided to act in earnest on the school board's demand that charter schools remain part of the district. So they petitioned Montgomery County, MD school officials and though meetings were held and committees formed to review the proposal over the last several months, word has it that their proposal is dead. As Frank says, "I doubt many people in Montgomery County will be rushing to submit a charter application ... We have lost time and illusions that the system would be fair: the kids who are suffering under the status quo are the real losers."
- "The **charter schools advertise**, so should we," says Kevin O'Brien, the New Jersey education association's Trenton president. O'Brien is leading a campaign to attract children to the public schools from two local Catholic schools that are closing this spring. Rather than face the possibility that these children would be running off to charters or other private schools, the union is engaging in a little marketing. Let's hope with the PR goes some real review of whether their programs work. They're likely to be asked to show some results from parents who are now able to shop around.

The PTA's Power Grab

First it was Michigan, where PTA gremlins stuffed innocent children's backpacks with tales of horror should vouchers come their way. Next it was Virginia (and Lord knows how many places in between), where children once again served as carrier pigeons in the PTA's delivery of notes authored by the People for the American Way that pleaded for parental uprising against a tax credit proposal pending in Richmond.

The latest reports now come from Brentwood, NY and the subject is charters, where once again parents were treated to PTA-circulated myths over a pending charter school. Their handiwork — referring to the potential opening of the Nehemiah Charter School — screamed "**this charter school may have a devastating impact on the education of your child and could significantly raise property taxes. Programs for our children could be eliminated and class sizes increased.**" The PTA flier was an announcement of a school-district sponsored "hearing" on charter schools, and assured readers that "**your PT A and all PTAs in Brentwood passed a resolution opposing Charter Schools.**"

Clearly the PTA's membership losses over the years to less than 10% of all parents means they don't have the attendance at local meetings to ensure their message gets out to all who choose to hear it voluntarily. Thus they've taken to school-sanctioned propaganda, despite many legal warnings about such actions possibly violating state and local policies regarding political and advocacy work.

Another indication that the PTA is losing members, and therefore, dollars, is its recent move to get federal money flowing to local chapters. The National PTA is lobbying for a rather **Orwellian** sounding plan called, the *Parent Accountability, Recruitment, and Education National Training Act* (PARENT Act). (Look at the book *1984* for strange similarities). This effort allegedly aims to help get more parents involved. Rather than embrace efforts like charter schools that offer true parent participation, these militant moms are going after your money in Congress.

It's ironic that a group that started out to be a positive force for parents also sees completely eye to eye with those satisfied with the performance of the current system. As we've reported over the years, there's rarely an education coalition that doesn't include the PTA along side the unions, the principals' groups, the administrators groups and so on.

The Cartel Implodes

Even their arguments against charter schools are amazingly similar, a fact that is clear from the following official DC Public Schools notice. Without any basis of fact, it foretells of danger and disaster should charter school conversions be permitted:

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOL CONVERSIONS ON THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM AND YOUR COMMUNITY, Dec. 1999 - Jan. 2000

**From the Office of the Superintendent
To Neighborhood Advisory Commission Chairpersons**

Please find below a brief overview of our concerns over the prospects of charter school conversions of District of Columbia Public School buildings...a charter school conversion of an existing District of Columbia public school can mean many or even all of the following:

- **The complete disruption of an existing school for the students, parents and community,**
- **The displacement of the students,**
- **Turf wars over school property,**
- **The derailing of education reforms well underway,**
- **Administrators who may prefer charter status and then use their work day to lobby for this status,**
- **The potential conflicts of interest between a principal and the Superintendent,**

- **Private for profit management firms acquiring public property, for private financial gain and profit,**
 - **Splintering the community over charter vs. non charter issues,**
 - **Forcing policy makers to politicize the educational reform process by “taking sides” on matters of educational policy,**
 - **A Balkanization of the Public School System, creating parallel boards of education, multiple administrations, increased overhead costs, and confused, convoluted curricular programs that cheat students of a continuum of learning,**
 - **Differing curricular standards...**
- ... and it goes on, and on, and on.**

The complete document is posted on our website under “The Opposition.” If you come upon similar items of interest, be sure to send them to us so that we can make these actions known to countless more people.

Mea Culpa

Many of our readers have contacted us about our sponsorship of an outrageously priced and not too effective conference in Scottsdale, AZ last month about reform. In fact, we offered our name and to mail to a sprinkling of people only because it appeared to be a useful forum. CER had nothing to do with the content or organization of the forum. We apologize for the confusion.

A View from Real People

We're pleased to share a few "choice" comments about things we've said or done. These were not sent to CER officially as "letters to the editor;" thus they are without attribution.

"[Denver, CO. Superintendent Chip Zullinger's] intent is to shut down the schools he is proposing to convert and open them as alternative schools. He's hiding under the terminology of 'charter' but [the district] would still control them, except for a few rules. When they fail because they've been put in the worst locations that most people wouldn't send children to, anti-charter people will say 'see, we told you so.'"

The above was in regard to a CER newswire story commending the efforts of school superintendents like Denver's Zullinger. Many there apparently see his particular effort as less than ingenuous. Responses from the Denver Super are welcome!

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"Thank you so much for sending me the School Reform Handbook – this is terrific! (continued)

"I shared *The Blob Who Thought It Stole Christmas* (Dec. 99) with my state representative who lives close by, since they're having such a struggle here with [the Governor's] bill to reform education in Georgia.

"I was at a town hall meeting the other night and heard the representatives of different factions putting forth what they did and didn't like about the education reform bill, and I thought, my gosh ... tinker, tinker, how do they ever get anything resolved! Some of the people involved in the legislative debate seem to take the proposed changes as a personal affront.

"Then up stepped the representative to the state association of the boards of Education (I'm still trying to figure that one out). Whew. Anyway, I just received your December newsletter and read the Blob poem and that really summed up the town hall meeting experience. Thank you."

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The following passage from a NY Catholic high school principal is so eloquent that we wanted to share it with you. CER and education reform in general embraces people of all faiths and creeds engaged in helping children. What the principal says is something we all should heed:

"... It is the one hundredth anniversary of St. John Baptist De La Salle's canonization and the fiftieth anniversary of his being declared the patron saint of teachers. He was the first one to systematically teach the children of the poor and working-class, to codify simultaneous teaching, one teacher with many students instead of one-on-one tutoring, and to teach children in their native language. He also spelled out the necessary virtues of a good teacher. First and foremost he said that teachers must have a love for every child confided to their care. This little obscure fact has considerable meaning, because at no other time in our history, in my judgment, have we needed to be so concerned for our teachers.

"Teaching is by far the most difficult and highest of the professions. The degree of difficulty is why teachers, when they die, go straight to heaven! They are responsible for digesting the core knowledge and values of a culture and transmitting it to the next generation. Teaching is only partly about training a person to have skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic; it is mostly about showing youngsters how to live. It is about introducing them to the wonders of God's handiwork in nature and history. It is about showing children how to recognize injustice and discrimination and to have the courage to stand against them. It is about living a life based on principles and continuing to learn throughout one's lifetime. It is about fidelity to the daily routine of classroom and to the tedium of administrative duties. It is about training one's heart to have a spot for every youngster and the patience to find a resonant chord in an otherwise dissonant, religious and disrespectful child. It is about caring even when children seem to have given up on themselves. This is why teachers are so special. They are asked to make of themselves a gift to others, to share their very hearts and souls. Because of the sacredness of our vocation, we must strive to be as selfless as possible, which is a call to personal holiness."

Success Stories

Three cheers for the Robert Treat Academy Charter School in Newark, NJ, whose Spring, 1999 Stanford Achievement scores posted higher than the national median in every subject in grades K-2. The school has a traditional approach, and boasts 85% monthly participation in meetings by parents, versus an estimated 50% for other local schools. The academy does more staff training than the local district, and offers children 210 days a year. The student body is diverse and dedicated. Plans are underway to expand and build a new facility. Robert Treat is advised by Seton Hall education school professor Jim Caulfield, a 43-year veteran of the public schools. For more information, you may call the school directly at 973-482-8811.

About *your* successes: please share them with us! If we don't use them in the Monthly Letter, they may show up in the CER *NewsWire*, our weekly email service, or somewhere on the web, in a book or speech! You never know.

Wisdom of the Ages

"Insanity is repeating something that doesn't work and expecting different results." G.K. Chesterton

"If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and defraying the entire school expense of those who have no one else to pay for them." J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*

"Ticket to Nowhere..."

... Is the apropos title of a report authored by the Education Trust, which found a huge disconnect between what states require and what college and universities require for entrance and placement into classes.

This is just another in a long string of assessments that find that most high schoolers are not getting the courses they need to be successful in college, and that what happens in schools and what employers, professors and parents expect is not being met.

A similar conclusion is reached in the Public Agenda Foundation's "*Reality Check '99*." Despite the demand for higher standards, schools are still not meeting public demands by providing solid, measurable standards-based courses to children. Not only that, but teachers don't perceive it to be the problem that the recipients of the product see. Parents remain concerned, but relatively happy. And why not? Parents who see B's on report cards, inflated SATs and norm-referenced tests, whose daughter or son gets into a 'pretty good' college don't see the remedial course work that's done, nor the void in knowledge that may later guarantee their child a better life.

Education Trust's report is available at (202) 293-1217 or www.edtrust.org.

Paying for Performance

The battle is over, say some of the nation's business leaders and governors, as far as the need to ensure the payment a teacher gets for doing his or her job is tied to the result of the teaching. The NEA has begun to tell newspapers that they are on board for such a concept; yet there's a semantics game being played that belies the best English teacher. Some definitions are in order:

Pay for Performance: The concept by which teachers' actual individual salary increase — and mostly their yearly contract — is determined by the quality of the instruction they deliver, as measured by the performance of students.

Bonus Pay: The concept by which a pool of teachers or school is given a sum of money based on the collective scores of a school, not the individual accomplishments of its many parts.

Career Ladder: A set salary schedule that allows a teacher to scale each predetermined rung on a ladder, normally measured by a combination of years of service, some observation, peer review and principal input.

National Certification: An "honor" conferred upon a teacher, who is evaluated based on a detailed application, a video, peer comments, and a portfolio. (Note: this is the latest concept embraced allegedly in the "pay for performance" genre.)

There are many more such programs being bantered around as measures to bring real accountability to teachers. For example, in Wisconsin, it means pegging licensing standards to assessments of a teacher's performance. Assessment — from others who watch them — not assessment based on how well the kids do.

Meanwhile we offer yet another example of the attitude of the unions toward performance pay (and some commentary thereof), courtesy of the Educational Intelligence Agency:

"Although many newspaper editorial writers think teachers' salaries should be based on student performance, I haven't seen a single editorial promoting merit pay for pizza delivery people, legislators or soldiers," writes Rich Wood of the Washington Education Association's media relations department. Well, Rich, there is a very good reason for that — these people already get 'merit pay.'

- a) *Pizza Delivery:* When your pizza arrives two hours late, do you ask the delivery person about conditions in the store, the age of the oven, or how many years the pizza makers has been on the job? Or do you simply withhold the tip?
- b) *Legislators:* When legislators 'merit' WEA endorsement by voting the way the WEA would like them to vote, isn't it normal procedure to reward them with contributions to their campaigns, without which they could not retain their jobs?
- c) *Soldiers:* Soldiers have an even more effective method of merit pay: if they do their jobs well, they survive to collect their pay. Military instructors, by the way, are not only judged by the performance of their students, they are held responsible for the performance of their students."

On Standards and Accountability

- Turn your heads west (unless you're already there) to **California**, whose posting of every schools' Academic Performance Indicator (API) is disturbing any complacency among troubled and mediocre schools. But while reviewing the APIs on the state's website can be a bit difficult, real people can find information in layman's language on the privately operated **www.greatschools.net**.
- One solution to the above-discussed conundrum on how to evaluate teachers might begin when teachers are first approved to teach. **New Mexico** is following where Massachusetts and a few other states have left off, and has set higher standards for teachers. They must now score 69% or better on the state's new teacher test to pass. Last year, only 60% scored at that level
- **Maryland's** State Board of Education took bold action in intervening with the state's three worst performing schools. Three different firms were approved to manage and run those schools on the state's behalf, which will likely stem the flood of educational failure experienced in these three schools for years. But rather than account for their own involvement with the failure, the union president there had the characteristically arrogant response: "*We're not sure how the state can expect these companies to do any better than people who live and work here,*" said Aaron A. Pinchback, Baltimore Teacher's Union representative, American Federation of Teachers.
- South to **Georgia**, the media has been abuzz with news that Governor Roy Barnes is leading the most radical education reform plan in the nation. Upon closer look, the bill is not really very progressive or likely to yield the kind of urgent rejuvenation and reform that the Peachtree State's children really need. In short, the bill removes tenure, but does nothing to establish performance driven pay plans; it establishes site councils for schools, but gives no more authority to the schools to make real changes; it reduces class sizes; pays for more National Board teachers; and allows for a few new state-sponsored charter schools. Barnes wants to give failing schools three years to improve or allow for several different kinds of state intervention. Unfortunately, most children in those schools don't have three years to spare, Governor.
- ***How to be a Millionaire*** — without a good education! The Brits are balking at America's educational standards, but this time it's not because of an international study. It seems that America's latest craze — Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? — has caused an uproar over the ease of its questioning. Goshak, the British insurance company that makes the payouts, is seeking to void the insurance policy it approved. When the American show is compared to the British show, there are several major differences:

First, there's the quality issue. The newspapers reported that while Americans are able to make the half-million mark with questions like "How many full bags of wool are there in Baa Baa Black Sheep," the Brits ask questions akin to "What's the title of T.S. Elliott's 'The Waste Land,' or 'What is the SI unit of magnetic flux density?'"

Thus Great Britain's show has only had one contestant so far take home even a second prize, while the show here has already paid off five contestants totaling more than \$2.5 million. It appears from international observations that, once again, we've given our neighbors good cause to question our dedication to education.

Bring on the Legos — My Kids are Going to College!

A Commentary, by the Editor

At our house, we always viewed playing with Legos as a healthy, creative outlet for our four children. It keeps them happily busy without the passive exercise of TV or video games, and one could argue it's great for fine motor skills, sensory perception, spatial ability and more. Our kids have Lego car races, skyscraper contests, beanie house building exercises, and more. In fact, we think Legos are really cool, and load them up with more at every event that calls for a gift.

But never in our wildest dreams could we imagine that one day, our Lego investment would also pave the way for college! Kathleen Parker, a syndicated columnist, wrote about this new development last month. She says that eight different colleges and universities, including Colorado College, Carleton, Grinnell, the University of Delaware and Rutgers — have begun to conduct admissions tests based on whether a potential enrollee can build a copy of a Lego robot in ten minutes. It's supposed to parse out the leaders, the team players, and those with drive, perseverance and adaptability. That's because, it is apparently conceded, not everyone is good at tests.

So I was thinking I'd try this one at home: I'm going to go see my children's K, 1st, 3rd and 5th grade teachers, and tell them it's time to dispense with all the educational testing that supposedly tells them whether the kids are getting the teaching right. Afterall, it's a real pressure cooker on Mom and Dad, too, and the teachers have to put up with all sorts of problems day in and day out. "So," I'll tell them, "let's do this instead. Let's just keep reading, and writing and 'rithmetic, but let's prepare for college by investing the money for testing in Legos instead." The Rock Raiders cost about \$49.95 for example, which is about the same as per student testing in the lower grades.

Afterall, if we're spending all this money now to get these kids well prepared to enter college, and the colleges don't want any part of it ten years from now, let's beat them to the punch. Move over Internet — Let's put a "Lego-land" in every school! Forget "Net-Day" you guys in Silicon Valley — Let's go for something far more basic! Forget the spelling bees, the math competitions and even literature. We could all get along much better, and we'd dispense with this petty bickering over whether standards should be met, measured and accounted.

If we all took the new Lego approach — perhaps Howard Gardner even has a new intelligence to discover for us — then all we'd need to fight over is who has more green Legos and whether there was equity in the minority communities and enough access to Legos, which are rather high-priced to boot.

The standards setters could engage us in what constitutes the right levels of Lego-mastery at each level. We could make accommodations for those not spatially or

kinesthetically-inclined. They could take paper and pencil tests, and leave the rest of the fun to us.

There could be federal and state subsidies for the new Title 46 Lego Enrollment Gateway Office (L.E.G.O), and more jobs would be created in manufacturing, tutoring and even polling and survey research.

So go home today, pull out the Legos, the Duplos and even the K'Nex, and get rolling! Just think how much easier our lives would be! Isn't that what it's all about?

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What follows is as old as the hills, but we wish it for all of you just the same! 'Till next time,

Jeanne
Jeanne Allen

An Irish Blessing

May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon you face
and the rains fall soft upon your fields,
and until we meet again,
May God hold you in the Hollow of His Hand.

May there always be work
for your hands to do.
May your purse always
hold a coin or two.
May the hand of a friend
be always near you.
May God fill your heart
with gladness to cheer you.

May love and laughter light your days
and warm your heart and home.
May good and faithful friends be yours
wherever you may roam.
May peace and plenty bless your world
with a job that long endures.
May all life's passing seasons
bring the best to you and yours.