



1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 204 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000
Fax 202-822-5077

MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 62

JUNE, 2000

Dear Friends:

The closing of the official school year brings opportunity for reflection, renewal and taking stock of what needs to be done to make our schools better. While the kids are jazzed they're finally out, we parents are worn out but looking forward to starting anew in the fall. During this all too brief hiatus, schools, too, should figure out how they can reverse the all-too-real failure of far too many schools. For some summer reflecting and action ideas, read on....

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The Testing Conspiracy Exposed

What children learn is as important as how they are taught or the setting in which they learn. A nice small class with beautiful windows, full of light and materials may indeed yield some performance gains, but only if what the children are being taught and asked to 'perform' is substantial, rigorous and appropriate. But some people don't want our children tested, or perhaps, don't want to feel the pressure themselves:

- Cheating in Potomac, MD where the children were told to correct wrong answers? Or in Fairfax County, VA, where they were "coached" with answers from copies of the test??? The howls went out from the media: Is it increasing, asked *U.S. News and World Report*? Is it the tests, asked *ABC's Nightline*? The world "discovered" cheating this month, and by and large attributed it to those big, bad, mean, old ugly tests that now are aiming to hold students accountable. The backdrop to all this is the arrival of the anti-testing furor that apparently runs deeper than whether Johnny should test or not. What follows are actual quotes from among the biggest culprits:

"High stakes tests are ...designed to drive millions of students out of school so that, if they end up with a low-paying job or no job at all, they will blame themselves instead of the corporate system."

(Who would really believe this stuff???)

"Tests like MCAS (in Massachusetts) are not about education but about social control. By constantly raising the standards... they make everyone afraid that 'you'll never be good enough' and subject our children to the same stress that employers use to control us on the job. The tests are meant to get students used to having no control over their lives, and to defining their own worth by how well they measure up to the needs of the corporations."

Such blather comes from a group called New Democracy which has spearheaded the test opposition in Massachusetts. This narrow slice of anti-testers are not concerned about testing, but about capitalism. Simply put, they don't belong in this business.

"High stakes tests result from corporate domination of our society; they would not exist in a real democracy. To oppose them effectively we must aim to defeat corporate power and create a truly democratic society."

(Anyone for a good love-in?)

"We need to reach out with information about the tests and organize meetings to ... help resist MCAS."

Unfair Test: Monty Neill of a group misleadingly called Fair-Test appears to be in this business to try to admonish corporations and not to improve schools. What's particularly dangerous about that is that he's actually been accepted by the media for his "mainstream," opposing views. Here's some excerpts from a recent electronic conversation that will show these guys are anything but mainstream:

Someone asks: **"Do we defer on winning on tests until we break the corporate stranglehold, or do you think this is all or nothing, we can't stop the testing and make real progress toward good education for all without stopping capitalism?"**

Neill answers: **"...It may well be possible to stop high stakes testing and corporate-led reform, though the fact that the same corporate forces are imposing education reforms around the US and around the world suggests that they have a lot at stake. ...We need every resource we can muster to win it. There are limits on the depth of the transformation of the schools we can achieve while the corporations are the dominant force in society."**

(Tell me when he starts talking about kids...)

"Should only anti-capitalists be part of the opposition to testing?"

Neill: **"... the great majority of people are opposed to the dog-eat-dog, money-oriented values of capitalism... If people actually shared the goals and values of capitalism, the media and politicians wouldn't have to devote full time to deceiving us and controlling us...We are trying to build a very broad-based movement in which people will participate for a variety of motives. Some will participate because they see testing as an attack on kids. Some will because they think testing is simply a poor pedagogical approach. Some will because they see it as an attack on kids which is part of a wider corporate attack on people everywhere."**

(And here's the real focus of Neill and company...)

"...The Business Roundtable and corporate America don't deny that they are behind the tests; they simply lie about their motives. Exposing their real motives is a way of taking the offensive against the corporations ... we're confirming and helping people understand more clearly the destructive role that Big Business plays throughout society. People are being told that the schools have failed and that the corporations and tests and standards are here to help.

"... Explaining that the corporations and the Business Roundtable are lying ... will help people understand..."

Oh, people will understand, all right. They'll understand that somehow there's a group of people that think fighting big, bad capitalists is a better cause than making schools accountable so children actually get to be successful someday. But successful people might like capitalism, and that wouldn't help their cause, now, would it?

For more hogwash and the real motives behind the anti-testing folks, log on to CER's website at <http://www.edreform.com/update/antitest.html>.

The Real State of Testing

There are some valid apprehensions in this latest testing craze, as there are signs of success:

- In many states, teachers weren't properly briefed or administrators didn't convey the requirements to schools. In **Virginia**, some were convinced that the state would yield to pressure to delay implementation of the Standards of Learning so when school reopened, they had done little to prepare. After the second year SOLs were given, many schools showed some modest gains, and some showed enormous gains. Now the risk is that ignorance will cause the standards to be watered down or cease to have the pressure-cooker effect that will cause urgently needed improvements.
- Curriculum and testing go hand in hand. Most schools don't even consider re-evaluating their materials to help better prepare children through the year for tests. But in some cities in **Florida**, where bad FCAT scores now can mean vouchers for kids, schools hired consultants, held staff retreats, and did summer work last year to evaluate programs and practices so they could make improvements.
- Some tests are giving serious indigestion to people who for too long have gotten away with *not* educating students. Affluent Montgomery County, MD saw half of its high school students who take geometry fail their finals first semester, but most still passed the course, since the final is only a small part of the whole grade. In this district that often is called "one of the best in the country", many parents were learning for the first time that the curriculum wasn't adequate and called their attention for the first time to bad math practices and the fact that all that glitters isn't necessarily gold.
- High stakes tests in the **Big Apple** are starting to push improvements. There were modest gains in 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 7th grades. Sixth grade scores increased by more than 12 points, which is great news. Kudos to the NYC Chancellor who, in acknowledging, the progress made it clear that more data was needed before they could call the improvements a trend. That's the right attitude to have.
- Tests were used to tell us about a recent Core Knowledge success in **Oklahoma**. Children in OK City demonstrated "highly significant" gains in the basics math, reading comprehension and vocabulary, social studies, science after only one year! (For more information log onto www.coreknowledge.org.)

• A mother recently wrote us that she supports tests, but when her daughter didn't master the Ohio proficiency test which kept her from the graduation ceremony, she was naturally upset. She said "I understand the need for tests but my daughter has done well in all other areas of the curriculum. But she'll keep on working on it until she passes." Food for thought: Testing isn't bad but maybe tests need work and teachers need training! Maybe, too, parents need choice to get their children better educated.

From Arizona to Chicago and back to California, standards and tests coupled with more control and flexibility at the school level are driving improvements for the first time in years. Let's put the fruitcakes out to thaw and get on with educating kids.

Other Testing Reflections

In reporting on local math scores, journalist, Karen Chenoweth writing in the *Washington Post* put the situation into a context that is applicable throughout the U.S.

"Kids, unite! You have everything to lose if you do not understand that this is about you and your future. If your teacher doesn't seem to know the material or has little experience teaching it, can't answer your questions adequately, or is frequently out of school for one reason or another, you have a right to demand better. This isn't about whether you "like" your teachers. This is about whether your teachers have helped you master what you need to know. "

Finally Chenoweth puts into perspective exactly why we should care about such information: "If we use this opportunity to develop a clear picture of why so many students are failing we will be a long way toward actually doing a good job instead of resting on whatever it was we were resting on."



The **Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)** has been under scrutiny since the Governor from the Lone Star State began his run for president. Some believe the strong results are mis-reported and others just don't like tests. Scholar Paul T. Hill rebuts the hit on tests when *the Post* criticized TAAS and testing in general:

"Texas is...one of 48 states trying to improve schools by setting standards for student performance, measuring what students learn, creating incentives for educators ... and finding alternatives for children in failed schools. Texas' approach was for years the favored cause of the education establishment...Now, Texas and a few other states are actually measuring performance, reporting results, and creating options for children in failing schools. The same people who embraced standards-based reform when it had few practical consequences are outraged. According to the *Post* story, Texas standards are too easy. Without irony the same story condemns Texas for denying diplomas to students who cannot pass these tests. Some schools in low income areas are deferring library purchases so they can invest more in teaching basic reading and math. Teachers and principals who cannot improve their schools face transfer and loss of jobs while superintendents whose district scores improve are rewarded... *The Post* also points to the high dropout rate among minority students as a reason not to believe that Texas'

scores are rising. Dropout rates are unacceptably high, above 31% for the poorest students, but they are declining."

Hill adds: "Texas is not doing everything perfectly... there are problems. It does not take Texas booster or a Bush supporter to be thinks the *Posts'* catalogue of complaints against Texas is a big step away from serious discourse about school reform."

From the Trenches...

On Charters: When on May 11th the New Jersey Council on Local Mandates decided in favor of ravenous school boards that charter schools would not receive the 90% of program funding to which the state said they were entitled, legislators acted swiftly to make up a \$500,000 shortfall in charter school budgets. Since then, policymakers have rectified the funding disparities that exist by adding state funds to the charter budgets. But money alone is not the problem faced. It's the fundamental issue that charter children are public school children and are entitled to the same kind of benefits as had they stayed in their assigned district school. This issue is not likely to be resolved in the near future by **the Garden State**, unless the definition of public school is clarified and the establishment who gets the lion's share of public monies in the state, stays happy with what they've got. While there's a quick fix in place to fund now and future charters for the next year, there's a bigger, more fundamental solution needed.

- One solution for lawmakers can be gleaned from **North Carolina**, where the state's highest attorney ruled that charter students are entitled to an equal share of revenues. Districts continue to insist that local charter schools are not entitled to their fair share of local monies for their students. The Attorney General's office ruled that the districts are indeed obligated to transfer a share of the tax money levied by school districts on residents. "It is clear from the funding provisions that the same State per pupil allocations would flow to the charter schools as to traditional public schools. In our opinion, it is consistent for the local school system to transfer all monies it has budgeted in the current expense fund pro rata to the charter school. This puts public charter school students on an equal footing with students attending traditional public schools...In conclusion, all funds contained in the local school boards current expense fund...must be transferred to the charter school on a per pupil basis."

- **Walla-Walla land:** When last we reported, there was still a faint chance of victory for charter schools in Washington State. The Democratic governor embraced the same plan as Republicans and even the union endorsed it. But the Senate Education Chair, Rosemary McAuliffe, dug in her heels and wouldn't let the bill out of committee. Enter entrepreneur and former Microsoft executive Paul Allen. He's taken over the campaign initially started and continued through the years by Jim and Fawn Spady, and the fate of charter schools will now be decided by the people in an initiative on the ballot this November. In the meantime, McAuliffe will get the run of her life by pro-charter Republican Leo Van Hollebeke, who was once a Democratic state senator.

- **The Bay State** saw its original 14 charter schools renewed after five successful years. The Charter School Resource Center at Pioneer Institute highlighted some findings of the inspection team in a piece entitled *Checking Up on Charter Schools:*

* About half the schools were found to be doing extremely well, several others had satisfactory achievement, and a couple were in the category of "not quite there yet." Schools with the highest student achievement had well-developed academic programs, clear standards of performance in each grade and subject, and used consistent and appropriate tools to measure student progress.

* Among the highest achieving schools are those that give priority to recruiting faculty who are proficient in their subject areas and are less concerned with certification and pedagogical experience. In the two highest-achieving schools, fewer than half of faculty members have Massachusetts certification.

* The charter schools demonstrated extensive school-to-parent communication. Parents volunteer in the classroom and wherever else help is needed.

- A number of schools have begun to disseminate best practices through their web sites...

In sum, the charter schools that have reached the five-year mark are taking advantage of their autonomy and flexibility to create effective learning communities. Their staff are sharing what they've learned with other educators. Should we make way for more of them? Absolutely.

- **New York City charters** may get a boost in funding thanks to Mayor Guiliani. His deputy mayor Anthony Coles told *Newsday* recently that city charter schools need money for capital costs because they don't normally get facilities financing. The idea of Mayors getting into the reform arena is not new but welcome news. Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist has some authority over chartering and several other cities, starting with Pembroke Pines, FL have actually started charter schools. What if all the nation's tens of thousands of mayors in states with charter laws became active reformers...?

- We visited with charter schools and their leaders in the **City of Brotherly Love** last month. What a wonderful opportunity to see West Oak Lane Charter School in action, and to visit with the Alliance for Progress Charter School where the community actively participates in the education of their children. Both schools were bustling with activity, and are run by energetic, highly devoted and obsessive women who live, eat and sleep their charter school and all its families. These ladies are also part of a great Philadelphia Alliance of Charter Schools which serves the greater Philly area. Its members are a tight knit group that provide support and encouragement to one another, which in a city with so much educational bureaucracy is no easy feat.

- Supporters held a rally in **Michigan** earlier this month to lift the cap on charter schools that's left charter growth at a virtual standstill. Universities, the state's primary alternative sponsors, have to keep all the applications they have on hold, which at one time was as high as 100. The legislature has several union-backed lawmakers whose livelihoods depend on doing the union's bidding. So it's no surprise that while they're keeping the cap down, they also have filed a bill requiring management companies in the state to disclose the same information that public school boards allegedly disclose. We were struck that there was a little bit of irony here. Since so many parents complain about how little regular public schools supply in the way of financial, procedural, and decision-making to the public, we'd like to know exactly what it is that public schools

openly, and legibly disclose that people think private businesses who work in charters don't. Send your submissions to cer@edreform.com, Attention: *Project Disclosure*.

And while we're on the subject, why don't we ask about what the following companies who gain/raise the majority of their profits from school business think about "disclosures" like that being proposed in Michigan: Textbook/Software publishers; Construction Companies; Testing Companies; Unions????

School Choice...in Ohio is up for grabs. On June 20, oral arguments were heard in the 6th circuit court in Cincinnati. The issue that has brought Cleveland's 1995 school choice program to the courts once and back again is whether or not the state advances religion by allowing parents to choose the school that best suits their child. The NEA argued that the state impermissibly advances religion by allowing parents to choose a participating religious school. Attorneys for the parents and children reminded the court that the decision of the parents is not a trivial matter. Rather, it is the heart of the matter. As a result, the state favors the right of the parent to choose a participating school, be it private or public, and it remains neutral toward all religion. That argument was also made in an amicus brief CER filed on behalf of several national groups. The outcome will affect the 4,000 children who are slated to attend schools of choice this fall. A decision is expected before the school year gears up again.

The American Jewish Committee is among the groups opposing Cleveland's program. It filed an amicus brief asking the courts to strike down the program, saying it "substantially weakens Cleveland's public schools." Of course, we want to know how much weaker you can get. Consider that earlier this year the Cleveland City Public Schools failed to meet a single one of 27 state performance criteria. As a result, the state has declared a "state of academic emergency" in the district.

- **Trouble in River City:** Actually, it's trouble in Iowa City, and it involves the test company that Florida hired to grade the FCATs, which is the test used to determine the various grade ranking of public schools, and thus, to determine at which schools children will be afforded vouchers and a chance to succeed. National Computer Systems isn't going to make their deadline. That's after NCS actually sued to get the contract that they'd originally been passed over for, causing a month delay by taking it to the courts. Rather than tar and feather NCS for messing up, the establishment is taking to task the Education Commissioner and anyone else who supports choice.

The FCAT scoring debacle awful no matter who's to blame but rather than point fingers, the BLOB should be figuring out a way to make it easy for parents to evaluate their choices once the scores are out. In the absence of that, call Floridians for School Choice at 305-702-5576 and visit their site at www.floridians.org.

- Some campaigns are all smoke and mirrors, even those run by reformers. But the Michigan effort to give choice to children in failing schools is an impressive effort that has joined together a wide and diverse lot of people in support of choice. The *Kids First! Yes!* effort was certified for the ballot last month, and is gaining steam. In short, the initiative guarantees per-pupil funding, statewide academic testing for teachers and opportunity scholarships for children in failing school districts, like Detroit, for example, where less than 50% of children graduate in four years (despite numbers

games to the contrary). While the power and common sense of choice is on their side, the Michigan campaigners still face an uphill battle against inertia and mighty union opposition. This nation loves underdogs, though, so here's to the underdogs there, and if you want to help, you should contact them via their website at www.kidsfirstyes.org.

- **Bigotry in Boston?** An effort to amend the state's constitution to make it possible for a choice program to even be considered has been halted. Federal District Judge George O'Toole has denied a motion for a preliminary injunction that would have enabled the Massachusetts legislature to vote on a school choice initiative before the constitutional deadline of May 10. Now, unless a political solution is quickly found, the enormous efforts of citizens to gather more than 80,000 signatures on initiative petitions last fall may go to waste. Nonetheless, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty is pursuing a lawsuit to remove anti-choice provisions from the state constitution. For more information on the suit *Boyette v. Galvin* visit Becket Fund at www.becketfund.org.

General Reform: Someone in Houston is working overtime to make sure children have access to many educational opportunities – even those above and beyond what his own district can provide. Superintendent Rod Paige —now the highest paid superintendent in Texas — is exploring how to implement a partnership with private schools advanced by the school board in 1998. Under that policy, children at low performing schools would have the option of going to approved, private schools. The district already contracts with private schools for special education and other services.

- **Pennsylvania** passed landmark legislation allowing Philadelphia and ten other failing school districts to have wide latitude in recreating education. Districts would be allowed to privatize, to create charters, to make substantive changes in staff and spending. Harrisburg and Chester-Upland had power transferred immediately, with the Mayor given control in the former and a special state appointed board in the case of the latter. Meanwhile, Philly's superintendent has announced he's leaving, giving some reformers hope that a new leader, along with the ability to implement new reforms, will long last help the children suffering from an impervious status quo. For more info about the bill go to <http://www.pde.psu.edu/issini/edempower.html>.



In Memoriam

The world lost an honorable man this month, a man who was also a dedicated, and stalwart reformer. Stewart Springfield was the Executive Director of the Walton Family Foundation and is responsible for so many successful reform efforts actually reaching children. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him, and by those who didn't but were helped by his connection with them, his absence will be felt. Godspeed.



It might be July by the time you read this. Time flies, especially in the education reform world, but we wouldn't have it any other way. We hope your summer has started out with a bang, and wish you the best this Independence Day!


Jeanne Allen