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MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
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Dear Friends:

It's been a bit more than a month since we last corresponded in this mode, but it's not for lack of wanting to get there! We wish we could say that it was *Valentine's Day* or *Black History Month* that have kept us busy. But alas, what has kept us from you is the confluence of great demands for help in reform efforts, with the unbridled attacks on reform from those who worry that the world as they know it is coming to an end. And maybe it is, and maybe that's OK for those who have suffered from lack of reform. But we start this time with a look in our backyard to the unveiling of the new president's education proposals, the responses recorded so far and what, if anything, it all means for our local schools and parents who need help.



And before we get there, we have one small public service announcement. Throughout this issue of the MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS are sprinkled several references to pop songs or popular culture. While they all mean something in our Letter, **this is a game** and the first person who can correctly identify each pop culture reference and where it's from, gets a near-all expenses paid trip to Washington, DC this spring to participate in our annual *Leader's Forum: Grassroots Spring Into Action!* And the deal is this: the songs need full title, who wrote it and who sang it, in addition to a year! Good luck!



For more information about CER's 3rd Annual Leader's Forum:

GRASSROOTS SPRING INTO ACTION!

Go to www.edreform.com and click on *Sign Up Now!*

Featured speakers include grassroots leaders from ten different states, including school board members happy about standards and school choice, parents leading the testing charge and those pushing for charter laws, and representatives of those least served who are mobilizing for change. Hurry – call now.



Will Education Reform Come to Washington?

George W.'s education plan was rolled out to a veritable who's who of education reformers on January 23. With the new secretary of education, Rod Paige, at his side, President Bush talked forcefully of the need for the federal government finally to become accountable for the money it spends. Throughout the lengthy proposal, from early childhood programs all the way up, the theme and message are clear: There can be no accountability without consequences, and consequences require some action that's been missing from the past eight years of Department of Education rule.

Let's start with the fact that in his remarks, President Bush acknowledged clearly that American education is a mess. He bemoaned the "scandal of illiteracy" and schools "where nearly 70 percent of 4th graders are unable to read," which is a sea change from the rhetoric of the past eight years where blips on the screen in test scores were proclaimed as "turning the corner" and "30 year gains." Since the president and his education secretary acknowledge that there is indeed a major problem, one would expect that their proposals would seek to solve the problem, rather than adding more money to the status quo and allowing the unions and school boards to run business as usual.

And to his credit, Bush's education plan is thorough, demanding, reasonable, and quite respectful of the role of states and communities. It starts with the premise that money from Washington should be tied to academic performance. From schools to states, the plan sets out requirements for measurements and assessments to diagnose student, school, and district progress. Rather than take a Goals 2000-heavy-handed approach, the Bush plan allows states to select a test to use and those tests will be gauged against the highly regarded National Assessment of Education Progress to make sure states are looking for rigor and not playing numbers games. Failing schools will get assistance first, and then if there is no improvement, their children will be permitted to take the Title 1 funds that Washington spends to allegedly educate them to their own choice of school or tutoring service.

While only a small but important part of the plan, this is the magnet for the media craze that has the nation thinking that the president just introduced a major voucher plan. Let's look at the facts. Schools get millions of dollars in federal aid in Title 1 funding that by the programs own internal evaluation has found no progress. Bush is taking what some consider a tepid approach and saying those schools can continue for only three more years, and after that, if the scores are still abysmal, those kids get to be treated to the kinds of services that middle- and higher-class parents already take part in to make sure Johnny gets into the best schools. If it's a voucher, or grant, or scholarship, or conduit, or piece of paper, or plain old financial aid, what does it matter? If money is supposed to help kids and it doesn't, move it over to someone who will make it work.

Because it's so clearly the right thing to do, it's hard to believe that there will be a major fight in Congress over this provision. The Senate's education committee has long been afraid to buck the blob, so it's likely that this will be a lightning rod for them. People like Washington senator Patty Murray will cry for more classroom reduction dollars, as if there's any evidence to suggest that such a program has done anything to eradicate "the scandal of illiteracy."

The rest of the package is as noteworthy, and pushes money and decision-making more to the states. Phonics fans should cheer the emphasis on research-proven reading instruction. Messy and bureaucratic programs will be consolidated to allow more flexibility outside of Washington. There's a focus on charter schools, rewards for states that narrow the achievement gap, and a reduction of administrative funds for states that fail to meet their own standards.

And there's even a special focus on promoting parental choice, to allow more exploration of programs that exist and information to parents about the wide array of options. Finally, there is a reversal of top-down focus on teacher hiring with a focus instead on allowing states to use federal money as they see fit to pursue programs, which could include efforts to break the certification log jam and to tie teacher pay to performance.

The response? The usual suspects of course were out in droves. The unions tried to temper their clear rejection of all that is not Gore and said they were heartened by some of the package but wary of vouchers, possible shifting of money, among other things. But that's to be the case, and whether the olive branch to Capital Hill succeeds will depend largely on whether or not the Bush education agenda is pushed as a package that must remain intact.

The Democrats, headed by Delaware's Tom Carper and Connecticut's Joe Lieberman have a package with similar themes but not as heavy on the accountability and missing the escape valve for children in failing schools. Obviously they want their package to succeed for not only good intentions, but for the sake of an early political victory. After all, education is supposed to be a Democratic issue, but if he sticks to his guns, this new president may finally break the perception that Republicans can't do education well. And that may be the crux of the deliberations over the next few weeks. Stay tuned.

The above commentary appeared originally in National Review Online

The Response

- The media was glowing in its assessments - for the most part - while often raising skepticism about those darn "vouchers." True to politics, the president's own party and some of his staffers were quick to try to play down any controversy.

By the end of February, the news reports were feeding the story that the president planned to increase the education budget by more than any other department increase. Those words were often said without the corresponding press for accountability that was the hallmark of the first few days of rollout.

- *The Washington Post's* opinion page is fast becoming the thorn in the establishment's side. In reacting to the Bush education plan, the *Post* assessed it as a "quick start" that places "welcome emphasis" on early literacy and annual testing.

But the part most likely responsible for the THUD heard recently at the NEA headquarters on 16th street is this line:

"As promised in the campaign, Mr. Bush also would offer the parents of students in failing public schools the option of using federal money for other alternatives, including private schools, if the public institutions don't improve after three years of intervention. This voucher plan, already a lightning rod for opposition, may be too small to give parents real alternatives. But the principle underlying the proposal — that students should not be trapped in failing schools — is sound, and the effort to give poor parents more choices should be embraced and enhanced."

- Contrast this to the venomous commentary in the Phi Delta Kappan (a scholarly journal, once upon a time):

"There are those who campaign for vouchers, whether to feather their own nests directly or to make political hay with those who favor private over public education. There are those who conduct workshops aimed at fixing a "broken" system of public education... And let me not mince words. None of those people is bound by truth."

In this particular issue, the editor then goes on a rampage over PBS's thoughtful program called *Education- A Public Right Gone Wrong*, aired earlier this year. She claims the documentary offered "nary a shred of evidence" that the state of education is still in serious need of repair, and thus promises readers that the Kappan will continue to "demand that 'evidence' be vetted by those who understand scientific processes." And probably they need to agree with her, too.

- **A Rose by any other name...** Before Bush unveiled his new accountability plan — which got high marks from many journalists — a group parading as the Republican Main Street Partnership issued its own plan which excluded the idea of allowing parents of children in failing schools to have an option out.

But rather than "Main Street," wouldn't this group be more accurately called the Old Conservatives of America group? As reformers and progressives increasingly join hands to help children, these so-called mainstreamers offer nothing but milk toast and pabulum to cure the disease. Someone from the White House needs to show these guys and gals the Texas two step out of Washington!

- *Are they breathing over there?* ... was what occurred to us after reading the National PTA's press release headline regarding the Bush plan:

"National PTA Critical of Bush Administration Education Agenda."

And? We expected something different?

On School Choice

One news item that held us up this month was the release of a new report showing choice does lift the quality of schools around it.

- **Catch a Wave!** At least that's what's happening in dozens of schools in Florida, with new pathbreaking research now finding that there indeed is a major Ripple effect from the establishment of the A+ program that provided the first lifeboat ever for children in failing schools — and apparently a good kick in the pants for schools on the verge.

The study, performed jointly by scholars from Harvard University, Florida State University and the Manhattan Institute, found that "schools receiving a failing grade from the state in 1999 and whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed a second time achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those achieved by other schools."

While all schools with lower FCAT scores improved their scores the next time around, "schools that faced the prospect of vouchers exhibited especially large gains."

Typically, the NEA says it's the improvements themselves that made the difference. And those came because..... "Anyone? Anyone?"

The evaluators found a strong correlation between the FCAT test and the well-recognized Stanford 9, giving Florida educators a higher confidence level that the state's tests indeed are a valid barometer of student performance. The guts of the report are fascinating. For more information on the study go to www.edreform.com/school_choice, as well as links to more choice related materials.

- Demonstrating the **growing support** of choice among minority communities in particular, the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is emerging as a grassroots link from state to state. BAEO is quickly moving to build a national network of chapters and will have a place in Washington sometime this summer. Wait... we hear something... something really loud... oh, it must be the NEA again mourning the thought of more reformers moving into Washington.
- Veteran Connecticut **legislator Lawrence Cafero** has proposed a measure similar to Florida's A+ program and not unlike the president's own proposal to help children in failing schools. His bill would provide a voucher to students in any of the 28 low performing (read: dismal) schools in the state. Hartford alone, according to the *Courant* newspaper, has 11 such schools. Says Cafero, "We have a constitutional guarantee to educate that kid."
- *Hot town summer in the city.* Even Mayor Daley is getting into the act when he suggested that **Chicago parents should get vouchers** to provide after school programs for educationally at-risk youngsters. A welcome pragmatist, Daley argues that families should be able to take advantage of anything that helps them – whether public or private or through a civic organization. The usual suspects were immediately questioning the proposal, with Americans United for Separation of Church and State suggesting that the small \$50-\$100 grants for programs after school would upset the hallowed grounds our forefathers created. Did any of them ever read a Federalist paper?

Let the Sunshine

- The name given to the laws that require open meetings over public school policies seems to come with its own double standard. While reading late January about the negotiations between the Los Angeles teachers union and the district over the contract that would avert a potential strike, the following sentence in a *Los Angeles Times* piece struck not a chord, but more like a knot:

"Negotiators declined to release details but were scheduled to brief their respective leaders and meetings today."

What would happen if a charter school acted like this? In New York City, a move by the Chancellor to turn over five of the worst performing elementary schools in the city (out of 80) must be voted upon by the parents and teachers, both of whom have been inundated by the unions and other opponents of private management about why they should be hostile. Meanwhile, negotiations over the VERY PUBLIC aspect of what teachers can do under a contract are done in secret?

- Opponents of charter schools are working overtime in states where laws are under consideration to make sure legislation that public hearings over what programs and operations charter schools are proposing. At the same time, there's no such requirement on traditional public schools to deliberate publicly over curriculum decisions in allegedly public schools.

Could it be that charters are becoming — by virtue of requirements on them to do everything in public — the only truly public schools while regular public schools are permitted more and more to clothe themselves behind veils of secrecy and internal negotiations?

We truly need an Aquarius moment – let the Sun Shine!

Everybody's talking 'bout a new way of walking...

...and construction... and modernizing schools. From last year's congressional proposals to this year's questioning of then- Ed. Secretary Designate Rod Paige in his confirmation hearings, some people believe that the federal government may be the only answer to revamping worn and run down buildings. But is that the case?

A look to Niagara Falls, NY (*the closer I step...*) may provide some real insights into why many of our school buildings across the country – despite the investment of governments over time – fail to get fixed or kept up, and it usually has a lot to do with construction and building laws.

In the land of 1,000 honeymoons, a wonderful partnership between the School district and Honeywell Corp. produced the first new building they've had in decades and the envy of the wealthy districts. What made this possible in addition

to Honeywell's contribution? Some ingenuity by the school superintendent and the waiving of several building-related laws. According to the *New York Times*, the district needed the following exemptions in order to have the building within the budget Honeywell allotted and which garnered the financing:

*A law that requires schools to choose the lowest bidder (not all the best will be the lowest, any home owner knows!)

*A law requiring at least four contractors for any public works project. Called the Wick's Law, the facilities coordinator at the State's Department of Education conceded that the school district was "able to get a lot more into their building because of the Wick's law exemption."

The district saved approximately \$15 million by using one contractor, and the building is hardly a bargain basement. On the contrary, reports say it's good looking, modern, well built and the source of pride in the community.

So why would states tolerate laws that automatically add millions to any project, especially when schools are in such desperate need of replacement or repair?

Before your favorite policymaker signs on to fix schools' bricks and mortar, you should ask them to do some research into their laws regarding all construction, labor and bidding. Our children's livelihood may very well depend on those provisions. And rather than simply mourn "savage inequalities" in schools, like leaky toilets and worse, why doesn't Jonathan Kozol *do something* about the laws that prevent these things from being easily and affordably solved? Ah, we ask too many questions, grasshopper.

On Charters

- We've often said that charters represent a "build it and they'll come" phenomenon. While opponents like to suggest that they simply haven't heard much interest before they've even passed a charter law, it's clear that once a law is passed, interested applicants are plentiful. A recent wrap up of charter activity by state:

Ohio: 86 applicants for only 39 remaining contracts available.

New Jersey: Had 24 applicants of which 9 were approved.

New York: Had 42 applications for 33 remaining slots by the State University of New York (only a measly 7 were approved!) and 37 applications were made to the Regents with 44 slots left, and 9 were approved.

Pennsylvania: Has had 27 applications, of which school boards approved 8 (more can come).

North Carolina: 33 applications were made for a remaining 6 slots, of which 3 were approved.

In *Florida*, at least 13 have been approved so far this year in five counties. And in *Kansas*, 17 charters were approved for 17 slots.

- *Indiana* wants me, Lord I can't go back there. Hopefully, that won't be the case for parents who are hoping that this time – the 7th attempt in as many years – charter legislation will finally make it through the General Assembly and on to the Governor's desk for a veto-free signature.

This year, Senator Teresa Lubbers was able to once again get a very strong bill passed through the Senate, but the interest groups prevailed in the other house where a weak bill is all the rave. However, many things have changed in the Hoosier State that provide signs of hope:

- * **A grassroots insurgence** – Parents and teachers statewide have responded positively to a set of radio ads and grassroots meetings that are finding new and committed charter supporters.

- * **Mayor Bart Peterson**, Democrat from Indianapolis, and possibly the mayors of Fort Wayne and Muncie, who would love to have chartering authority to help them reform their cities' troubled schools;

- * **Business leaders** – the Indianapolis Chamber and other leaders statewide are committed. For more information call the Indiana Charter Network at (317) 253-2501.

- It's too bad there's not better news for charters in *San Francisco*, where a turnaround school that went from being one of the worst performing elementary schools to the one making the most progress now is facing a bizarre campaign from the school board to cancel its contract with Edison Schools, Inc. Edison was awarded the contract to manage the school in 1998.

Enter Jill Wynn (boo, hiss) who for 8 years sat as a member of the board while the same elementary school wallowed in failure. Now chairperson - thanks to the union's campaign on her behalf - she wants to throw Edison out, and enjoys support on the board by other anti-reformers. Wynn, whose own background suggests she has never had a disadvantage doesn't seem to like these outsiders. Problem is, she had her shot at doing something to help and she failed.

Opponents of Edison admit that it's because they are "philosophically against a corporation running a school" – even if the schools scores continue to rise. Second grade reading scores have gone up 12 national percentile points, second grade math by 36 percentile points, fifth grade reading by 11 percentile points and fifth grade math by 17 percentile points – even while the African-American population remained the same and the Latino population increased by 100 students.

Donna Smith, grandmother of a student at the school said it best: "*What part of success don't they understand?*"

Now, the situation has taken an even uglier turn, as the school suffered a break-in over President's Day weekend. Left untouched were computers, electronic equipment and cash; files were ransacked by someone who had keys to the files and the building.

- Bensalem, *Pennsylvania's* school board set up nearly literal roadblocks when it came to transportation for charter students. There, when Philadelphia students enrolled in Mosaica Academy in Bensalem school district, the Philadelphia District refused to pay their transportation expenses. After being taken to court, the Commonwealth Court ordered Philadelphia to pay the transportation expenses and also to pay more than \$265,000 in lawyer's fees.

The judge in the case termed the Philadelphia system's action as "...nothing more than an attempt to block the implementation of the Charter School law..." Noting the roadblocks that encountered as a result of the school system's tactics, the judge wrote that "... this Court could have concluded that the conduct of the School District of Philadelphia ... was both vexatious and obdurate in that the manner in which this litigation was conducted did not evidence an intent to pursue a valid cause of action as much as to thwart the ability of a neighboring school district to provide educational alternatives to children."

Philadelphia hasn't learned though: The school district is appealing the decision. *Yakety, yak, Don't talk back.*

Quality Counts... When Quality is the Issue

Education Week each year does a rather good job of pulling together the facts about school and student success from state to state. This year's focus was on standards and testing, and while their factual presentation is superb, once again we take issue with how they rank and grade the states.

First, it has to be said that *Education Week's* work is only as good as the standards and tests the states have. Every state likes to think it has the best of both, and if you suggest to their state chief or education committee chair anything to the contrary, you immediately fall off their "friends" list.

But we expect better from *Education Week*, which gives high marks to states like Maryland, where the test assesses no basics, skirts over grammar in compositions and allows extensive creative writing to be substituted for more objectively marked, multiple choice tests. (Yes, we know the latter aren't everything but they do gauge results better. Essays are good but shouldn't dominate).

Meanwhile, most teachers in even the best Maryland schools scratch their heads when you ask them about standards. And yet MD standards got an A grade.

Over to Pennsylvania, which always seems to get panned, no consideration was made of the fact that the state just started its tests, based on a relatively new set of standards in English and math, and the other subjects are under review. Said the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "The... rankings do not take into account the money or accountability provisions of the state's new Education Empowerment Act." Other states claim to have standards in each subject, but they haven't been touched in more than a decade. That didn't seem to matter to the authors, who rely heavily on input from the establishment-oriented state education chiefs group for their rankings. *Ed. Week* apparently didn't ask the other group — the Education Leader's Council — to provide any evidence of progress on standards. Maybe next time...

School Board Reformers Unite!

Do you sometimes feel alone, anxiety-ridden and frustrated by the minutiae of many board meetings? Does everyone else sound like they are talking gibberish while you struggle to understand the new reading program the district just bought without asking about results?

Now there's an answer! (Note: this isn't an ad for anti-depressants!)

Join people who share your vigor for reform and your frustration with the status quo in the new informal association CER has started called:

THE SCHOOL BOARD NETWORK!!!

Through this effort you will meet like-minded individuals, have access to cutting edge research and analyses to the sides of issues that may not always be apparent. Ever wonder if that math curriculum you're hearing is the new choice of the district is really proven? Find out more through our partnerships with curriculum specialists. Trying to determine if the district's testing program is really helping children? Ask for comparison data and research from the staff at CER and get personalized responses. Need information on tying teacher pay more closely to achievement? Let CER's affiliations with the Teacher Quality Network go to work for you!

The cost is minimal (just \$25 to say you're in) but CER will give you thousands more back in time and services. And over the next few weeks, you'll even have your own limited-access website.

Some reformers may not want to ruffle the feathers of their establishment colleagues by making the statement that your affiliation might suggest. But if you are one of those bold and determined board members that thought you were running to get something done, this may be for you! While you may have already received your invitation to join, if you can't wait, call us now at 1-800-521-2118. Operators are standing by.

EMPTY THE TROUGH!

Parents, teachers and school board members who struggle over the most basic needs (like crayons, paper or books) will cringe to learn that late last year, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a contract for just under \$1 million dollars (that's \$1,000,000) to an alliance of the usual suspects in the Blob. Under the heading of the Learning First Alliance, 12 groups – including the NEA, NSBA, CCSSO, etc. are going to “help education leaders develop effective professional practices.”

More studies? As if we didn't have enough! And more study of process, while ignoring teacher knowledge of subject matter.

Now think about this. First – these groups are going to review the current literature and development criteria (I'm not making this up!) on what it means to have an “effective professional practice.” Then the team members will visit districts to learn from one another, and then they'll “*step back and take a cross-analytical look at what each of our roles should be in creating a healthy environment for teaching and learning.*”

Wait... if these groups are going to be figuring out their roles for how to make healthy learning environments happen, do you suppose we should ask what they've been doing all this time?

This expenditure — and dozens like it throughout the vast federal bureaucracy — are a waste of money, and an insult to the integrity of individual teachers and school board members who know precisely what it takes to create a healthy environment. It's called good teaching and learning. And if you don't know what it is, there's already about 500 colleges devoted to studying this issue and countless more research labs and private groups who do this for a living.

Oh, please, Secretary Paige. Put an end to this FEEDING AT THE TROUGH that goes on so often in Washington. No one will get mad if you'll give the money instead to a school principal who knows exactly what to do – if he didn't have to beg, borrow and more for the money he needs.

Coming Attractions

What's it all about, Alfie? Well, apparently it's not really about testing at all.

Alfie Kohn travels amidst educators and parents preaching that we're overdoing the testing and putting a kibosh in some of the best testing systems. The intention appears to be concern for children's wellbeing, but digging deeper we find something much more pernicious. Kohn is tied to the Boston-based group New Democracy that believes tests are designed to help business control minds.

Meanwhile, as standards and tests combined serve to raise the level of schooling many deprived children get, Alfie and Co. remain unimpressed. When told that, as a result of the standards and testing system, all children in Oregon are now getting exposed to algebra, and that students are taking more science in middle school, Kohn responded: "Are they getting music? Art? Subjects that are not on the tests?"

Egos do strange things. Kohn actually has a website named after himself that announces his upcoming appearances. You know how you always tell your kids that they'll be judged by the character they keep? Well just check out who is sponsoring Kohn at various events to spread the news that kids don't need tests and that things will be fine if we just let children alone. Better yet, show up and ask him how his preachings affect the child in the George H. Conley Elementary School in Boston, MA, who still can't read in the 4th grade. Let us know what he says.

A belated thank you to an avid reformer

Last November, Ohio State School board member Charles Byrne failed to win reelection, after four years in office. Ever the outspoken proponent of all matters relating to choice, Byrne not only pushed for reform but represented well the school children of his state by being well-read, staying on top of all the issues, asking the right questions and generally making comfort at State school board meetings a non-sequiter.

Byrne, 75, was beat by his own rhetoric. Rather than campaign against choice, his opponent successfully blurred the lines making people think he was the real reformer. We wish successor Virgil Brown luck, but even more, commend Byrne for devoting so many years to pushing the envelope.

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Next month! Quotes Not Even Their Mother Would Love; more legislative developments, glory stories and progress reports. And please remember, we can't fit it all in here but the weekly *CER Newswire* and continual web updates help. Sign up at www.edreform.com. And as the wife of an Irishman and mother of four with that blood, I'd be remiss in not adding a farewell befitting St. Patrick:

May the Irish hills caress you,
may her lakes and rivers bless you,
may the luck of the Irish enfold you,
may the Blessings of Saint Patrick behold you.


Jeanne Allen