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

Greetings from the Nation's muggy Capital! It's the dog days of summer and rather than laze around like the term suggests, there's never been a more ferocious bark to the reform tenor as there is today! Far from the hiatus of old that summer used to represent, education reformers have been continuing their fast and furious pace. Herewith is our traditional mid-summer communication. Please be sure to take it to the beach or wherever your travels find you and share it with a friend!



Educating the Future

The more than 150 educators from 43 states that were honored at the Milken Family Foundation's annual tribute in June were a testament to the fact that quality teachers have a different and refreshing attitude toward reform. The National Education Awards reward teachers with the recognition they deserve and a prize of \$25,000 for their commitment and dedication. It is no surprise then that the awardees uncovered in each state are those who represent the cream of the crop, and are not content with the status quo, but rather, find current reform proposals appealing and exciting.

Rather than hear the defensive posturing that is so often the hallmark of education conferences (see *A View from the Blob* on page 7), these educators understand that indeed there is a problem and that it is their job to help solve it – if someone will give them that authority. "American schools are in crisis," writes David Tobergte and Shirley Curtis from Freedom Elementary in Ohio. "It is time to face the crises head on."

In conversations with dozens of teachers, there is evidence of support for performance-based pay, high stakes testing, freedom from contractual, district-based and state-imposed rules regarding curriculum, school size and structure, and process, and even support for greater choices among children.

Even a few administrators at the Milken gathering offered their support for choice and flexibility, and in general the group was supportive of using strong standards-based assessments that serve to evaluate and institute consequences for everyone's performance.

The Milken Family Foundation has researched these attitudes and trends and designed last year a new program that would enable school districts to meet the needs of quality teachers better, while addressing the need to attract and retain new candidates to teaching. Called the Teacher Advancement Program or TAP for short, its five principles for reforming the teaching profession involve multiple career paths; market-driven compensation; performance-based accountability; expanding the supply of high quality teachers; and ongoing, applied professional growth.

The TAP program is currently being piloted in five schools in Arizona and various TAP principles have been infused into the laws of ten states, most notably in Florida's Mentor Teacher Pilot Program. Also, a new federal education bill being negotiated on Capitol Hill would allow states and districts to use their teacher training and professionalism money on programs such as TAP that emphasize real mentoring, different incentive systems, and greater opportunities for growth while not pushing teachers out of the field to simply be promoted. Visit (www.mff.org).

Indeed many teachers do not want to be a mentor or master; they simply want to be the best teacher they can be and be rewarded for wanting to keep their focus on their classroom alone. The current structure for teachers in most states flies in the face of this, of course. With programs such as TAP, it won't be so for long.

I'm Not Making This Up!

No wonder there's a clamor for good teacher policies. The following are a but a few illustrations of the lack of sense that prevails among people or institutions in positions of power:

- **Headline: Teachers Union (sic) Wades Into National Defense**

U.S. military exercises on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques are "not a military issue but a civil rights issue," said Norma White, a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers. (Source: CNSNews.Com, 5/1/01)

- The Iowa Board of Educational Examiners will consider a rule requiring teachers to post their teachers licenses in classrooms for everyone to see. According to the director of that board, having a license hanging in one's classroom would "reassure" parents and "give the job a look of professionalism." Would that it were that simple!
- When the Redford Union School District in Midland, Michigan cut 12 teaching positions because of budget cuts, the Mackinac Center, a state think tank, offered a \$350,000 proposal to reinstate those teachers. The group identified cost savings by outsourcing various transportation, food and janitorial services. If that action didn't add up to \$350K, the think tank would pay the difference. Common sense? Regardless of the education impact of cutting 12 teachers, the district found no need to look into other measures first.
- The head of California's school employee union thinks it's unfair to single out teachers for awards based on their student's performance. So as the Governor was seeking cuts to boost the state's reserves, Wayne Johnson weighed in and agreed that the bonus program should be scrapped. We wonder how many good teachers he asked first?

The Testing Wars

- The NEA says it will oppose mandatory testing of students. While they couch their opposition to testing as defending parents' rights to opt out, it's clear that what is really at the bottom of their formal policy statement is an **aversion to measurements** that can be used to gauge teacher productivity and effectiveness. It might be worth reminding the NEA (especially if you're a teacher) that the idea of annual mandatory testing was first proposed by Senator Robert Kennedy in 1965. It was then that he urged that the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act include a provision that districts report years of testing results to the federal government. Unfortunately, because it was left to districts to decide it didn't work and, according to historian Diane Ravitch, the tests were spotty and not consistently applied. Still, it's interesting to see how long this one issue has been around. Everything old is new again...
- Having tests has revealed math curriculum problems in Maryland. It turns out that **Maryland's** Algebra I exam for ninth graders compares almost identically to the test Singapore gives its fifth graders. What's more alarming is that when given last year, just over 40 percent of ninth graders in Montgomery County passed the Algebra I exam! John Hoven, an education specialist in Montgomery County uncovered this fact and has long pushed for higher standards. Meanwhile, this problem has been creating a huge gap between minorities and whites, although the troubles are equitably distributed. One solution proposed by Commissioner Grasmick is to require prospective teachers to pass at least six college math units. Let's get more radical, shall we? How about making sure prospective math teachers actually majored in math??
- Milwaukee, **Wisconsin's** school board is split over testing. After a union backed slate won last year, the consensus on high standards and testing for all kids diminished. The previous board had instituted a system that required using annual standardized tests that align with state requirements. They did this to be able to evaluate progress for each student from year to year. While the testing program prevailed, some anti-testers tried to gut the program with the now common argument that tests water down instruction.
- Perhaps those that oppose diagnosing student progress can offer an opinion on what happened in **New York** last month, when students taking the high school biology Regents exam who got fewer than half of the questions right still got a score of 65, allowing them to pass. It turns out that despite rhetoric to the contrary, the state's education leaders have been manipulating scoring. So to pass, students only needed to score a 46. This incenses Brooklyn science teacher Paul Cohen. And they wonder why teachers are leaving the profession?
- The low passing scores are obviously not a worry to the teacher-led group of 1,500 who stormed **Albany** to protest Regents requirements. Apparently failing a test and still passing is too much for them.
- Of course, we should not be surprised (sadly) over the fact that passing scores are low or that our children take exams that don't really reflect their grade level. It's

been that way for years, and most parents don't even know it. Take **California's** high school exit exam, for example. While it won't count until 2004, to graduate from high school a student will need only to meet 60 percent of the requirements for 10th grade English, and 55 percent of the requirements of 8th grade math. Let's put it another way: Employers should note that by 2004, high school graduation will not be a reflection of having mastered 12 years of schooling at all, but rather, just a bare majority of necessary material required by 10th and 8th grade in reading and math, respectively. Now there's a confidence builder!

(Editor's Note: I know, I know – we can't expect children poorly educated to pass new high stakes tests, or we'd be holding most children in school for another ten years. So (the argument goes), it's better to start out slow and build. Shouldn't we require, then, that we tell parents upon entering school that their child only has a 50 percent chance of actually learning what 12 years offers?? Think about it.)

- **Florida's** annual testing yielded gains this year once more. Reading and math scores were up, while writing scores held steady. Says Florida Governor Jeb Bush, "This is only the latest evidence that real improvement in student learning can be achieved." Indeed, next year the state begins to shift from normed scores to actual progress, using "value-added" measurements to compare each child to his or her own achievement.

- *U.S. News and World Report* reporter Ben Wildavsky offered a great overview in his May 16 article entitled The question is: Are tests failing the kids? "Objective measures of academic progress are an especially vital reality check in big-city school districts", says Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that favors testing as a tool for improving the education of poor and minority students. Research shows that A students in high poverty schools test at about the same level as C and D students in wealthy communities. For children in low-performing schools, testing fans say, an intense focus on well-defined, measurable educational outcomes is overdue. "These tests open the doors for kids who are excluded," says David Levin, principal of the KIPP Academy, a South Bronx charter school that tries to send its graduating eighth graders to private, parochial, and selective public high schools. Without the reassurance of test scores, he fears, "people are going to say, that kid went to a high school or a middle school in the South Bronx, and we can't trust those grades."

- A great quote from **Education Secretary Rod Paige**, in response to the "we're being tested to death" drum beat: "That's a charge made by people who feel that testing is somehow external to teaching. But it isn't. It's the other side of the same coin. If you don't assess where you are, what the students have learned or not learned, you're teaching in the dark. That's analogous to driving at night without headlights. Do you ever hear anyone saying we're *teaching* them to death?"

- *Washington Post* columnist Jay Mathews explores this very allegation of teaching to the test in a **must-read column** called Trying to Clear Up the Confusion (<http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/education/columns/classstruggles>). Without doing justice to the whole piece, here's just one excerpt:

"How is it that these tests are forcing so many good teachers to abandon methods they know work for kids?" Reflecting on a colleague's column in which an unidentified third-grade teacher remarks that 'I have to teach to the SOLs and so can no longer have students write biographies of famous Americans,' Mathews asks, "what exactly is she doing to prepare for the SOLs that prevents her from teaching deep lessons that seem to be wonderful preparation for the SOLs?"

"How have the teachers at Barcroft Elementary School in Arlington (VA) managed to teach a rich curriculum based on the life of Leonardo da Vinci, full of biographies and art and extra reading, and still done well on the SOLs? What am I to think of the dozens of teachers in Virginia and Maryland who tell me their state tests have not hurt their creativity at all?" Great point.

- Then there's the **87 percent** of Americans that think students are indeed capable of learning more difficult subject matter, which makes us wonder who exactly these lower-standards and anti-testing people think they are trying to please! The statistic comes from a poll commissioned by *Recruiting New Teachers, Inc.*, which also found that fewer than two in ten Americans think their community's teachers are highly qualified, and most believe that the unions are an impediment to getting rid of incompetent teachers. For more information, go to www.rnt.org.

School Choice Champions

- A fitting tribute was paid to outgoing National Catholic Education Association president **Leonard DeFiore** this summer. In his capacity leading this national group as well as in his previous leadership positions in Catholic school systems from Metuchen, NJ to Washington, DC, DeFiore has tirelessly crusaded for the rights of parents to have access to important educational venues such as Catholic schools. A choice for even large numbers of non-Catholics in inner city and suburb alike, the results of Catholic education continue to mystify the critics but bolster the argument that providing access to more locally controlled, autonomous and value-laden schools like these helps not only those who attend them but those who cross in their paths. But DeFiore reminded attendees to his group's conference last year that while choice empowers and benefits parents, "our concern is not with Catholic education only but the education of all children."

- A case in point is **Los Angeles** where this spring a report found that Catholic schools do more than Los Angeles Unified schools in general with less to help them. The Pacific Research Institute found that low-income children attending LA-area Catholic schools on scholarship outpaced their peers, while those schools operate on less than half of what the public schools spend.

- New York City **Board of Education** head **Ninfa Segarra** agrees that Catholic schools should be able to educate students regardless of income, and argued recently that the city needs vouchers to help more of the children who are failing in traditional schools and to spark public schools to improve through competition. Indeed, Catholic and other private schools have stepped up to the plate admirably to educate children from Cleveland to Washington, DC who came from failing public schools but were fortunate to get a scholarship.

- And private schools — we need to remind — do **score significantly above** the national average on international math and science tests. As the Council for American Private Education points out, had those scores been the norm for the nation, they would have propelled the U.S. position from 19th to 12th place in math and from 18th to 6th place in science. "...The average achievement score of U.S. eighth grade non-public school students was higher than the average of their peers in U.S. public schools."
- The U.S. Supreme Court may consider the case petitioned by the state of Ohio seeking to overturn the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals decision which found that the program which served a few thousand of **Cleveland's poorest** is unconstitutional. That Sixth Circuit, interestingly, decided that case without regard to any educational conditions that are at play in that city. That's the reason the Center for Education Reform filed an amicus brief asking the high court to take the case. For a quarter century, Cleveland struggled to improve its schools, but without decisive reform that would make a difference in the lives of the kids there. The choice program is the natural next step in providing a good education, and it has provided hope for families, options for parents, a future for children, and created an impetus for positive change in the Cleveland public school system. To view CER's statement and our amicus brief, written by Catholic University Law School Interim Dean Robert Destro, and Joseph Schmitz, Gregory Walden, and Daniel Volkmuth of the law firm of Patton Boggs, go to www.edreform.com/press/2001/scamicus.
- A favorable high court ruling would please the more than 63 percent of Americans who — in an NEA-SPONSORED POLL — agreed that tuition scholarships for children attending schools that don't meet performance standards is fine by them. **Seventy-five percent of African-Americans** under the age of 35 recently told the Joint Center on Political and Economic Studies, a left-leaning group, that they, too, as in previous years, support choice.

Looking Ahead at "Back to School" Time

Believe it or not the annual flurry of Back to School polls is almost upon us and as certain as the kids not making bedtime that first night before school, you can be sure that the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll will be chock full of **misrepresentations** of where our schools stand in the people's eyes. The reason is that Phi Delta Kappa represents the dinosaurs of the education establishment and the prehistoric attitudes and contradictions best depicted in Orwell's 1984. PDK believes (and maybe a few of you agree!) that anyone who likes choice must be anti-American and that without total state and educator control to guide us, we'll just ruin our children.

Back to their poll — here's what you are unlikely to hear from that poll:

- More Americans than ever before have and want more choices over where their children go to school, versus the outdated and unsuccessful system of assigning children based on where the state and school districts believe children should go.

- The Pennsylvania State Education Association no doubt got its hands slapped behind closed doors for its leak of a report outlining why PSEA must organize charter school employees, as well as why they must exist to begin with (*hint: think of a five letter word that starts with P and ends with W*).

“Act 195 granted PSEA and the Federation a legal monopoly to represent public education employees for the purpose of collective bargaining. ‘All’ we have to do is to convince teachers and support personnel to join. Once we obtain majority representative status, PSEA becomes the exclusive bargaining agent. The timeworn debate whether we are primarily a professional association or a union obscures a critical point. The main source of PSEA’s influence is that almost all Pennsylvania teachers are unionized. If we want to maintain our influence, our ability to do ANYTHING we must make sure that education remains a unionized industry....

“If we lose our grip on the labor supply to the education industry, we will bargain from a position of weakness. We should try to organize the for-profit managed charters and the larger non-profits first.”

Oh is that all?? Charter operators take note: The report by PSEA also discusses a NJ union survey of charter teachers and the fact that many charter teachers report longer hours and some, lower wages and benefits, making them prime targets for Pied Pipers in union clothes.

- And the PTA Blob was in full force in Baltimore, and with a skeptical eye the press had this to say, “Facing declining membership... and criticism over its liberal agenda and close alignment with the teachers unions, the PTA hopes to recast its public image with a new ad campaign.” In order to pay for this new campaign, the PTA had to raise its dues by 50 cents per year. Ironically, declining membership in the past has been blamed, in part, on similar increases. They must be hoping that more people will join as a result of the campaign than they will lose as a result of the dues hike. See our recent editorial about the PTA at www.edreform.com/oped/2001.

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Headline: Vallone (Democratic mayoral candidate): I Will Fight Privatizing of Schools. (*NY Post*, 6/4/01)

Freely translated: Give me the union vote!

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Enjoy your hiatus (if you have one) and we’ll see you — as the song says — in September!


Jeanne Allen