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MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF  
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM  
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BACK-TO-SCHOOL, 2001

Dear Friends:

It's that time of year when harried parents are relieved to have finished the proverbial Back-to-School shopping, when teachers shed their summer clothes and don their teacher-voice and the formalities of the classroom, and when all eyes in the schools seem to be focussed on making it through another year. Or is that only a reality for a portion of American families? Indeed, much as we'd love to celebrate and be content with the kids in our own backyard, we are reminded again through a wide variety of results that the wistful and happy times described above are increasingly limited to only the children who are fortunate enough to be where they want to be. This month, a look at the reality, and a plea to abandon the complacency so many want us to have...

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**Who me, worry? The *Don't Worry, Be Happy* Push is on**

Whether it's the annual PDK/Gallup poll, or PBS's roll out of revisionist school history, it's clear that the opponents of reform have undertaken a MASSIVE campaign to lull parents into complacency about what ails American education and to convince the public that today's reformers are simply a wild band of natives that the settlers simply need to push off their land.

Numerous examples backing up that radical statement abound:

**The anti-testing mantra is now fast and furious:** One of the establishment's most notorious members, the American Association of School Administrators, wrote a crafty letter emphasizing its support for accountability but making it clear that the use of a single test to guide public policy is anathema to what the people want. Never mind that no one is pushing the use of a single test under which everyone would be judged. What both states and Congress are pushing is the simple concept that a state test should indeed be implemented and used to measure and, yes, to do corrective work where there are problems. Call it punitive if you want, but how pray-tell does AASA plan to move up good people and move out bad if it can't tell who's who? Ah, maybe they won't! To read AASA's letter, go to [www.edreform.com/forum/2001/AASA.htm](http://www.edreform.com/forum/2001/AASA.htm).

**PBS's major push of an anti-reform documentary:** Calling testing a controversial topic, telling viewers that choice and charters are creations of the Reagan era to dismantle public education, and even the absurd attempt to rebut the fact that since the 1980s our nation is indeed at risk, PBS bent over backwards this month in its part for the *Don't Worry, Be Happy* push. Go to [www.edreform.com/oped/](http://www.edreform.com/oped/) on our website for our in depth review.

**Pollsters spin the attitudes of the public:** In their yearly attempt to paint American education as a bed of roses, Phi Delta Kappa helped the Gallup poll elicit overwhelmingly negative responses to questions regarding choice and accountability, and overwhelmingly positive ("30 year high!") responses to the state of public education.

**The SAT's are billed as indicators of success:** Are schools successful when their highest scoring students are actually scoring lower on the SATs than ever before? Indeed, far from just a crisis among poor children, the results on the SATs this year once again demonstrate that there has been a precipitous drop in the number of higher-scoring test takers. Their scores have not only gone down in verbal and math ability when you compare them with the same demographic ten years ago, but the percentage of these test takers with "A" grades has soared from 28% to 41%. While more children are indeed taking the SATs, minority achievement has been stagnant overall. Hardly anything to crow about. Colleges: get ready to deliver more remedial education.

**NEA fighting charter schools in Capitol Hill:** The school employee union's president suggested that charter schools (whose failure rate he exaggerated) were trying to eke out an exemption from federal accountability requirements that may apply to other public schools. They got Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy's staff to raise hell about how charters are treated; at press time, negotiations to ensure that charter school's own accountability agreements were recognized by federal law were still under way.

Far from friendship, NEA's relationship with charter schools is more like that of dysfunctional in-laws. They will tolerate them for only so long, and then they let loose.

What's really going on here? The stakes are high, people's patience with business-as-usual is low, and reform is happening. The response is just that — it's to be expected. Which is why we need reform. Read on.

### **From the Trenches**

- *Help for Special Needs Children:* A Los Angeles based-substitute teacher reports that most days he's assigned to a special education classroom where his job is really to keep the peace. If he can add value, he will, but mostly, these kids are so used to not having a permanent teacher or someone who instructs them that it often ends up he has to begin with some basic rules of conduct and by the end of the day, they may have covered a few pages or lessons but not much.

That's why it's so heartening to learn that special needs children in **Florida** now have a chance to have someone else vie for the privilege of educating them. A bill signed into law in May by Governor Jeb Bush extends what are called "McKay Scholarships" for students with disabilities. As of this month, nearly 3,800 have applied for vouchers, up from 1,000 last year. Not surprisingly, the press is acting as if the \$25 million cost is "new," conveniently ignoring the fact that it would cost exactly the same if every child showed up at their public school doorstep.

The Florida legal battle challenging the state's A+ Opportunity Scholarship program took a turn for the better this month when the trial judge was removed from the case because of his unusually close ties to one of the plaintiffs in the trial. Judge Ralph Smith's son married the daughter of a Florida Education Association member, and rather than recuse himself, Smith files a brief opposing the motion to remove him! The First District Court of Appeals saw the conflict, though. As one of the lawyers for the choice program argued, "Nobody should have to go to court in a case where you have a reasonable basis to question the neutrality of the judge."

- Speaking of choice, another evaluation of the **Cleveland scholarship program** reveals that children in the program for three years showed small "but statistically significant higher academic achievement" from 1998-2000. Response of the Ohio Federation of Teachers? "It's time to pull the plug on this failed experiment."
- Good polls tell us that voters want educational success stories before they're willing to spend more money. **Colorado's Jefferson County** is a case in point. Taxpayers here voted down increased budgets for 16 years. Since the district offered voters a guarantee in 1999, scores have soared significantly (about 7 points) on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, a high stakes test used to gauge progress and seek out trouble spots. Commissioner Bill Moloney praised the district's guarantee. "You can call it merit pay," he told reporters.
- **Contra Costa, California** is the site of a new effort to boost math achievement in eighth graders. Because the state's testing program will eventually kick into gear, the school district of West Contra Costa is adding an algebra prep course for eighth graders in seven middle and high schools.
- The St. Petersburg, FL *Times* reports: "Two charter schools will welcome students on Monday [August 13], one brand new and another that is doubling its enrollment in just a year... Eighteen months ago, not a single **Pasco County** student attended a charter school... nearly 450 will be taking part." Parents who signed up boasted of the size and personalized environment they'd be able to find.
- Pennsylvania's Governor got pretty bold late this summer when it hired the company, Edison Schools Inc. to create a plan to reform **Philadelphia's troubled school district**. Under a plan passed a year ago, Governor Tom Ridge is allowed to execute a takeover of Philadelphia's schools if they can't meet academic and financial goals. Ridge has bailed them out a few times, but it's more clear than ever that money isn't even remotely the main problem in Philly. Observers expect Edison's plan to include some sort of hybrid contracting arrangement with a variety of providers. If the school district doesn't like what Edison provides, they have to contend with the Governor.

Hopefully they'll include the views of one of the state's leading Democrats, Philly Representative Dwight Evans, whose disadvantaged district was home to one of the state's first charter schools. He now envisions a cluster of 16 charter schools that would help revitalize the Ogontz neighborhood that he serves. The reason? The charter he helped found has already stemmed the tide of movement out of the city. A few more accountable public schools may indeed have the same effect.

- *USA Today* sees the following of the so-called “**new unionism**” that is touted as the school employee unions’ answer to reform. The editorial writers point out that while the unions want to be seen as reformers, they are working behind the scenes to undermine testing proposals. The case in point is their summer resolution supporting parents’ ability to opt-out of state testing requirements.

Let’s see: the unions oppose parents ability to opt-out of traditional public schools for other choices; they oppose opt-out provisions even for things like sex ed, but when it comes to tests, which may reflect badly on them, they advocate choice. Interesting.

- Few educators will deny that **small schools** are better, but most district administrators will argue “it’s too expensive and can’t be done.” A new report just out shows how it can be done, and looks at where it IS being done. With case studies from 22 school buildings in 12 states (including both district-run and charter public schools) the Center for School Change at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs shows how shared facilities and small schools have dramatically increased student achievement, attendance and behavior. And in the process, they’ve developed stronger community support and involvement in those schools. You can get the report by going to [www.edfacilities.org](http://www.edfacilities.org).

## On Teachers

- Delia Busby was just a normal principal — until she was fired by her district and proceeded to win the largest settlement in district history in her lawsuit. Apparently the **award-winning educator** was told by her superintendent that she “lacked leadership skills.” In reality, Delia attributes it to the fact that she bucked conventional wisdom.

After she won her settlement, she won a seat on the Colorado Springs school board in 1999. She started an organization called the Parent Empowerment Movement to help parents prevent the closure of six schools that served children in disadvantaged areas. Now principal turned activist, her group is devoted to being a watchdog for parents, electing good people to school boards and making sure administrators are held accountable for results. For information, call (719) 578-5373.

- Some teachers disgruntled with the lack of real leadership and abundance of politics coming out of their union have a place to go now that some groups have challenged the **monopoly union representation** that is employed through this country. Washington State’s Evergreen Freedom Foundation’s public information efforts and investigation into how its state’s school employee union spends its money has resulted in the union being fined extensively for massive violations in the law and having to disclose additional details about how it spends money. At least 87% of teachers now decline to contribute to the union’s PAC, and 1,700 teachers have joined their effort to challenge the union’s domination of their employment contracts. For more insights and information into what really goes on in union politics, check out the Walla-Walla think tank’s website at [www.effwa.org](http://www.effwa.org).

- While normally too busy to speak out — and more inclined to be quiet than most — teachers are often the most vociferous proponents of reform. So when Fairfax County teacher Ed Linz wrote to his local newspapers of his disdain for a union-endorsed work-to-rule scheme proposed late last school year, we know something had really struck a chord. Linz points out that teachers would do well to look at higher education — which he likens to a system of vouchers, where taxes provide for public universities based on children's choice and where universities seek to attract the best faculty so they can obtain students. Linz argues for **performance based, or merit pay:**

“Pay follows supply and demand, and demonstrated competence, rather than the strict system of longevity currently in place in public primary and secondary schools... Under the current system, there is no incentive to become a better teacher because pay is in no way related to that aspect of performance, i.e., student achievement. Although such an approach frightens many teachers, competition will translate into improved pay for those who perform well...”

“So, my colleagues, you cannot have it both ways. Either accept the fact that you remain mired in pay mediocrity as a public employee in competition with every other public worker, or start to examine some meaningful alternatives. They just might improve your salary and make us all better teachers.

“Oh, and in the process we just might improve the education of our children.”

- Reported by the Teacher Quality Bulletin (TQBulletin@aol.com), a venture capitalist in Chicago has launched a school to provide **teacher training** in a residential setting to 300 students. The Chicago Academy will put these teachers to work in classrooms. The mentoring teachers will make higher salaries, to boot.

- If it wasn't broken, there wouldn't be such steam to fix it. **Traditional certification** is quickly being squeezed out not only by programs like the one above in Chicago, but by fellows programs like that recently inaugurated in Washington, DC with the support of First Lady Laura Bush. Like similar programs in Boston and New York, fellows accepted receive an intensive seven-week training and a stipend and put in some of the most difficult classrooms. This year's batch of graduates has started in the classroom, and we would hope that a strong assessment program will measure the added value these new teachers bring to the classroom.

## On Charters

- **The final tally is done and the score card on national charter school numbers is...**

- 467 newly operating charter schools for 2001-02 school year,
- 2,370 total operating charters serving approximately 576,000 children, and
- 67 already authorized to start next year.

In fact, when you add up parents, students and teachers, you find that charter schools directly touch the lives of more than 1.3 million people.

No other reform in this nation's history of public education has ever caught fire so fast, or produced so many positives for so many children as the charter school phenomenon. CER's *National Charter School Directory – 7<sup>th</sup> Edition* is on its way to the printers and in a short while you'll be able to see for yourself why charter schools are fast becoming a parent's preferred choice of public school. To reserve a copy, call 1-800-521-2118 or email [cer@edreform.com](mailto:cer@edreform.com)

- Should an authorizer revoke the charter of a school that it admits improved achievement because it did not file financial audits properly and failed to carry out other paper work responsibilities on time? That's the big question monopolizing charter school debates today.

When **Banneker Charter Academy of Technology** was given its final revocation papers, a first grade teacher announced she felt like her life was being ripped away. But Central Missouri State University, the group that first gave Banneker life, felt justified in its revocation, despite admitting that the school improved scores, and put learning first in the lives of their teachers and students.

The board also admitted that the school, after being put on probation, made great strides in clearing up some of its non-academic messes. But too late, they said, and thus in a city whose schools have been threatened with loss of accreditation for nearly two decades, a promising bulb is dimmed.

It's important for readers to remember that this kind of attitude – that places process above results – is what got us into the mess we're in today to begin with. Charters were supposed to start with results, not process. While compliance with rules and financial reporting is vital, one wonders whether or not if the charter had the money and the people that Kansas City schools have devoted to paperwork, they would have had to endure this fate.

Once again, charter schools are being closed not because of what they do to kids, but because of what they do to bureaucracies. Think about it. (For evidence and information backing up this statement, check out CER's full in depth analysis of charter school closures at [www.edreform.com/pubs/cs\\_closures.htm](http://www.edreform.com/pubs/cs_closures.htm)).

## **The State of American Education**

The Nation's Report Card on math achievement was delivered this fall, and it's clear that once again traditionally disadvantaged students are still not getting the quality of education they deserve.

While scores for 12<sup>th</sup> graders were down across nearly all categories and barely a quarter of fourth and eighth graders are performing at or above proficient levels, the racial achievement gap demonstrates even worse performance by those most in danger of being left behind.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress also underscores other important differences: Fourth graders who report using calculators every day averaged 25 points lower on the NAEP than fourth graders who never or hardly ever use calculators. Eighth graders whose teachers majored in math or math education scored higher on average than students whose teachers majored in other fields, highlighting again the need for teachers trained in subject material, rather than jargon.

Texas, North Carolina and Georgia were the only states to make headway in closing the black-white achievement gap, and Texas and Maryland were the only states to make gains in the white-Hispanic gap. Even so, 90% of Hispanic students in Maryland perform below proficiency.

Across-the-board, states also experienced limited advancement. Only 11 of 39 states made significant gains among fourth graders since 1996, and only 13 of 37 states made those gains among eighth graders.

Not all states participate in NAEP testing – making comparisons in some areas impossible, and posing yet another argument in favor of using the Nation's Report Card as a benchmark for state progress. For more information and details, go to [www.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/](http://www.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/).

### **Building The Grassroots**

Effective reform has always, and will always, take place at the grassroots level where united parents and teachers can have a concentrated impact on their communities, and consequently, on their leaders.

That's why CER has focussed so much attention on two of our promising programs to help build local grassroots organizations and arm them with the kind of resources that will help them succeed.

The School Board Network (SBN) has nearly tripled in size since May, and is approaching a critical mass in states like Virginia, Indiana, California and Texas. Because the SBN's membership is made up of local leaders who are empowered to make decisions about local schools, this group will play a critical role in making reform work.

CER's Partners Program is similarly growing a network of local and state reform groups, helping to build the cross-fertilization that will help those in Washington State to know what's happening in Florida, and vice versa. By exchanging ideas and best practices, groups grow stronger and better policies take root.

Dozens from both groups will be getting together at the annual Education Leaders Council meeting this month in Atlanta. School Board members and local education reform leaders are invited to contact us to learn more about these exciting programs.

## New and Improved from CER!

Here's a quick reminder about some additional services CER offers you that you won't want to miss!:

*Parent Power! Helping you make sense of schooling today* is a newsletter devoted to helping parents become better advocates for their children. The Back-to-School issue features articles on "How to Advocate For Your Child", "Understanding Your Child's Math Education," "Getting Organized," and more. Coming up is an entire issue devoted to how some schools and reform efforts are driving the character education train to make a positive impact for children. To view previous *Parent Power!* editions go to [www.edreform.com/parentpower/](http://www.edreform.com/parentpower/) where you can sign up to receive a free electronic version of each issue.

*CER Newswire* gives you the latest news in education reform, delivered to your computer screen each Tuesday. With quick summaries on the most recent studies and news reports, complete with links to further information, it's free to members like you, by going to [www.edreform.com/update/](http://www.edreform.com/update/).

*Hot Off the Presses!: A Consumer's Guide to Public Private Partnerships* will help parents and school groups learn more about the private companies operating in public and charter schools.

*Charter School Laws Across the States* lets you have a ranking scorecard and legislative profiles of charter school laws in all 37 states and the District of Columbia, and tells you what makes a charter school law strong – and what makes it weak.

To order any of our publications, just call our offices at (800) 521-2118, or visit us on-line at [www.edreform.com/pubs/](http://www.edreform.com/pubs/).

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With the close of this issue, seventy MONTHLY LETTERS TO FRIENDS have come and gone. Our thanks to CER's broad array of supporters, whose depth and diversity show the strength of the education reform movement in this country. The readership of this tome is now 28,000 strong, with an additional 300,000 people accessing it yearly via the web.

While some may applaud and others may jeer each issue, we are committed to our mission of Making Schools Work Better for All Children and will continue to provide a candid and unapologetic view of education happenings and reform towards that goal. We wish you and your children and families a great and productive school year!

  
Jeanne Allen