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

With the Fourth of July just behind us and the East Coast's new Monsoon season now just a memory, it is time to wrap up the last few months of action. In the "quick and dirty" summaries this issue you'll find news from numerous vantagepoints. It's clear that there's no summer break when it comes to helping children succeed.



DC Hope

To an uproarious crowd on July 1, President George W. Bush announced his new school choice initiative, designed to provide \$75 million worth of scholarships in selected cities, most notably **Washington, DC**. The announcement came at the DC-based KIPP DC: Key Academy, one of the network's premiere schools, founded in part by Susan Schlaeffler, a dynamic Teach for America grad turned school entrepreneur. Bush commended Susan and KIPP's success in general, pointing out that KIPP is a charter school. The president said:

"The money follows the child, and that makes sense. The problem is that oftentimes there are not enough charter schools, in certain communities, to meet the demand. And there is big demand here in Washington, DC, for alternatives other than the status quo. And so I got an idea that I want to share with you today about how to meet that demand."

That's when the president turned to his choice incentive fund. Bush argued: "It is the beginning of an experiment that will show whether or not private school choice makes a difference in quality education in public schools. I happen to believe it will."

The president sounded themes that reformers have long hoped he'd strongly acknowledge: That the system needs shaking up in many places, that too many children can't read proficiently, that competition works, and that accountability with no consequences is no accountability at all.

The Washington, DC parent community is giddy at the prospects of having additional choices. Whereas this issue has been trounced in various power centers in the nation's capital before, this time the Congressional leadership is on board with gusto, the business leadership has come out swinging and the president, obviously, has now committed himself to seeing this through.

It's a new day and one that should make education activists hopeful and proud.

Gates Opening

Perhaps it's a little trite, but we thought it an apropos word connection to describe the generous contributions made of late by the Gates Foundation to real education reform efforts that strike at the heart of many a grassroots battle. For those of you who don't typically follow philanthropy, here are some of their most notable recent contributions:

- To the Cristo Rey schools, \$19 million to bolster the network of Jesuit-influenced high schools that help urban teenagers get a solid, morally infused education.
- To the NewSchools Venture Fund, \$22 million to support the **California**-based philanthropy's efforts to expand charter school networks throughout the country. New Schools believes that to create scale in the movement, additional networks must be established.
- To Aspire Public Schools, started by CEO Don Shalvey, \$5.7 million to help open six new charter high schools over the next five years.
- To Communities in Schools: \$6.3 million for a drop-out prevention group in **Atlanta, Georgia**, to help open 25 small high schools and serve as "performance learning centers."

Other promising developments in the world of scale and reform:

- The **Los Angeles** Alliance for Student Achievement has launched its College Ready Public Schools network, which will seek to open ten charter schools over the next several years. What's notable about this network is it comes from a coalition of business and education leaders who over time have been involved in just about every major educational effort, of which few have led to any substantive change. Having not been able to really reform Los Angeles schools from within, the LA Alliance is seeking to open charter high schools with small learning communities and standards that ensure mastery of core subjects. For information, contact their director, Judy Burnett, at (213) 943-4930 or www.laalliance.org.
- Did we tell you about **Colorado**? If you haven't heard it before, Colorado now has a school choice program that will, starting fall of 2004, ensure up to 20,000 children by 2007 the ability to attend a school that may better meet their needs, even if it's in a private school. Here's how this program works: a student must attend school in the participating district and is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to qualify. Of these students, those in grades K-3 must meet selected at-risk factors or live near a neighborhood school rated "low" or "unsatisfactory" by the state. Students in grades 4-11 must have scored unsatisfactory on at least one subject on their most recent state test. Scholarships will be worth 75 percent of state per-pupil funding for elementary and middle schoolers and 85 percent for high schoolers. The rest of the funding stays with the school district. This year, the statewide average for per-pupil funding is \$5,795, according to the *Rocky Mountain News*.

State Senator John Andrews, a Republican and long a school choice supporter, joined with the state's attorney general Ken Salazar, the Democrat, to draw legislative, executive and private support for the program.

Among others, the Colorado Association of School Boards was not pleased. "This is not the best time to run an experiment like this," said one of the group's directors to the *Denver Post*. We'd like to know: when is it a good time?

- **Ohio's** Choice program, upheld last summer by the U.S. Supreme Court, now extends to high school students. In 1995, the program in Cleveland was limited to K-3 years, but added a new grade each year. The problem is it was capped at 8th grade, so children whose elementary schools may have prevented them from the fate that awaits most public school children there were thrust back into failed schools. Now, more children have a chance to continue, thanks to an amendment backed by Rep. Jon Husted and included in the Governor's budget.
- Buckeye residents also enjoyed a strong revision to the state's charter law, which survived court challenges to its constitutionality this year. The state's charter law originally provided for the creation of charters in the state's "Big Eight" districts and was later amended to include any distressed district. But the State Board of Education, already consumed by too much process work for all schools across the state, proved to be overwhelmed by the authorization process. Several bad schools were authorized while a few bad apples masked good charter progress. Now the legislature has provided funding to create the Ohio Charter School Sponsor Institute, to train and develop potential and existing authorizers, taking the burden off an already burdened governmental body and giving it to a willing institution who may have more incentive to get involved and *stay* involved in creating and monitoring quality charter schools.
- Not so in **Michigan**, at least yet, where a struggle between the Governor and legislators has charter school proponents still wondering whether that state's cap will ever get lifted. There are at least 10,000 students on the state's waiting lists and over 30 schools wanting to get started. The Governor, Jennifer Granholm, has surprised many charter proponents with her interest in supporting the schools but does not want to go as far as some proponents would like in approving the creation of another 200 schools. Meanwhile, Detroit parents are champing at the bit for more choices. A result should be available by month's end. Keep an eye on CER's weekly newswire for frequent updates.
- Evidence of success among children who participate in **school choice** programs is mounting. On July 16, researchers at the Manhattan Institute confirmed that children in charter schools outperform children in comparable public schools. CER's internal research finds that in 14 states achievement results demonstrate that charters exceed non-charter public school achievement among lower-income, lower-performing children, in particular. And the studies of private school choice students conducted by Harvard University professors shows that African-American students who entered private schools scored higher than their public school peers on standardized tests. See www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg for more.

Scores of Washington, DC scholarship recipients also bear out similar positive findings. During the 1998-1999 school year, African American students who attended private schools using scholarships in grades two through five outperformed their public school peers by 3 national percentile points in reading and 7 points in math. African American students attending private schools in grades 6-8 scored 2 points higher in math. Such results are helping to fuel the DC choice effort currently underway.

The Language Police, How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn

- *A Book Review by Merle Rubin, from the Los Angeles Times, April 28*

[Editor's note: Not enough can be said about historian Diane Ravitch's "The Language Police," a book that finally documents the strange and true in textbook, content, and answers, in part, why our students know so little considering they are allegedly taught so much. Following is one of the best reviews we've read to date.]

What do dinosaurs, mountains, deserts, brave boys, shy girls, men fixing roofs, women baking cookies, elderly people in wheelchairs, athletic African Americans, God, heathens, witches, owls, birthday cake and religious fanatics all have in common? ... all of the above share the common fate of having been banned from the textbooks or test questions (or both) being used in today's schools.

In the late 1990s, Ravitch ... was overseeing the development of voluntary national tests [and] was surprised to learn that the passages her committee had chosen had been subjected to a second review by a "bias and sensitivity" panel, which wanted to eliminate many of them. Among those rejected by the "bias and sensitivity" panel was a passage about the patchwork quilts made by 19th century frontier women: "The reviewers objected to the portrayal of women as people who stitch and sew, and who were concerned about preparing for marriage." The fact that the passage was historically accurate was considered no defense for its "stereotypical" image of women and girls.

Another story about two young African American girls, one an athlete, the other a math whiz, who help each other learn new skills, was red-flagged for stereotyping blacks as athletic (even though one of the girls was not an athlete but a mathlete).

A passage on the uses and nutritional values of peanuts was rejected because some students are allergic to peanuts. Stranger still, a story about a heroic blind youth who climbed to the top of Mt. McKinley was rejected, not only because of its implicit suggestion that blind people might have a harder time than people with sight, but also because it was alleged to contain "regional bias": ... Stories set in deserts, cold climates, tropical climates or by the seaside, Ravitch learned, are similarly verboten as test topics, since not all students have had personal experience of these regions.

Also forbidden: owls (the animals are taboo for Navajos), Mt. Rushmore (offensive to Lakotas), dinosaurs (suggestive of evolution, hence offensive to creationists), dolphins (regionally offensive because they live in the sea) and Mary McLeod Bethune (this early 20th century civil rights pioneer had the lack of foresight to use the no-longer-fashionable word "negro" in the school she founded).

...What makes this form of censorship so insidious is that it has not been imposed by the federal government but has been voluntarily embraced by textbook publishers who, quite naturally, want their books to be adopted by schools and by states like California and Texas, where statewide adoptions are the rule. The publishers have voluntarily adopted "bias and sensitivity" guidelines, which echo the guidelines of test development companies, which reflect the guidelines of various state and city agencies, which in turn reflect the concerns and sensitivities of ... well, just about anyone who cares to raise a stink about anything.

...Publishers rarely challenge this form of censorship: Occasionally they've managed to fight off demands by right-wing religious fundamentalists to give creationism equal time in science textbooks, but they have been loath to stand up to the demands of what these days passes for the left.

...Ravitch relates how history textbooks written by prominent champions of multiculturalism and expressly designed to be inclusive and inoffensive have still come under fire from various racial and ethnic groups. "Rewarding groups that complain by allowing them to censor words and images that they don't like only encourages them," she concludes. "Censorship should be stopped, not rewarded with compliance and victories."

... One middle school textbook ... "lauds every world culture as advanced, complex, and rich with artistic achievements, except for the United States." Textbooks "sugarcoat practices in non-Western cultures that they would condemn if done by Europeans or Americans.... condemn slavery in the western world but present slavery in Africa and the Middle East as benign.... " Publishers of literature textbooks actually subscribe to the notion that "everything written before 1970 was either gender biased or racially biased." Good-bye to Dickens, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Wordsworth, Keats, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois and Shakespeare.

...Ravitch presents concrete and practical proposals for fixing what is wrong. Discontinuing the practice of statewide textbook adoptions, she believes, would open up the marketplace to competition and allow schools and teachers to choose books for themselves....

(We agree! In May 2001, CER published the Textbook Conundrum, which similarly outlined the unnecessary bureaucracy involved in statewide adoptions, which have the net effect of shutting out "little" publishers whose programs are often extraordinary.)

..."The Language Police"... should be required reading not only for parents, teachers and educators, but for everyone who cares about history, literature, science, culture and indeed the civilization in which we live.

From the Trenches

News that catches the eye and educates the senses

Union Paid for Chief's Opulent Lifestyle

"On the morning of November 19, 2002, United Teachers of Dade President Pat Tornillo excoriated school leaders over low teacher salaries and demanded 'a hunt for spare dollars that could go toward raises.' But Tornillo himself wasn't so frugal. That night, he spent teachers union dues to stay in a \$2,000-a-night suite at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel at Brickell Key. Tornillo slept eight nights at the opulent hotel and charged it to a UTD credit card. Total cost: \$20,138.53."

The Miami Herald, 5/18/03

FBI Searches Teachers Union HQ

"The headquarters of Miami-Dade County's teachers' union were searched by the FBI Tuesday..."

WPLG TV, Miami, 4/29/03

NEA Challenged on Political Outlays

"As much as one-third of the tax-exempt National Education Association's yearly \$271 million income goes toward politically related activities, according to union documents filed with the Internal Revenue Service.... The NEA's Washington headquarters spends more than \$47 million yearly to field a national advocacy staff called UniServe, whose 1,800 directors help screen and select political candidates for endorsement and campaign for their election."

The Washington Times, 4/7/03

Teacher Tests Come Under Scrutiny

"The No Child Left Behind Act may push Rhode Island to do something that many educators say is long overdue: require teachers to pass a standardized state test that proves they are competent to teach math and English."

"The state Department of [Education] wants to abolish the so-called Metts amendment, passed by the General Assembly in 1991, that allows teachers who fail a state certification exam to teach anyway."

The Providence Journal, 4/03/03

Charters' Test Gains Higher, Study Says

"Elementary and high school students enrolled in charter schools in California made greater gains on standardized tests than students attending traditional campuses between 1999 and 2001 but still have lower scores overall, according to a study released Tuesday."

"The differences were more pronounced when charter schools were directly compared with public schools in their districts with similar populations."

The Los Angeles Times, 6/18/03

Law and Sausage

While charters were challenged in virtually every state this year, this scorecard suggests that the balance sheet in state halls actually favored charters in legislative sessions. To Churchill's favorite adage, we offer this brief roundup of charter action in the U.S.

California: A bill is pending that would allow universities and mayors to sponsor schools, but it is "on hold" until next session. Another bill has some interesting stuff in it for charters: Schools that do not get an API score of at least 4 by their fifth year will be in danger of not being renewed. If passed, the bill allows various monies to flow more readily to charters, which is a good thing. This bill also gives school districts the ability to forgo their oversight duties and instead the state board will identify an alternative entity (like a university) to monitor the school's progress. This might be a good move considering many school boards are not able authorizers.

Colorado: Pending legislation would allow the state board to begin approving charter schools if certain conditions are met: First, the school district in which the school is to be located has imposed a moratorium on approving new schools; the school district and the applicant have mutually agreed to allow the applicant to submit an application to the state board; the school district has unilaterally imposed conditions that are unacceptable to the applicant; or the district and the applicant have not concluded negotiations and agreed on terms of the contract within 90 days after being submitted.

Florida: New law permits community colleges to develop charter schools and extends the amount of time the state board has to act on an appeal. The act also lifts the cap on the number of charter schools per county. Also in the Sunshine state, a bill to expand the corporate tax credit program that allows companies to donate to various scholarship funds (from \$50 million to \$88 million).

Illinois: A new law allows for 15 new charter schools for the city of Chicago, but it restores some additional bargaining power to the teachers and put restrictions on the management and independence of charter schools.

Indiana: Charter schools in Hoosier land will finally be guaranteed funding on par with the districts where they are located, but the funding will come directly from the state, allowing school districts to be held harmless from the school children that leave their schools for charter schools.

Massachusetts: Lawmakers in Massachusetts tried twice to place a moratorium on the creation of new charter schools, but failed both times, bringing a sign of relief to state proponents.

Maryland: The Governor signed a weak charter bill in May. The state department of education is working on an application, which is repeatedly very bureaucratic.

Minnesota: Lawmakers defeated a big push for a moratorium on the creation of new charter schools. Some are still working to cut funding for building "lease aid" and for school start-ups. Budget cuts for virtual schools resulted in the state limiting enrollment for students not previously in public schools to about 200.

New Hampshire: Thanks to the addition of the state board of education as a chartering authority, the state may finally get its first – and maybe more – charter schools.

New York: A bill to limit funding and the number of charters permitted was defeated at the last moments of the legislative sessions.

Washington: After seven years in action, a bill nearly made it to becoming law, but the proposal that everyone supported died suddenly in a special session, when the Speaker of the House, Frank Chopp, failed to call the bill up for a vote, after giving numerous indications that he would ensure a vote on the bill. Observers say he is solely responsible for the failure of the Evergreen State to enact a new law this session.

The Nation's Report Card

In June, we were again treated to bad news about reading proficiency in this great country of ours. It's the kind of news that in most industries would send enough shock waves to drop stocks, reduce consumer confidence and send new technologies flying into every corner where it would count. Not in education. The scores of the 2002 Reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress made news one day and was gone the next. Characteristically, many school leaders scoffed at the results, including DC's Superintendent Paul Vance, who upon hearing that DC made the worst scores in the nation, told the media that when tested against what they learn, DC students are improving. But that's the point, isn't it — that children learn what they are taught and in DC, they're only being taught that which satisfies the average, norm-referenced test, not that which holds children to higher standards.

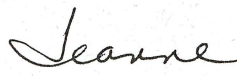
Here's a brief run down of the national reading picture, and a link for you to more specific data by state: www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading.

Nationally, only *32 percent of 4th graders were proficient in reading*, a small 2 percent improvement over 1992. Thirty-two percent of children have basic reading skills according to NAEP, and equally alarming, 36 percent are below basic.

In *eighth grade, proficiency jumps a point to 33 percent*, and just basic reading scores are posted by 43 percent of students. Twelfth grade scores decreased four points in ten years, perhaps because reading research came too late to make a difference in these students' early instruction. Thirty-six percent of twelfth graders are proficient, 38 percent basic and 26 percent below. In ten years, there was *no significant change overall in the achievement gap* between black and white students.

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A word of thanks to those of you, who have taken time to express your thoughts about our work, issues you care about or even a personal note of support and friendship. You know who you are and you have my gratitude.


Jeanne Allen