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

From building parent networks to supporting and advancing charter developments in almost a dozen states, the spring and summer have kept CER's team busy and away from the business of corresponding in our traditional Monthly Letter way. As some of you know, we send out weekly blasts of hot news through our E-newsletter, the CER *NewsWire*. And so to catch you up on what's been ailing — and stimulating — the education system these past few months, here's a brief report, at a glance!



**Win some...**

In Camden, the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) succeeded in attracting a handful of teachers at the Rutgers-based LEAP Academy charter school. Because of ongoing NJEA politics, charters in the Garden State get as much as 30% less funding than traditional schools. The result is lower spending on many aspects of the school, including some teacher pay scales.

It's a clever strategy: make sure full funding never reaches the schools, and then turn around and sell your ability to negotiate better pay to the teachers whose pay was docked by the same union's charter opposition. No wonder 10 of New Jersey's 48 charters are unionized. Earth to New Jersey charter advocates...

**Lose Some...**

The unions are going for teachers in the Keystone state, too. But in Pittsburgh, AFT affiliates were unsuccessful in recruiting a majority of teachers at Northside Urban Pathways Charter School to organize under a union umbrella.

School CEO Linda Clautti said: "In the end, I believe the employees came to recognize that all the red tape that goes along with having a union is just not necessary where there is good, open communication."

Of the 103 Pennsylvania charters, only three currently affiliate with unions.

## **Send in the Clowns**

When the school district allowed all Buffalo public schools – including charters – to participate in the annual Carnival in the Park, the unions of teachers and principals discouraged participation by traditional schools. Attendance was significantly down as a result – translating to fewer dollars raised for school affairs. A healthy response was heard from a parent and carnival committee chair from one school: “If you don’t like a charter school, don’t buy their cotton candy... No matter how you feel about charter schools, this is not the place for battle lines.” The union persisted and caused the fair to nearly flop. Send in the clowns? They’re already here.

## **Almost Terminated, Part IV**

When Golden State Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger began to appoint some new state board of education members, organized labor took special pains to try to terminate one potential member. Thankfully they failed. Jeannine Martineau was attacked because she has been an outspoken proponent of outsourcing public services to private firms. Despite having been a member of her Lake Elsinore school board and past president of the state school boards association, Martineau promoted repeal of a law that banned contracting out. The 220,000-strong school employees association balked, but the Governor’s choice prevailed. Moral of the story: *It’s all politics.*

## **It’s all politics, Part II**

The Washington Education Association (WEA) showed its true colors this spring. It not only succeeded in putting a referendum on the November 2004 ballot that requires the people to approve or reject the recently passed charter law (thanks, by the way, to an army of paid signature gatherers), but it also rejected the re-election bid of former pal and WEA president Terry Bergerson. Bergerson was seeking her second term as state superintendent of public instruction. She made the mistake of supporting charter schools – a badge she should wear on her chest and promote as she campaigns for votes among real people.

## **If You Can’t Beat ‘em, Get Dirty**

NEA’s plans to recoup apparently hurtful membership losses include unionizing charter schools. The union giant would stand to gain back revenues if they succeeded in the big states, in particular. But is it legal? It appears that the U.S. Labor Department has found some cause for examining such efforts. There is no indication yet as to the Department’s specific concerns. And the IRS is still looking into possible tax violations surrounding the union’s definition of “political expenditure.” It seems that it may or may not match the one the rest of us use. During the union giant’s annual meeting in Washington last month, NEA budget committee members asked one key question about the inquiries: “When will this be publicized to our members?”

### **It couldn't be the schools, right?**

Such was the only conclusion we could draw from a comment that the *Associated Press* attributed to East Cleveland City Schools Superintendent Elvin Jones, in defense of his district's 38% passage rate on 9<sup>th</sup> grade math tests. "Sometimes the questions are not sensitive to certain cultures," he said, such as a question about yachting or golf. "It throws kids for a loop."

### **Nero's back fiddling while another Rome burns...**

A recent report by the National Council on Teacher Quality finds that an alarmingly high percentage of teachers are not "sufficiently grounded" in the subjects they teach.

The report revealed that less than half of all secondary teachers did not have a college major in their assigned subjects, despite being certified by the state. A whopping one out of every four middle school teachers in Pennsylvania recently failed a test in their own subject! And it's even worse in Philly – where two-thirds of the city's middle school math teachers failed a math proficiency test designed for high school sophomores. But rather than putting resources into helping all teachers master the subject they teach, groups like the NEA are focusing on political battles like those in Washington state.

Sadly, the unions would rather – well, unionize – than ensure quality control.

### **Rocky Mountain High... and Low**

While Colorado Governor Bill Owens was happily signing into law a bill creating a new statewide charter institute to provide an alternative route for applicants faced with anti-charter school boards, the state Supreme Court was striking down the law intended to give more children with the greatest need a chance to choose among public or private schools. Colorado's "Opportunity Contract Pilot Program" would have only allowed about 2,000 children in poorly performing districts to make a choice, but the state's highest court interpreted the state constitution to be at odds with parent-driven education. So, it's back to the drawing board for parent-friendly lawmakers.

Meanwhile, the new charter institute might help some kids now. Avid CER readers will recall that it was 1994 when the Denver school board refused to allow the Thurgood Marshall charter to open, despite an order to do so by the state board of education. Cordia Booth, a former teacher and avid education reformer, was at the helm of the project.

More recently, Steamboat Springs rebuffed parent petitions to open a Montessori charter, and the power battle that ensued sucked the energy from many charter supporters. The new route to approval says that unfriendly boards no longer have the only say. That should be good news to the over 20,000 children on charter waiting lists.

## **Charter Tea Party**

A rebellion tingeing with Tea Party days is a foot near Boston harbor. And it's caused Governor Mitt Romney to emerge as one of the most tenacious governors on education reform. The General Assembly has threatened moratoriums and major rollbacks since January. All the while, Romney has consistently argued his support – and potential veto – for any bill that would shut down growth of the Commonwealth's charter movement. So when lawmakers sent him the moratorium in June, Romney promptly vetoed it, and set about to get Bay State legislators to work with him on ensuring that new schools open, even if it means some funding changes (which are unfortunate). At press time, Romney was sticking to his guns...or tea.

### **Come see for yourselves...**

As a nationwide superintendent search threatens to scare off even more talent from the broken DC school system, the new DC K-12 Scholarship Program is up and running. The program has received more than 8,500 inquiries and attracted almost 2,700 applicants from families who no longer want to wait for the public system to respond to their pleas for good schools. The "sky is falling" predications have been anything but true. History in other cities tells us that the impact of so-called "evil" vouchers will be nothing but positive. In Milwaukee, the sky never fell, but instead, incremental progress in student achievement has been documented from year to year. That hasn't stopped people from trying to shut down Wisconsin's choice program, or to slow down its charter program. There is still doubt in the model, despite research by renowned academics such as Dr. Caroline Hoxby that reveals a quantifiable increase in higher achievement where choices are offered in large quantities. So, come see for yourself next time you're in Washington, DC, Milwaukee, Cleveland or parts of Florida.

In the meantime, maybe Congress will tire of the leadership void here and do something drastic. We can only hope.

## **Adventures in Citizenship**

It's been almost six years since the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) bemoaned the state of civics in U.S. classrooms – revealing that less than a quarter of 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders demonstrate proficiency in civics. But there are few signs that it's getting better. So, when the Monthly Letter scouts discovered a new interactive tool to teach kids about public policy and citizenship, we just had to share...

Called "Adventures in Citizenship" and produced by Southern Mutual Help Association, Inc., the compact disk-based program and teachers' guide uses entertainment and strong content for middle and high school years. It was conceived, in part, by veteran Louisiana school reformer Jackie DuCote and is available by logging onto [www.southernmutualhelp.org](http://www.southernmutualhelp.org).

## **Oklahoma, you're doing fine...**

Limits to charter enrollment are putting a kink in many parents' efforts to improve opportunities for their children. With only 2,650 kids currently in charters in the Sooner State, supporters are once again trying to open up the modest law to more schools and potentially more authorizers. The state's largest newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*, said: "...limiting charter school enrollment is a step backward. If districts want to keep students from moving to charter schools, then perhaps school officials should pay more attention to what charter schools are doing right."

And supporters have an ally in State Superintendent Sandy Garrett as well – she has long encouraged Oklahomans to embrace the charter model.

## **Snapshot: Maryland**

State achievement increases in Maryland bode well for many students. But what about those students still abandoned by traditional schools? That's the case in Baltimore, for one, where there are currently over 50 failing traditional schools serving the city's students. There has been dismal failure of the system; a bailout by the city; and hundreds of parents gathered in June at a city council hearing on school board obstacles to the opening of charter schools. All underscore the need for alternative authorizers in a state that was willing to accept a bill that left school districts in charge.

## **I fought the law, and the law won...**

When a law allows a school like KIPP to be denied in a needy community, there's something dramatically wrong. No surprise to CER, whose analysts rank Tennessee's law 32<sup>nd</sup> in the country. The squashed efforts to open a high achieving program in Nashville give new meaning to the word... stupid.

## **Bite-sized learning, giant-sized results**

Students at the Arthur Academy in Oregon have demonstrated remarkable success. Recently released Stanford Achievement test results show that the school's kindergarten class jumped from reading scores in the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile in only nine months. Math scores jumped from the 46<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 77<sup>th</sup> percentile during the same period. School co-founder Charles Arthur credits a curriculum that focuses on learning in "bite-size" sequences – a proven method most traditional public schools don't put to work for their students.

## **Moving on... out?**

Having received national acclaim for their education model, the founders of the successful Amistad Academy in New Haven are expanding into 15 charter schools in New York. It seems that the growth of the program in Connecticut has been strangled by a poor charter law – one that ranks 29<sup>th</sup> in the nation. But New York's top-10 law has paved the way for expansion in the Big Apple. Look for more on Amistad's success story in a PBS special airing at the end of August.

**Turn off the TV, pitch the video games and passcode the computer!**

Too long for a bumper sticker? Maybe. But this mom and professional remains amazed at the complete disregard that too many families have for what is now well documented as being harmful for kids! Young people spend an average of 23 hours a week in front of the television set – more time than they spend doing any other activity besides sleeping.

We talk about 21<sup>st</sup> century education and standards, we examine and demand research into reading pedagogy, early education, class size, site-based management and data drive reform. But how often do we demand to know the correlation between the hours our children spend engaged in front of electronic media and their reading proclivity, constructive play or basic conversation?

This allegedly old-fashioned notion is actually a set of conclusions based on observation, not necessarily empirical study. But the research is beginning to accumulate that supports the long-time hypothesis that children who are exposed to too much television and video games may suffer serious and long-lasting consequences. The University of Michigan found that TV discourages reading, reduces school performance and interferes with vital social interactions. A new study in the journal *Pediatrics* finds that infants and young children who spend long hours in front of the television are far more likely to develop problems like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, now the most common childhood behavioral disorder. And a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children's Digital Media Centers, found that in "heavy TV households," 34 percent of children ages 4 to 6 can read, compared with 56 percent in homes where the TV is on less often.

We can't talk about reading to learn and reading better unless we talk about preconditions for success, especially when children are young. We must also talk about all the conditions that affect whether they read.

Interest must start at home – and other activities can't be considered more important than reading. A \$30 video could buy a lot of books. Think about it.



From all of us at CER, have a great rest of your summer. Tell the kids not to forget to read. Tell your legislators you'll be watching! See you in September!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeanne Allen".

Jeanne Allen