

# THE Center for Education Reform



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

Mid-winter finds reformers awash in education reform activity, the likes of which have not been seen in years. Early indications are that this promises to be a watershed year for reformers!

This year you'll hear from us again quarterly — and occasionally more, in other modes, when there is more to share. For now, it's time to review the major developments that have been taking place — and that most legislatures are already reviewing — as we kick off this first MONTHLY LETTER issue of 2005.



## Pathfinders

On January 28<sup>th</sup>, one of the charter movement's leading pioneers was treated to a visit from her Governor. Yvonne Chan, founder of a cluster of charter schools in San Fernando, California has conquered gangs, community unrest and skepticism to create high achieving schools where once few existed. In his examination of how Vaughn Next Century Learning Center works with their own performance pay efforts, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger noted the success there and beyond. He also added a pretty passionate endorsement:

**"To be honest with you, I love charter schools. They are pathfinders in education."**

*Pathfinders.* What a great term, Mr. Gubernator. And it fits. But most Americans would hardly know that, based on the bevy of bad news stories served up to them in the media over the last quarter about charter schools. Are charter schools making the grade? Is there evidence that they work?

Just for starters — and before we get into the hard achievement data — there are many pieces of information from which we can make this conclusion anecdotally. First, there's the 15 percent increase in charter schools just this year, which demonstrates public acceptance, as well as parental commitment. Next, there are the literally thousands of reports we receive from the schools themselves with notes of their rising standardized test scores, first graduating classes, value-added test data on students, college acceptance rates, and more, all which include chief among them the nation's less advantaged kids for whom such successes are typically less likely to occur.





There is the parental survey data, from experts such as former UCLA Dean of Education Lewis Solmon, which finds parents' high marks for charters correlates with schools' achievement. And there is the evidence, undisputed by anyone, that demonstrates the diversity of students throughout the schools we call charters.

Is there national evidence they are working? I like this question the most, because it typically gives us the opportunity to clarify how it is that schools work after all. For it is state data, not national data, that is most important to have in the life of a student. It is state data that schools, parents, and even funders use to evaluate schools. It is state data that the federal government now uses to assess progress on the No Child Left Behind Act. It is state data that governs formulas and state data and local data that often drive colleges to accept students, or not.

So when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation's Report Card, revealed disparities between conventional and charter schools, reformers were confused, some conceded defeat, and some in the public were led to believe that charters were yet another failed reform.

Not so. The NAEP scores said nothing about the quality of a charter school or its students. (A detailed analysis from outside experts as well as CER is posted at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com)). Later in the fall, it became clear, however, that charter school success is indeed well documented when Harvard scholar Caroline Hoxby released an extensive report comparing individual charter schools by school data to conventional public schools that would otherwise have been the neighborhood school for the charter kids. In other words, comparing apples to apples.

Hoxby found that charters outperform conventional public schools when accounting for all racial and other socioeconomic factors by at least 3 percent in math and 5 percent in reading. Her data also revealed that charter schools do a better job of raising the achievement of poor and minority students. Progress was most dramatic in Louisiana, Alaska, Illinois, Hawaii, Colorado, and the District of Columbia.

Additional studies reveal progress in charter schools in selected areas (Hoxby's is the only report to date to try to quantify the information across all states). Bryan Hassel produced a report for the Charter School Leadership Council (CSLC) that evaluates 38 separate analyses of student performance. Hassel found that the quality of the studies is mixed, and most are of limited use. However, "the results, while far from conclusive, are encouraging." Twenty-one studies look at change in performance over time. Nine follow individual students (which he agrees is the ideal method). Altogether, with varying specificity, most of the 21 studies find gains that tend to be greater than conventional public schools, but a few found lagging achievement ([publications@cslc.org](mailto:publications@cslc.org) for more).

Meanwhile, if you step aside from the "studies" and look at individual state data (as CER has frequently done), the picture of charter school achievement is bright. In addition to accountability, parental choice – and teacher choice – should not be discounted. In fact, choice is a powerful lever, is typically an indication in other industries of product approval, and is a concept that charters were born to embrace.



The other lever is the pressure brought to bear from the competition that charters create. Little is discussed anymore about the incredible ripple effect that creating new schools has had on existing schools. We've said it often here, and you can find it as well in our publications, but there is no question that progress has been made, **not** because the same people woke up one day and began changing, but because they were forced to change. Progress – such as strong and high standards, assessments, more choices in conventional systems, and even copycat schools that look like the charter down the street – is the hallmark of successful reform. Pathfinders make progress.

As 2005 emerges with new proposals, new enemies and some of the old, do keep in mind that the power of a reform is sometimes messy to document, and hard to put in a few choice words. Time indeed is on our side.

### **In the States**

*Speaking of 2005, check out the efforts underway across these United States:*

- A bill expanding the path-breaking **Milwaukee school choice program** was sent to the Governor in early February, clearing the way — almost — for another 1,500 students to make choices outside of their neighborhood public schools. Doyle vetoed a similar bill last year and now the city is only 300 students away from the cap that will limit any further use of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.
- **Hawaii Five No:** Despite a huge push by popular Gov. Linda Lingle, the Hawaii House Education Committee rejected a charter school bill that would have strengthened the state's charter schools and paved the way for more of these independent, innovative public schools. It's no time for Hawaii's lawmakers to be playing politics with kids. Only 22 percent of the state's eighth graders are proficient in reading and only 17 percent are proficient in math. These are some of the lowest scores in the country. Just last fall *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin* reported that Hawaii charter schools scored higher on standardized tests than regular public schools. And there are more than 400 kids on the waiting list for these charter schools. This isn't the last time this issue will confront the lawmakers. We need a charter-like Don Ho to come to their rescue.
- **Colorado** ushered in some new leadership in 2004 that is less than friendly towards charter schools and other choice reforms. A statewide board created last year to ensure that school boards could no longer summarily dismiss charter proposals is now being called into question. Boulder lawmaker Jack Pommer says that authority is now with an unelected board (even though people who are elected appoint the board members). It doesn't seem to bother Pommer that while some school boards in the Rocky Mountain State are friendly, many school boards have worked hard to keep charters struggling or out of business altogether. State law prior to last year provided few alternatives to charter applicants looking to serve children in their area. Steamboat Springs was one such national horror story when parents were turned away at every juncture. The Governor will likely watch – and eventually veto – Pommer's attempt to rollback the law.
- The education commissioner from "**the land of 10,000 lakes**" (we're not telling – you figure it out!) is putting charter school sponsors and board members in school. Noting that training is essential to becoming good stewards of public funds and able managers of the complex institutions that are schools (especially given that charter



schools do not have built in back-room support) Alice Seagren issued the new rules and was immediately applauded by charter supporters for her effort to stave off problems before they occur. According to CER research, charters fail most often because of mismanagement and financial troubles, two things that can be easily avoided with the right training.

- “Dozens of high schools in **metro Detroit** failed to meet the state’s progress goals this year, and the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) posted its worst showing ever.” This lead sentence in the *Detroit Free Press* is bad enough on its own. The numbers are astounding. This may explain continued enrollment declines, a large percentage of which is a result of charter schools being available as higher quality options. But this does not seem to make Detroit officials want to do better. Rather, they are complaining to the media that charters are the cause of their failure. Twenty years ago it was money. In fact, every few years, there’s a different scapegoat. Enter the worst stage of a crisis: denial. Rather than figure it out, Detroit announced in mid-February that it would no longer be granting waivers for kids to attend schools out of the district.

Says the *Free Press*, “Detroit Public Schools has a \$200-million deficit, which administrators blame largely on declining enrollment. The district has lost 40,000 students during the past decade, and says it could lose 10,000 a year until 2008. Last week, the district announced 34 schools would close in June. Each DPS student who leaves costs the district \$7,180 a year in state funding.

“In addition to the 6,000 students attending schools-of-choice districts, an estimated 33,000 Detroit students attend charter schools. School choice districts are those that open their borders to students who live outside that district.”

One parent’s comments about the district’s move were particularly interesting: “I’m going to move. I’m going to have to take an apartment in the Clarenceville district. It’s not going to work. I’m going to change schools.

“He’s everything to me. I cannot risk him going to school in this foolishness,” the parent said. “I’d like to see the Detroit school system improved and I wouldn’t mind being part of that improvement – but I can’t risk my son’s education...Detroit schools are unsafe, mismanaged and academically inferior.”

- Common sense from **Florida**: Charter schools in most states have long been challenged by budget limitations that do not allow them to receive capital dollars to purchase or renovate facilities in ways that are standard for conventional schools. So the opinion by the state’s attorney general concerning funding inequities was music to the ears of thousands of school leaders who struggle to provide adequate learning environments for their students. In his opinion, Attorney General Charlie Crist argued that the Florida statutes clearly provide for “students enrolled in a charter school [to be] funded...the same as students enrolled in other public schools in the district.” Such a mandate is not only clear but must be followed.



- **ConnecticutCAN!** After years of enduring a weak law where opening charter schools has been contentious and funds not equitable, a prestigious coalition of state leaders is joining forces with charter families and their successful school leaders to press for needed changes in the Constitution State's law. Connecticut has to appropriate money each year for state charters, and school districts do not contribute to a child's charter education. Such inequities of as much as 25 percent cause schools that are serving some of the state's poorest to have to raise millions to cover costs. Enrollment limits fix school size and there is no capital support. The state's charters have closed the achievement gap in their schools better than comparable, conventional public schools. "We're asking children to compete in a knowledge-based global economy, and they can't do it," said Alex Troy, the chairman of the Connecticut Alliance for Great Schools. The feat should not be as difficult as in some places – the author of the original legislation — Rep. Jim Amman — is now the speaker of the House.

- Black clergy in **New Jersey** took to the streets this February 11 to advocate for vouchers and vow to push the legislators to do better by their kids. Reverend Reginal Jackson told a crowd that "The Black Ministers Council comes to not just talk about the plight of minority and poor children, but to announce our intent to revive the civil rights movement in this state and to center it around the issue of the education of our children." Jackson is well regarded in the state, having spearheaded the effort to end racial profiling in the Garden State. He is not alone in his support for greater choice for the urban poor there. And years of failed efforts to improve education in the so-called Abbott districts have resulted in financial mismanagement, not better education. For more or to get involved, call Excellent Education for Everyone (E3) at (973) 273-7217.

- **Maryland...finally.** Avid readers know of the trials and tribulations experienced for years in the Old Line State, where charter reformers have had to contend first with no law, and then a weak one, to be able to start charter schools. Last fall, the push for more quality schooling options in Baltimore finally paid off when the school board approved three new charter schools from community groups – groups that CER had the pleasure to work with from their inception. While the contracts still have yet to be negotiated and a limited appropriation for the schools is unfortunately a factor, the notion that charters will have finally arrived in a significant city is good news for all. Not to put a damper on the news, but the months and anguish the success required should not be visited on any human. It's time for the Governor and legislative leaders to recognize where they went wrong and improve the law so that school boards are not the only game in town.

- **Raising the Roof:** Proposals to raise the cap or add authorizers are being considered across the country. **Massachusetts** still fixes enrollment at a percentage of overall public school enrollment, **North Carolina's** 100 are bursting at the seams, and **New York** may soon hit its cap of 50 for the State University of New York, its most prolific and quality authorizer. (With 24,000 students on waiting lists in the Bronx alone, pent up demand persists).

In states such as **California** and **South Carolina**, new authorizers are being considered to pull charters out of the fierce local school board battles that seem to occur wherever school boards have a lock on authorizing. Bills to improve the overall regulatory climate for charters are moving forward in such states as **Georgia** and **Indiana**.



## The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

- San Jose's James Lick High School was on the "list." And according to the *Mercury News*, student Chris Cibelli wanted out. He got his transfer, but what caught our eye is the comment by one in the turnaround team: "That's the youngster that's going to raise my test scores. It's hard to take, that there's a law that says your child has a right to move on."

- "The City that Never Sleeps" may have more illiteracy than insomnia. As of November '04, five percent of third graders were left back a second or third time. Worse still, the dropout rate is among the highest in the country at 46 percent.

- It's hard to believe that administrators would think that artificially making the National Honor Society is more important than actually earning it, but such is the case in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where discussion was underway earlier this year to move the GPA necessary down to a 3.0. The national rules say that such a grade point average, a mid B, is acceptable, but typically schools set higher standards. The proposal by the school board president and superintendent was met with fierce opposition, and students to their credit were miffed. In the end, two schools moved down to 3.5, not as significant as the drop proposed. Nice job, citizens!

- "Choice is the new euphemism for white flight," according to *Phil Delta Kappan* editor Anne Lewis. That will show you how out of touch the publication and its staff are. As Minnesota expert Wayne Jennings responds, there are a higher percentage of minority students in charters. Contrary to Ms. Lewis's continual denial of the fact, charter schools are also more diverse than their neighborhoods. One would think that such a prestigious name would not apply to a rag that is anything but.

- Leaning Tower of Education: The international assessment called PISA might as well be a euphemism for unstable educational results. According to the test released at the end of 2004, America's 15 year olds continue to perform below the international average in mathematics, literacy, and problem solving. It's more complex than that, and for more go to <http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa>. But no matter how you slice it, the U.S. is not where it could, or should be.

- Bush Budget Busts Blob: *The New York Times* highlighted the political posturing of opponents to the president's 2005 budget request, which does little more than cut a handful of programs that are irrelevant to student learning. The "*Democrats pounced on the spending plan... with a longstanding complaint that No Child Left Behind had been insufficiently financed. Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the ranking Democrat on the Senate committee that oversees education, called the proposal 'the most anti-student, anti-education budget since the Republicans tried to abolish the Department of Education.'*"

## In the Trenches

**High School is Hot** — Small high schools, charter high schools, alternative high schools, high schools that work. Joining the rationale view that students in these critical years need access to reform, too, President Bush has made high school accountability a



central part of his '05 federal push. This would involve a \$1.5 billion requirement for state assessments to ensure that diplomas are truly meaningful. For more on why some of us think this a good idea, go to *Chalktalk* at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com) for a special blog on the subject.

**History is Not** — Apparently the fact that U.S. social studies does little to convey depth and instill a sense of national and world struggles for freedom is not enough for Michigan legislators, who seriously considered doing away with critical social studies questions on the statewide assessment (MEAP). Former state board member Michael Warren took this notion to task in a fabulous essay, which is posted in full at [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com). Argues Warren convincingly, "If I were a terrorist intent on destroying the United States I would begin by striking at the heart of America – it's founding principles and history...this plan of attack may be unwittingly implemented in Lansing. In an attempt to save costs, improve efficiency and spare themselves from the annual complaints of superintendents who prefer to avoid accountability for what they teach," a plan was approved by legislators. Warren goes on to say that MEAP social studies scores are dismal, which is a reflection of what is taught, not of students' ability or interest. Rather than water down requirements, we should require schools to teach the fundamentals at all levels. "We are the only nation left standing that was born of ideas; and our core history has been making those ideas become reality...the least we can demand is that our schools teach the founding principles and history of our nation."

**Golden Parachute** — The term typically applies to corporate execs who sail away from cushy posts with huge windfalls, despite perhaps being dismissed for anything but success. Seattle reporters uncovered a similar trend in the school district they monitor. Turns out that Seattle public schools have "forked out more than a half a million dollars in exit settlements to educators who don't get passing grades, according to findings published in a story last week by *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*." Seattle has a \$12 million shortfall currently, causing threats of layoffs and school closings. But as the paper points out, "before the district wails to Olympia for more money, it would do well to make sure the executives it pays so handsomely don't end up becoming cash leeches..." *Hey boys and girls, it pays to screw up. Forget good results. You can get paid without performance.*

**Pro-charter Principal** — The head of a conversion charter school in Boynton Beach, FL applauds his new found freedom. "The big advantage of being a charter school is that we're able to respond to the needs of our students more quickly and to give them more individualized attention." Well said.

**Another District Reformer** — "With the number of choices available, we have to give more information to the public than ever before. It's really a matter of making as much information available as possible to parents so they can make an informed decision." ("Amen" to Ike Thomas, Durham, NC Student Assignment Director.)

**Albany's Alterations** — The city's fifth charter school will be opening next year, thanks to a strong proposal for the Albany Preparatory Charter School that will serve 300 students in grades 5-8. But rather than embrace strong new entities, one school board member vowed to "fight the charter through zoning and any other means they could find." Isn't that a swell example?



**Gender Matters** — A new wave in public education is taking off and copying age-old efforts from prestigious private schools. Single-sex schools, and sometimes single-sex classes, are increasingly showing up in the charter world, as these new public schools have the flexibility to innovate. Higher male participation in special ed programs is one of the catalysts for a new way of doing school, as the drive to make boys sit still has resulted in increased diagnoses of ADD and decreased learning overtime. The subject has attracted the attention of First Lady Laura Bush, who recognizes that boys are now getting lost in our culture and in schools. In tough areas, the boys drop out, join gangs, and spurn school and conventional institutions. In Indiana, *The Indianapolis Star* reporter Staci Hupp reports that two thirds of all special ed students and 60 percent of dropouts lasts year were boys. So some schools there are creating single sex classes, such as Kansas City, MO's University Leadership Academy, that educates its middle schoolers in separate classes for certain subjects. Others are school-wide. The National Association for Single Sex Education retains the definitive research on this subject. For more on this link to CER's Web site and search for "single sex."

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People often ask what it is that CER does. Is it policy think tank stuff, or information? Some of our long-time readers may need to excuse the introduction, but to help you better understand who is writing to you and why, we end with our newly revised statement of purpose:

The Center for Education Reform (CER) creates opportunities for and challenges obstacles to better education for America's communities.

Founded in 1993 to translate ideas into action, CER combines education policy with grassroots advocacy to work deep within the nation's communities to foster positive and bold education reforms. Today this premiere national group serves as a full-service education reform engine working in over 40 states.

CER advocates reforms that produce high standards, accountability and freedom, such as strong charter school laws, school choice programs for children most in need, common sense teacher initiatives, and proven instructional programs. Its Washington, DC-based team and state and local partners advance the mission by

- Making parents better advocates for their children
- Giving lawmakers knowledge they need to make smart decisions
- Providing school-based reformers the tools to promote positive change
- Building and strengthening education reform leaders in the states.

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If you like what you've heard, please consider joining us with the enclosed membership envelope. What you've learned in this publication is based on our involvement, and we hope that whatever your field or interest (or perhaps even opposition!), you've found your reading this month a catalyst in some way. Thank you, and please keep in touch!



Jeanne Allen