

THE Center for Education Reform



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

Thank you for the great comments, insights and support since we last wrote. You clearly love getting the *Monthly Letter to Friends* still, and we love writing it. We wish there were more hours in a day to allow it to be monthly again, but every day we are writing, blogging, emailing and encouraging people to stand up for reform, for kids and for common sense initiatives to make US education the best in the world, once again. Your stories from the field, your encouragement and your critiques help us carry that message through. As spring flowers reach full bloom, we're reminded again that even in education, new life does spring forth on age-old ideas and themes. Read on and you'll see what I mean.

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We told you so. We told you so. We told you so.

Childish, right? We just can't help it, especially upon reading a front page *New York Times* article (4/19/10) about the growing importance and necessity of alternative routes to teacher certification in states. It turns out that there's a fabulous education commissioner in **New York** who learned firsthand in his stint as the Ed School Dean at Hunter College just how ridiculous the course work is that teachers are required to do at most education schools. They were trained not how to teach but more along the ethereal plane, e.g., "the role of democracy in schools." Pedagogy and philosophy, not how to get results.

For years, skeptics called attention to not only the ridiculous nature of ed schools, but to the poor quality of entrants to those schools. After all, why would strong students pay to learn the fine art of cooperative, non-competitive engagement through cut and paste exercises?

Back in 1991, author Rita Kramer visited more than a dozen of our nation's "finest" education schools, discovering that, "our schools of education are appalling."

She produced "Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers," which was described by *Publisher's Weekly* as a scathing "indictment" of teacher preparation programs and a clarion call for alternative certification. According to *Library Journal*, "she found students woefully ignorant of subject matter, while sometimes lacking in communication skills. Kramer maintains that new students are forced to abandon the instruction of information and knowledge in favor of theories in developing pupil self-esteem, indiscriminate passing, and reforming society." Whew! What a wake up call.

Sadly, America didn't arise from its slumber.

And here we are, almost 15 years later, and the issue du jour has finally vindicated all of us who said these are bad programs, these programs will not help teachers become better teachers, these schools are incubators of teacher union allegiance and we need reform.

Yep, we told you so.



The Federal Power Grab, Redux

Our next “I told you so” may not be for another five years, after the public recognizes that its renewed fixation on more federal money and intrusion into education has actually backfired, and *not* created the new era of quality control that its authors seek to usher in.

A brief history lesson is in order for those who may believe this is just one limited government fan's knee-jerk response to big government:

Charter schools: When and where did they start? In the states, in **Minnesota**, in 1991, after a series of federal commissions and reports, and summits with Governors had revealed that most of the problems — along with most of the money — in education had to do with laws that protected and grew the status quo. When schools tried very hard to improve, nothing very good happened to them. When they failed, nothing very bad happened to them. Teacher contracts bound districts to arcane rules (which only came under attack after charters hit the scene). Money poured from federal and state coffers to high poverty schools regardless of their prior success or failure; rules and regulations prohibited innovative teaching or curriculum. Standards and accountability were based on norm-referenced tests with no consequences. There was no definition about what it meant to be a proficient 4th grader at the state level.

Did Washington fix this? No. Governors, and a bevy of reform minded state legislators and state chiefs fixed it. They had no financial incentives from Washington. They had the independence and foresight to know it was their job and they should do it, incentives or not.

Standards: The elite in academia today believe that standards started in research institutions. They did not. They started in states. **Virginia** and **Massachusetts** were the first two, spurred on by citizens who were frustrated with the snail's pace of change and by leaders who believed setting and holding firm to standards would raise the bar for all kids. **California** followed suit, on the heels of the fuzzy math and phonics' debates. **Colorado, Delaware** and **Florida** later gave life to meaty standards, instituting hard but fair tests assessing proficiency in core subjects. These states ranked or graded and held to account the levels of education at each school. Sun began to shine, and the status quo balked. And balked. And balked.

This was before No Child Left Behind. These standards ushered in a new era of reform that guided all other reforms, that provided the basis for parents wanting to make other choices; that leveraged future efforts in the poor, urban areas that had long been mindlessly failing kids.

Did they accomplish everything? No. That's because only about 15 states really did anything meaningful with standards. Later, No Child Left Behind became a necessary component to pushing more accountability for education, particularly when federal money is involved (more on that later). But that could not have occurred had the work on standards not already been done, through federalist approaches, not nationalist.

School Choice: Ah, the debate in **Washington, DC** is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to providing true civil rights for poor kids (see story on pg 6). In 1990, 1991, 1995, and 2000 and since, programs to provide vouchers (EEK - SHE SAID IT!!!) for poor kids began in **Milwaukee**, went to **Cleveland**, expanded throughout **Ohio**, went to **Florida**, then onto the nation's capital. Picking up on the trend, another half a dozen states provided vouchers to special needs children, and lots more gave tax credits to businesses to create scholarships. George Bush didn't create vouchers — they were started by African-Americans and Democrats who partnered with Republican Governors, who together shed their political ideology for children.

It is still embraced as such everywhere, except, sadly in our national government. It is yet another reason the public's mistrust of Washington is rampant.

Performance Pay: Tennessee and North Carolina instituted career ladder pay plans before anyone realized it. Milwaukee's Howard Fuller railed against tenure before it was popular to do so. Alternative certification was biggest and most impactful in New Jersey, and later, more than a dozen states adopted the kinds of plans being written about in *The New York Times*. Indeed the most research to date about the role of pay and incentives on teachers has been done by a private concern — the Milken Family Foundation and its National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, which for ten years has toiled to create, pilot and monitor the most ambitious plan for teacher advancement in the nation.

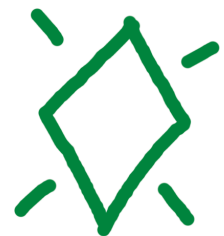
Wait, you say. Wasn't it Arne Duncan's idea? Well, actually, there were no performance pay efforts in Arne Duncan's Chicago, and the few attempts by districts in recent years are about teachers' union-approved bonus plans for all school employees, not individual contracts that are tied to individual accomplishment.

The shining exception is the District of Columbia, where Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, and Mayor Adrian Fenty, are working to inaugurate the most ambitious proposal to date. The proposed contract with the union would put any teachers who wanted dramatically higher salaries on a performance evaluation track, with no tenure. This idea didn't start with the federal government either. Frankly, little the feds have done in this area have encouraged such a dramatic change in the status quo. On the contrary, Race to the Top requires union buy-in for any reform effort, ensuring minimal progress at best.

Charters, Standards, School Choice, Teacher Pay — our four pillars of core education reform have all been initiated, tested and operational without directives from the national government. From 1991 through early 2000s, these programs grew virtually untouched by federal hands. To be clear, there have been incentive funds for some of these, and debates over all of them. But comparably little has been spent at any level to really grow these true reform efforts.

But that was then, and this is now. And with the allure of new federal money comes a temptation to water-down efforts that otherwise would be substantive.

The battle must be waged to preserve real reform. Real reform helps kids, but federal money has a history of just being, well, federal money. That's the race that's really on, especially for the nation's potentially new 37 Governors this fall.



Education by 50

One could argue that the reason the feds have gotten so gosh darn good at co-opting reform is because the states have failed to do their part in continuing the strong bipartisan leadership they donned in the past. Think about it. From 1990-2000, here are just a few of the Governors you might recall who all served together and drew education ideas from one another, keeping Uncle Sam at arm's length:

Engler (MI)
Thompson (WI)
Carper (DE)
Bush (FL)

Bush (TX)
Weld (MA)
Wilson (CA)
Hunt (NC)

Owens (CO)
Ridge (PA)
Pataki (NY)

The Governors today have nowhere near the fire-power as they did in “the old days.” Those who arrived after 2000 were less likely to embrace reform, less likely to start a fight, but more of them had been raised with money or social status. They weren't like blue collar Tom Ridge, or motorcycling Tommy Thompson, or down to earth Tom Carper. They were, well, a lot more concerned about popularity and thus big compromisers on essential issues (think Charlie Crist).

Well that's all started to change.

Jindal in **Louisiana**, and Christie in **New Jersey** may soon be joined by an equally robust group of Governors come November, when Americans will take to the polls to elect 37 state executives, many of whom are likely to be brand, spanking-new. The potential for most of the 50 to be committed to real educational change has major significance for this nation. If voters recognize this, they have the potential to transform their state and restore the bulk of reforming to state-level politics, by doing what works to raise student achievement so that the feds can sit back and applaud, rather than direct.

Education is only as strong as the weakest link, says the latest initiative of The Center for Education Reform. Each of these races is a vital link in the education reform tapestry of the nation. Each position these candidates take will be carefully watched and connected to voters through **EducationFifty.com**. Watch for the debut on May 10... but until then; start readying your vote to make the weakest link the strongest for all children.

Race to the Top. Not.

You don't believe that federal government gremlins skew the best of intentions? Just listen to this tale about the latest craze, Race to the Top (R2tT).

Offered up as serious education reform, the choice of **Delaware** and **Tennessee** as the first examples of the Obama Administration's commitment to breaking the status quo is not serious at all, but instead is an echo of the establishment's stranglehold on our leadership in Washington today. For in each of these states, the education establishment (aka The Blob) backed the proposals to allegedly reform their state's education system. Why would The Blob back real reform, you ask? Maybe because it's not real reform.

Delaware and Tennessee scored huge points for having the buy-in of The Blob. That same buy-in eluded Florida, whose education groups have never liked charters, choice or performance pay. Federal reviewers using fixed numerical scoring were forced to score Louisiana low because its teachers union doesn't like Governor Jindal's plan to link student achievement to pay. The alternative teachers association, A+PEL, (more than 7,000 strong), however, loved the idea. But the non-union teachers apparently don't count as stakeholders.

Will the Volunteer State's new bankroll repay charters \$570 per student that Memphis City Schools cut from every charter school (already under funded by 30 percent) to make up its deficit? This is the same school district that rejected 18 charter applications out of hand last fall. And Tennessee got one of the first two coveted Race to the Top awards?

Some people praise Tennessee for raising its cap on charters last year. In reality, the 'D' ranked law didn't do much that was new at all, save for spin a tale about charter changes that have little impact on kids. Those changes simply expanded the number of students in low performing schools that could attend a school, if there were more charters. Alas, the responsibility for creating such charters still rests with the school districts, whose hostilities are infamous.

We get that Delaware created a bold vision for transforming teacher evaluations from status quo to performance-based on some level. But there's this little thing called a collective bargaining contract that trumps public policy. Will the unions really accept a world in which teachers who do better are paid more? We have reason to be skeptical. Such notions have been the cause of lawsuits and two-year negotiations in **Washington, DC** and have eluded even **New York City's** reformist leadership, thanks to contracts.

And so, yes, like all good ideas that Washington embraces, Race to the Top went from ambitious to technical when the regulatory and legal divisions of the federal bureaucracy took over. And that's where the effectiveness of all ambitious federal programs are determined — not in the policy offices or hallways of the Secretary's political appointees, but in the program offices where every 'I' and 'T' counts more than the kids behind them. That's exactly where the establishment wants it; safe and predictable and subject to rules and regulations that it can influence and depend on for its stability. It's been that way since the Department was created and hasn't changed. Great ideas die when they reach the federal regulatory bureaucracy. Speaking of which...

NCLB RIP?

The question on the table about the President's new NCLB proposal is "what does it really mean?"

The sad reality is that the Administration proposes to scrap the only meaningful approach to accountability for federal funds that this country has ever had. Up until the famous compromise between the late Senator Ted Kennedy and POTUS 43 that led to NCLB's adoption, there was absolutely zero that schools and school districts had to show in exchange for federal funds. While the final law could have had more sanctions and more incentives, NCLB was a tremendous wake-up call to the nation and it literally changed the conversation about how the feds can play a positive role in encouraging schools to do better.

But the establishment and the unions have complained since day one, and now, it seems they'll have their way. More money to "do" elementary and secondary education programs (which have already doubled in just a year thanks to the stimulus package, which catapulted federal funding for education to a new all-time high), with little required to show for it.

The proposal on the table says that the Administration will make states compete for some portion of traditionally formula-driven programs, so as to supposedly reward achievement without requiring the kind of testing and reporting that NCLB now requires. But how exactly does one measure success in the absence of tests? Do doctors diagnose without a test? Ed Secretary Duncan is either naive, or being political. While I'm no fan of an increased federal role, to remove the hammer on schools that caused thousands of them to change for the better seems an entirely adult-centric, not child-centric, decision.

Boy, do I miss Senator Kennedy! Kennedy understood when he crossed the aisle to support NCLB that the federal government has the ability to lead by exposing what works — and decrying what doesn't. While he thought — in error — that more federal money would make education better regardless of the consequences, he was the first leading national Democrat to ever link accountability for results with spending. The Obama proposals undermine state efforts to adopt reforms that put achievement, over process, outcomes over inputs. By removing the requirement that states demonstrate and publicize selected results and remove the consequences, there is no incentive for state lawmakers to do much of anything, other than focus on reelection. **More's the pity.**

Killing Opportunity

On March 16, the Senate proved that sometimes, politics is, indeed, pitiful. Rejecting Senator Lieberman's amendment by a vote of 42-55, the US Senate dodged the hopes of low-income DC children. Most opposing senators didn't even bother to speak up about the program (despite impassioned, truly excellent speeches in favor of the program by Senators Feinstein, Lieberman, Collins, Voinovich, and Ensign). One notable exception was Mr. "Lost in Space" Dorgan (which is our new name for the gentleman from North Dakota, after he announced on the Senate floor that because America has produced accomplished astronauts, DC schoolchildren do not deserve vouchers.) This would be the theatre of the absurd if it weren't so sad.

The Washington Post's Fred Hiatt hits the nail squarely on its head when he describes the main reason that President Obama wants to kill the eminently successful DC school voucher program: the influence of teachers unions.

These unions exercise their power to muscle out parents who want what's best for their kids, and their angry opposition to DC school vouchers — which are overwhelmingly supported by the City's Democratic establishment and by voters — has influenced the president and his Congressional allies.

Why? Cash. Teachers unions spend more money — \$31 million last year, to be exact — on lobbying. This amounts to more lobbying money than America's largest corporations — combined — spend in a year. They have one singular goal: protect the educational status quo, and, thus, their turf. So, of course they don't want to see the continuation of a federal education program that they can't pin down under their money-stained thumbs!

National Democrats like to say that Republicans have become the "party of no," but when it comes to providing educational options to families who desperately want them, **President Obama and his friends on Capitol Hill have done everything they can to kill educational options for DC kids.** They've said "no" to families who've pleaded to attend better schools. President Obama has also said, essentially, that no, his campaign and State of the Union rhetoric on "funding what works" doesn't apply to children in his own extended DC backyard.

As they work overtime to kill the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, President Obama and his friends in Congress have co-opted language that was once practically copyrighted by school choice supporters — the need for "choice and competition" — to drum up support for their health care reform plans.

The messaging and policy dissonance is sickening to those of us who've fought for school choice for decades. Even worse, it hurts kids who need access to good schools the most.



Career Ready Schooling - Dead-end work by any other name.

I will never forget the stomachache I had — to the point of nausea — when I heard the late Gerald Bracey stand up in a crowd at an education meeting in the mid-90s. Paraphrasing a question for the panel on setting and keeping high standards, Bracey said, "Who will be the busboys at this hotel? How will the garbage reach the dump?"

I poked fun at Bracey back then, calling him and his compatriots the **"Don't Worry, Be Happy" crowd** (think Bobby McFerrin). It made me angry. It still does.



My Dad came to this country, off the boat. Like the millions here right now that came looking to make their lives better, he took menial jobs, as did his entire family. Those menial jobs allowed him to pay for college, and then led to a better life. The same course is true for many of our immigrants today. The only thing stopping them from having a better life is a strong education, one that lasts through college into career life.

Those who came here and are now citizens at various earning levels and who currently pack our groceries or cut our grass deserve the same opportunity to reach high. They should have the ability to be promoted — with achievement — throughout the ranks of education and up through four years of college if they choose. But many do not have access to college. We stop them in their tracks because we fail them, and kill their ambition. When I go to the grocery store and see a sea of lower-income people taking care of groceries in my upper-income neighborhood, I'm not gratified that someone can check me out. Creating more self-checkout lines should make us all perfectly happy if it meant opening new opportunities to workers.

Yes, some people who mow grass and pack groceries are happy. For many, it is their choice. But it's only their choice if we really think we've done everything we can possibly do to create great learning opportunities for all of our citizens, and see to it they that are not failed by inadequate administration, teaching or lack of choices.

As for who will do these tasks in the future should we succeed in educating all of our kids? Maybe such jobs will be taken by our high school and college students. I worked at menial but necessary tasks throughout my high school and college career. My friends and I were busboys, construction workers, and garbage people. That didn't stop most of us from pursuing higher education. Maybe the blue collar and lower level white collar jobs will be constantly churning with new entrants into that job market, as they stop, gain valuable experience and move on. But **"career ready" is a misnomer**. If we truly want to make people career ready, give them access to 16 years of great education. Any other training they need in the future they can get on the job or as a condition of getting the job, on their own.

We shouldn't be worried about overeducating people to the point where we'll lose laborers. In fact, there will always be people who want to — or have to — work at every level of our workforce. If that should cease to be the case, innovations in technology may solve the challenge. But let's all understand that without a core education for all of our people, real success for all Americans will remain just a dream.



Demerits...

To Charlie Crist, **Florida** Governor and candidate for US Senate — for vetoing a tenure reform bill that would have allowed Florida's schools to evaluate teachers for the value they brought to kids and removed the protection that most often protects those who do little.

To Bryon Dorgan, US Senator, **South Dakota** — for his argument against the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, that our public schools have given us our astronauts so they should be good enough for DC kids. Hello? Have you been to DC schools? *Postscript* — The only astronaut in the US Senate, Bill Nelson of Florida, voted for the bill.

To Bob McDonnell, newly elected **Virginia** Governor — for lauding a charter school measure that does virtually nothing to fix the state's weak law. Using flawed reasoning on alleged constitutionality problems with independent authorizers, McDonnell heeded bad advice from his team and celebrated a bill that leaves school boards in the driver's seat.

And Merits...

To Chris Christie, newly elected **New Jersey** Governor — for beginning his first 100 days by putting forth movement on new charter schools, pledging to renew a fight for scholarship tax credits, and being bold enough to make controversial cuts to state education aid while he seeks reforms to improve student learning.

To Fran Gallo, Superintendent of Central Falls Schools, **Rhode Island** — for taking the necessary step to fire all the teachers at the high school which produces only eight percent of students proficient in reading each year. Gallo asked the union to help arrest the decline and its refusal resulted in the superintendent putting the school into turn-around status.

To Diane Feinstein, US Senator, **California** — for vigorously supporting the DC scholarship bill when her leadership and party did otherwise.



Have any nominations for merits and demerits that fall into the four core pillars of education reform? If so, write to us at news@edreform.com and qualify to win a year of free CER publications, conference access and grassroots toolkits! Okay we wish it could be an iPad but we are in a recession. Speaking of which, every one of you reading this today have got to have found something you liked enough to take out your checkbook or credit card and help this small but dramatically successful non-profit pay its bills! And here's the exciting part! Every dollar you give us today to help us fulfill our strategic plan goals get matched dollar for dollar by the Walton Family Foundation up to \$750,000. If each of you sends us \$100 today — just one hundred dollars! — we will meet our match in the next month! If you send us more, we can meet our future matches. It costs money to know the stuff we know and do the stuff with it we do. Information is power. Help us re-empower all citizens in making schools work better for all children.

Thank you and God bless you!


Jeanne Allen
President