

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

Vol. 6, No. 7 (Letter # 59)

EDITOR: Samuel L. Blumenfeld

July 1991

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

Can Chris Whittle Succeed? His Is the Most Revolutionary Plan for American Education in 150 Years

When media and marketing entrepreneur Christopher Whittle unveiled his plan last May to apply the principles of free enterprise to American education, it sent shock waves throughout the education establishment. Whittle's plan calls for creating 1,000 for-profit private schools by the year 2010 which will educate some 2 million students who will pay a tuition comparable to costs per pupil in the public schools. The fact that the schools will be operated on a for-profit basis is probably the most radical idea of all, since the word "profit" is synonymous with evil in the minds of our socialistically inclined educational leaders.

Whittle Communications, of which Whittle is chairman and which is based in Knoxville, Tennessee, plans to spend more than \$60 million over the next three years on a new division that will conduct research which will result in a "new American school." Whittle's company will later seek \$2.5 billion to \$3 billion in capital to open some 200

private schools in major urban areas across America by the fall of 1996. These schools will incorporate the innovations developed by the Whittle research team.

"If it works, it is going to change American education," said Whittle in the understatement of the year. The 43-year-old entrepreneur has faced scorn from many educators for introducing television commercials into high-school classrooms with Channel One, the 12-minute news program that includes two minutes of paid advertising. Bill Honig, California's superintendent of schools and a strong opponent of Channel One, said of Whittle's plan, "If somebody wants to spend big bucks on how to make schools better, that's fine. The dangers are if you have a profit-making institution, who's to say that cutting costs and cutting corners won't be undertaken to increase profit margins."

The implication is that cutting costs to increase profits is some sort of terrible sin.

The Blumenfeld Education Letter is published monthly. Sources of products and services described are not necessarily endorsed by this publication. They are intended to provide our readers with information on a rapidly expanding field of educational activity. Permission to quote is granted provided proper credit is given. Original material is copyrighted by The Blumenfeld Education Letter. Subscription Rate: 1 year \$36.00. Address: Post Office Box 45161, Boise, Idaho 83711. Phone (208) 322-4440.

But companies are always looking for ways to reduce costs, not so much to increase profits but to simply remain profitable. The narrow margin between profit and loss determines whether an enterprise succeeds or fails. Mr. Honig, who is accustomed to spending the taxpayers' money as if the supply were limitless, has been a bureaucrat so long, he doesn't even understand the meaning and importance of profit. Without profit there can be no economic progress or growth, for without profit there can be no savings, no investment, no accumulation of financial resources. Without profit you wind up like the Soviet Union, a pauperized society.

Private Schools for All

The proposed "Whittle schools" would serve all children, including the handicapped and others with special needs, from pre-school to 18. There would be no admission requirements; if demand for a school exceeded available space, applicants would be selected randomly.

As part of its three-year research effort, Whittle will devise ways to offer this education less expensively than the average per-pupil cost in the nation's public schools, currently estimated by the Education Department at \$5,638 per year. The tuition charged for each school would be just below the per-pupil cost of public education in its community. Over all, 20 percent of Whittle students nationwide would be on full scholarships, Whittle said.

One way to achieve the goal of underpricing local public schools, Whittle said, is to "harness student power" to reduce support staff and bureaucracy. Thus, as part of their schooling, students would work somewhere in the facility, and likely would be called on to teach younger pupils.

Whittle's idea of what a school should be like is also quite radical. He envisions a

school in which each student would have his or her own computer workstation and would learn from software and video texts developed by the firm. The Whittle research team would have free rein to redesign schooling entirely.

"We need a complete redesign of the way we teach our children," said Whittle. "This means we cannot begin with the system we now have."

Whittle stressed that while the proposed schools would be a profit-making venture, they would be undertaken with a larger public purpose — to demonstrate a reshaped notion of schooling unburdened by multiple layers of educational bureaucracy or by an unwillingness to alter the status quo.

Whittle has dubbed his effort the "Edison Project," an allusion to the revolutionary shift from candlepower to the light bulb. The effort, expected to involve some 100 educators, business leaders, scientists, and others is similar in many respects to one of the major components of President Bush's America 2000 plan to reform education, which calls for a \$150-million effort to award research and development grants to redesign American schools. Whittle does not intend to seek one of the grants.

A Born Entrepreneur

In the past, Whittle's name was associated more with innovative forms of media than with school reform. Beginning with a publication for incoming freshmen at the University of Tennessee which he co-founded in 1970, Whittle has built a communications empire that has rescued *Esquire* magazine from extinction; installed advertising-supported wall posters in thousands of schools, doctors' offices, and hospitals; and developed ad-supported books and commercial-television systems for high schools and

doctors' offices, among other projects.

He became intensely interested in transforming schools during his efforts to promote Channel One, which has been received negatively by many state education officials despite its use in 9,000 schools across the country. Critics have charged that Whittle sold the Channel One package to financially strapped schools by offering \$50,000 worth of free satellite dishes, color television monitors and VCRs. As a result, Whittle's advertisers now reach some 5.4 million students daily, an estimated one-third of the nation's 13- to 18-year-old population.

It was dealing with the educational bureaucracy that made Whittle realize that the system could not be reformed from the inside. He and his staff spent much time in recent years meeting with local school boards.

"We've attended probably 20,000 public meetings over the last year and a half, and we've consistently heard about the problems in education and various attempts to deal with them," said Whittle. "What began to crystallize for me a couple of years ago was the feeling that most reform efforts were not likely to succeed, despite the best of intentions. Part of my motivation for wanting to do something is anger and an enormous feeling of frustration with the system. And part of it is wanting to put what skills I have to their best and highest use."

Starting From Scratch

For the past two years, Whittle said, he has read extensively from school budgets to John Chubb and Terry Moe's *"Politics, Markets & America's Schools."* His staff has filmed children at progressive day-care centers, and Whittle, whose young daughter has yet to start school, said he has played with "every learning toy on the market" to see what works for kids and why.

"Starting over from scratch is one of our

specialties," said Whittle. "What I do best is restructure things. I have a capacity to walk into a building and imagine no walls. And I think that's what's required in education reform today."

That's the kind of talk that's giving many an educational bureaucrat uneasy feelings about the future. One of them, Gary Marx, associate executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, commented:

"Whittle's plan is profit-motivated and depends on the sale of advertising, tuition, textbooks, and who knows how many other allied products. Both public and private educators, and certainly the American people, should be wary." (*Education Week*, 5/22/91; *Boston Globe*, 5/26/91)

Comment:

In our January 1991 Letter (#53) we wrote of the trends toward decentralization and privatization being brought about by the technological revolution. We asked whether or not the public schools—that 19th century anachronism—can survive these trends, and our conclusion was that, in the long run, they cannot.

The Whittle plan is the handwriting on the wall writ large. Sooner or later some entrepreneur, deeply involved with the new technology, would see the challenge of American education and seize the opportunity to provide Americans with an educational scheme more in line with the 21st century than the 19th. Of course, the movement toward privatization and decentralization has been underway for the last ten years. The home-school movement has been the most dramatic indicator of these trends.

What Chris Whittle will eventually discover is that his technology will make school buildings virtually unnecessary, for the computer workstations can be used quite

effectively at home or in small buildings. There will be no need for big high schools with several thousand students milling around admiring each others clothes. There will be no need for long bus rides to and from school. There will be no need for an army of administrators and bureaucrats to oversee the system. There will be no need for certified teachers when computers and videos can do the job as well if not better.

Nothing is less efficient than a computer in a public school. That's like installing an advanced stereo system in a stagecoach. The best place to use a computer is at home where you have access to it day and night whenever you want to use it. Eventually, homes will be built with computer rooms which will become the family learning center. Schools will be for children whose parents cannot afford a home learning center.

A Sound Philosophy of Education

But what Whittle will need more than his hi-tech delivery system is a sound philosophy of education, sound teaching of the basic academic skills, and a wide range of subject-matter software. Once the basic academic skills are mastered by the student, the parents should be able to choose the curriculum they want for their children from a vast array of packaged courses on videos and cassettes.

In short, the Whittle plan may indeed do for education what Edison did for lighting and recording—open the way for unlimited possibilities. Parents will finally have educational choice in the full sense of the word. No longer will they have to put their children in the hands of strangers with peculiar ideologies. They will be able to choose what they want their children to learn.

But, you may ask, what will become of the marching bands, school teams, glee clubs, proms, and graduation ceremonies? What

will become of all the traditions that surround the institution known as the school? That will depend on how much the public is willing to pay for their perpetuation. True education never required those extras. But when socialization became the main goal of education, the extras became more important than academics.

In any case, we applaud Chris Whittle for the courage he showed in announcing that his schools would be profit-making instead of tax-consuming. If he educates 2 million children on a tuition basis, he will be saving the taxpayers over \$10 billion a year.

Undoubtedly the Whittle school will have to concentrate on academics if it is to succeed. As for the marching bands and football teams, perhaps a new institution, with no academic pretenses, will be created by another ambitious entrepreneur who will cater to the parents' insatiable appetite for social glory.

Convention in Miami: The NEA Follies of 1991

If you want to know why public education is in its present sorry state and offers no hope for improvement, all you have to do is attend a National Education Association convention and listen to the delegates deliberate on the great issues facing American education. You may think you're in Disney World. But let's not insult Disney World which is a lot saner, smarter, and consumer friendlier than the world of NEA.

Here are some of the happenings that took place during the NEA Follies of 1991 held in Miami during the Fourth of July week:

Boy Scouts Kicked Out

The Boy Scouts of America was ordered to shut down its booth because the group's policies forbidding homosexual scout leaders run counter to the NEA policy against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Pro-Lifers Censored

NEA delegates rejected a request from teachers opposed to abortion seeking to end union policies that prevent them from distributing any pins and brochures they wish at the convention.

The issue of union censorship was raised by Christine Nowak, a Buffalo, N.Y. English teacher who is a member of the NEA's Respect for Life caucus. The delegates voted down a request to consider her motion. In other words, the majority of delegates favor killing the unborn who now number over a million a year and who, if permitted to live, would fill a lot of classrooms and provide lots of new jobs for teachers.

"They're very much against neutrality in the abortion issue," Nowak said. "I'm not the only caucus that's been censored." Her group was prevented from distributing pins and pamphlets deemed offensive by NEA management. Caucuses may hand out their own materials even if they espouse views differing with the union, but are prohibited from distributing such materials from outside groups.

New Rules

Richard Nuanes, the NEA's manager of convention operations, said the union's board of directors liberalized exhibit rules at its May meeting. The new rules allow teacher caucuses to offer materials supporting positions that differ with the NEA's as long as the groups produce them themselves.

Nowak and other anti-abortion teachers said they believe the union is using the exhibit policy to stifle dissent, especially on the abortion issue. The NEA has been staunchly pro-abortion for years.

Nowak showed a July 2 memo from NEA convention manager Peter Ridenour that listed anti-abortion buttons and pamphlets her group was told could or could not be displayed or sold at the convention. Among six buttons permitted for distribution were "Pro-Life," "Choose Life," "Give Life a Chance."

Five buttons were banned. Among them: "Eliminate Human Problems Not Human Beings," "Abortion Kills, Choose Life," and "Former Fetus for Life."

Fifteen anti-abortion pamphlets were allowed at the caucus's exhibit. Eight were denied. They included: "Diary of an Unborn Child," "Beyond Abortion, A Chronicle of Fetal Experimentation," and "Respect Life."

Bill Martin, the NEA's director of communications, said the banned buttons violated the union's exhibit policy that forbids materials deemed offensive or disruptive.

So much for academic freedom! But when it comes to parents' objections to values clarification, sensitivity training, sex education with explicit materials, AIDS education and condom education, NEA members become hysterical over their possible denial of academic freedom. The double standard is alive and well among NEA's leadership.

More Daylight for Halloween

Because a Wyoming third-grade class wants to go trick-or-treating while the sun is still up, the NEA endorsed an extra week of Daylight Saving Time. The delegates approved a resolution extending DST from the last Sunday in October to the first Sunday in November—to cover Halloween, the pagan

holy day of the Druid religion.

Impetus came from third-graders at Highland Park Elementary School in Sheridan, Wyoming, who think it is unsafe to go out costumed after dark. "This is a child safety proposal," said their teacher, Sharon Rasmussen, who brought it to the convention. "As much as we try to deter trick-or-treating, a number of our young children continue to participate."

The students wrote a letter to Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., delivered by Rasmussen when she visited Washington. The Senator, she said, has agreed to introduce such a bill, and the 8,100 delegates added it to the list of legislation their lobbyists are instructed to support. (Ms. Rasmussen did not reveal whether or not the children used invented spelling in writing their letter.)

"This carries the message that people—even young people—do make a difference," said James Potter of Cheyenne, president of the Wyoming Education Association.

Down With Grammar

Freedom of expression won the day among teachers over grammatical correctness. A T-shirt that flippantly read, "I Be A Teacher," prompted a 20-minute floor debate at the NEA convention on Thursday.

The 8,100 teacher delegates finally voted resoundingly for the freedom to be ungrammatical—even when the joke is aimed at their own profession. (Who says they're joking?)

NEA Bill of Rights for Children

Keith Geiger, president of the NEA, said in his address to the delegates that he planned to send President Bush and every member of Congress parchment-style copies of a proposed "children's bill of rights" aimed at assuring that all youngsters in the nation

come to school healthy enough to learn.

The proposed rights include adequate nutrition, medical care, a secure place to live, quality education, and safeguards from abuse, violence or discrimination. (Note that these rights only apply to children who manage to emerge from the womb after nine months of successful gestation. Exceptions are made for preemies. But unborn children have no rights, according to NEA policies. They can be murdered, dismembered, experimented on, or have their parts used for whatever reason scientists deem plausible.)

Geiger, a former math and science teacher who ran unopposed for a second term as NEA president, angrily accused Washington of skewed priorities. He said Washington was willing to hand out tax dollars and subsidies to large corporations and Pentagon contractors but unwilling to adequately fund Head Start.

Geiger said that the school-reform debate in the coming decade "will shift from schools to the family."

"Problems in families mean problems in schools. The problems reach into every classroom, no matter the income level of the families, no matter whether urban, suburban or rural," he said. "I can guarantee our fellow citizens that schools are improving. It's childhoods that are not." (Is that a money-back guarantee?)

NEA-AFT Merger?

According to Keith Geiger, the once bitter relations between the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers led by Albert Shanker continue to improve. He said the NEA board will spend half a day next December discussing whether to propose changing a 15-year-old NEA position effectively blocking an AFT-NEA merger.

Down With National Tests

Assembled representatives of the 2.1 million members of the NEA voted overwhelmingly to oppose any standardized national tests for students, a goal sought by President Bush.

"We can't continue to fight the dropout rate and simultaneously send our students a message that a single day of testing will be the end goal to the school year," said Betty Kraemer of the New Jersey delegation, who sponsored the testing resolution.

President Bush's Education Policy Advisory Committee in early January proposed creating national standards and tests to measure student performance. Such standards would set out the skills and knowledge to be learned at various ages and grade levels, beginning at age 9.

"These pre-test pressures . . . really set these students up to fail," Michael McKay, an elementary school teacher from Bloomington, Ill. told delegates. Later, in an interview, McKay said, "We're being forced into putting too much emphasis on standardized tests. We won't be teaching them the skills they need to have a successful life."

Teachers Are Angry

Keith Geiger underscored what he called "tremendous anger and frustration" by teachers over a trend toward using more tests to measure school performance. The only tests the NEA wants are those used for diagnostic purposes or to screen students with "special needs," such as the disabled and gifted.

An NEA committee produced a study calling standard testing "almost indefensible" when used as a requisite for promotion, graduation, teacher compensation or school funding.

Delegates also called for an end to tests such as the Iowa skills test and California basic exam, which measure students against

their peers across the nation.

"Testing has become an epidemic," said Vicki Burroughs of Portland. "In Oregon, test scores are published and schools below the norm are demoralized."

Philip Rumore of Buffalo, N.Y., leader of the movement to ban these tests, said, "I have sat in classrooms watching second- and third-graders take meaningless standardized tests and seen the anger and frustration and hurt on those children's faces. We know full well that we are demoralizing our children."

Rumore called for a moratorium only through sixth grade. Then Wyoming delegates suggested it go to eighth grade. Then Texas teachers asked that it be extended to 12th grade. The delegates adopted each change almost unanimously.

Not Happy With Clarence Thomas

As of this writing, the NEA has not taken a stand on U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. "But it's fair to say we're not overly pleased about it," said Keith Geiger.

Delegates voted to instruct their leaders to study the record of Clarence Thomas and work to block his confirmation if his philosophy clashes with NEA goals. According to NEA general counsel Robert Chanin, Thomas has a 10-year record "contrary to almost all of the policy positions taken" by the convention.

Investigate Whittle

The convention voted to call for a congressional investigation into the relationship between Education Secretary Lamar Alexander and Whittle Communications, a Tennessee firm that wants to start a network of private schools. Alexander, a former Tennessee governor, owns Whittle stock and has said he is a personal friend of Chris Whittle.

Down With Columbus

The delegates urged that the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America in 1992 be de-emphasized, because of his "atrocities" against American Indians.

(Information in this article gleaned from the *Idaho Statesman* 7/5-8/91, and the *Middlesex News* 7/8/91)

Comment:

It is obvious that the delegates to the NEA convention represent nothing but the narrow self-interests of a politically driven monopoly union. Its political-social agenda is its primary concern, and "academic excellence" is an empty phrase mouthed by teachers who wouldn't recognize it if they walked into it.

It is interesting that both the NEA and many conservatives oppose national testing, but for very different reasons. The NEA opposes it because it would reveal that their members are incapable of delivering academic excellence. After all, what could one expect of teachers who are proud to be ungrammatical ("I Be A Teacher"), or know nothing about Columbus, or are more concerned about Halloween than the lives of the unborn.

Conservatives, on the other hand, oppose national testing because it would foster a national curriculum, gradually impose federal control of education, and bring the federal government into the private sector. We do not need more government in education. What we do need is more educational freedom, so that parents can freely exercise their responsibility to educate their children in a manner compatible with their own values.

The rationale of the Department of Education is that national testing will force the public schools to strive for academic

excellence. The educators know this and that is why they are resisting it. But we also know that these tests can easily be perverted to serve other purposes. There are simply too many people behind the scenes in the education establishment who would like to use these tests as a means of controlling our citizens. For that reason, we oppose them.

National Average Salary for Teachers Rises 5.4%

Teachers' salaries increased 5.4 percent last year to a national average of \$33,015, the National Education Association said Tuesday. The nation's largest teachers' union said state averages ranged from \$22,363 in South Dakota to \$43,861 in Alaska. The NEA report also said:

Per pupil spending rose 5.2 percent over last year. The 1990-91 national average was \$5,208.

The federal government's contribution to public elementary and secondary school funds fell from 6.4 percent to 6.2 percent.

State governments provided 49.3 percent of financial support.

41 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools. (*Idaho Statesman*, 5/8/91)

Comment: It's ironic that teachers have made their greatest economic gains during two supposedly conservative Republican administrations, yet the NEA is constantly complaining that conservatives don't care about the public schools. The sorry truth is that the Education President is doing the best he can to save the public schools when he should be trying to get rid of them. Everything the President has proposed will get the federal government more deeply involved in education at every level, and Bush will have done for the liberals what they could not do for themselves.