



Citizens' Group Gets Facts Parents Need to Know

by Robert Holland

There are many fine parents' organizations around the nation that delve into education issues, monitor school-board meetings, and go to bat for parental rights.

But it is doubtful there are many groups as deeply immersed in research and as active on the front lines for education reform as California Parents for Educational Choice (CPEC) based in San Francisco. A local physician, Dr. Alan Bonsteel, serves as president.

Parents would be in a stronger position to ensure sound education for their children and more options for everyone if there were at least one

organization like this in every state of the nation.

Over the course of the year 2000, CPEC's activists did all this and more:

- Published the first of two reports examining in depth where California's tax dollars for education wind up. Its analysis found that approximately 40 percent of the state's K-12 tax dollars are spent on government bureaucracy and overhead. Another fascinating finding was that the four levels of administration running the government schools are embroiled in multiple lawsuits against each other, with taxpayers picking up the tabs for lawyers on all sides.

- Exposed "rampant cheating" on the Stanford 9/STAR testing in California. CPEC found

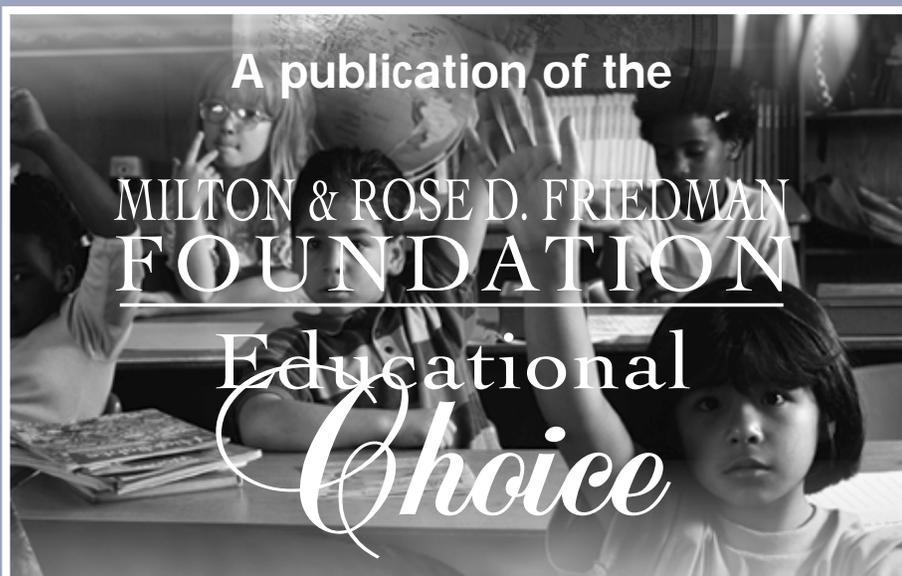
that the bulk of Stanford 9 test questions are recycled from year to year and copies of the still-active test questions are widely circulated in the schools. Even though the tests are supposed to be tools for accountability, CPEC also found that many questions are not aligned with the statewide curriculum.

- Blew the whistle on the state education bureaucracy's wildly misleading reporting of statistics on dropout rates and per-pupil spending. While the California Department of Education (CDE) had been reporting the dropout rate at 3.3 percent, CPEC disclosed that the actual rate was 33 percent (1,000 percent higher!). The government bureaucracy failed to count such categories as students who dropped out in the summer, or those who were dispatched to "alternative" schools but then dropped out.

As for the fiscal picture, the parents' group found that the CDE was understating per-pupil spending by 25 percent by omitting from its calculations such major revenue sources as lottery and federal funds.

Unlike some citizens' groups that despair of ever getting fair coverage in the news media, California Parents for Educational Choice works hard to communicate with print and TV reporters, with considerable success. In a particularly adroit move, CPEC put a fact-filled analysis of the state's misleading method of reporting dropouts in the hands of education writers across the state just ahead of the state bureaucracy's annual dropout reporting date.

This remarkable parents' group was born early in 1999 at a summit meeting of school-choice supporters organized by Dr. Bonsteel, co-author with Dr. Carlos Bonilla of the 1997 book, *A Choice*





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for Our Children: Curing the Crisis in America's Schools. The 75 persons attending agreed unanimously that there should be a membership organization that would make the case to the news media and build toward school choice in California.

"Our group," said Dr. Bonsteel, a Democrat, "is non-partisan. At one extreme is our executive director, Fred Raab, a veteran of many tax limitation efforts, and our one part-time, underpaid employee. Fred is a Libertarian and outspoken in his support for free-market solutions.

"At the other extreme is board member Carmela Garnica, founder of the Escuela de la Raza Unida in Blythe, a lifelong United Farm Workers member, and a colleague of the late Cesar Chavez," Bonsteel continued.

A key leader in the organization is Carl Brodt, a Republican, but more importantly a certified management accountant. "It was Carl's accounting skills," said Dr. Bonsteel, "that deciphered California's school finance morass, and his computing skills have aided us immeasurably in all three of the projects we have completed."

The CPEC offers a Big Tent to school-choice supporters. Proposition 38 on last November's ballot calling for a universal voucher of \$4,000 per every California child elicited mixed opinions among choice advocates. In a carefully worded statement

last summer, the CPEC board lamented the "dramatic deterioration of our government-run schools," and stated that, "regardless of whatever differences any of us may have with the School Vouchers 2000 initiative, its passage would be a huge improvement over the educational decline we now face. We therefore encourage all of our members to vote for Proposition 38, and we encourage those members who are so inclined to work directly for the School Vouchers 2000 campaign."

Prop. 38, backed by Silicon Valley venture capitalist Tim Draper, lost by a 2-1 margin, as did a voucher initiative in Michigan, both of which were sternly opposed by teachers' unions and the education establishment generally. But while the national union chiefs have pronounced the death of vouchers, Dr. Bonsteel says that choice supporters are serving notice to the government school monopoly that "we will never give up as long as they stand in the schoolhouse doorway holding our children captive."

Dr. Bonsteel's involvement in the movement goes back to 1979 when he worked on the Coons-Sugarman initiative for school choice in California (so named for Profs. John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, proponents of vouchers as tools of equity for poor families). That proposal did not make the ballot, but it led to a follow-up effort in 1980-81, for which Dr. Bonsteel served as political director.

Again, that didn't make the ballot, but it did generate major publicity in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*.

Persistence paid off in getting Proposition 174 on the ballot in 1993, a campaign that laid the foundation for the continuing school-choice campaign in the Golden State. The pressure of that Proposition, noted Dr. Bonsteel, had the salutary effect of pressing the school establishment to acquiesce in a pilot charter school project, which thrived with the help of Silicon Valley entrepreneur Reed Hastings. California now has more charter schools than any other state.

California is home to sometimes contending schools of thought supporting vouchers from disparate perspectives of enhanced liberty or social equity. Dr. Milton Friedman and Prof. Coons both serve on CPEC's Advisory Board.

One of the key goals of California Parents for Educational Choice, Dr. Bonsteel says, "is to unite the often contentious school choice movement in California behind common goals, whether they be initiatives or legislative proposals." ☛

Published by
The Friedman Foundation © 2000
Robert C. Enlow, Managing Editor
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The Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation
One American Square ☛ Suite 1750
Indianapolis, Indiana 46282

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