Public High School Grads Unprepared for College, Work

by Neal P. McCluskey

Whether they went right to work or into college, large percentages of recent public high school graduates do not believe they were adequately prepared for the challenges they faced after graduation, according to a new report from Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit, nonpartisan group created by the nation’s governors and corporate leaders to help states prepare young people for post-secondary education, work, and citizenship.

Employers and professors agree with

Thousands Rally for Vouchers in Florida, Wisconsin

by George A. Clowes

Crowds of concerned parents, students, and educators rallied in Tallahassee, Florida and Madison, Wisconsin in January and February to show support for defending and expanding school voucher programs that school choice opponents are trying to kill or limit.

On January 24, parents and students who participate in publicly fund-

Students’ Readiness for College Low but Rising, Study Says

by Krista Kafer

Only 71 percent of U.S. students enrolled in public high schools graduate, and only 34 percent graduate ready for a four-year college, according to a new study by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

Tracking graduation and college readiness rates over time using the most recent data available, authors Jay P.

Urban Catholic Schools Excel Academically, Struggle Financially

by Brian L. Carpenter

Like urban public schools across America, urban Catholic schools—especially in the Midwest and Northeast—are buckling under financial pressure. With expenses up and enrollments down, Catholic leaders often have no choice but to merge schools or shutter them altogether.

A report published in April 2004 by Sister Dale McDonald for the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) indicates that during the 2003-04 school year, 123 Catholic schools nationwide were “consolidated or closed.”

In February, the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago announced plans to close 23 elementary schools. Dozens more are slated to close in other cities.

But in contrast to their public school counterparts, research shows Catholic schools—even those predominantly serving poor, minority students—are often academically successful.

Solid Scores, Weaker Financials

In the largest study of New York City Catholic schools ever conducted, researchers Herbert J. Walberg and Paul E. Peterson found Catholic “schools not only achieved more, but also more successfully solved the ‘poverty gap.’” In a 2005 editorial in New York Sun, Walberg noted this means Catholic schools help close the “pervasive” achievement gap between middle-income and poor children.
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Bush Budget for FY06 Includes Choice

The FY06 budget proposed by President George W. Bush could end 40 education programs that duplicate other efforts or have not proven effective. Adult education programs, like this Adult Learning Center in Louisiana, are among those that could be cut.

by Robert Holland

President George W. Bush’s proposed Fiscal 2006 budget for the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) is leaner than in recent years, though not by much. Bush’s request for $56 billion in discretionary appropriations for the DoE represents a decrease of $529 million, or just under 1 percent, from the 2005 budget.

That slight retrenchment comes on the heels of a 33 percent increase (almost $14 billion) in federal education spending since Bush took office.

Proposed Cuts Assailed

The DoE’s discretionary funds constitute 8 percent of the $514 billion the United States spends at all levels of government on K-12 education. Overall, the U.S. spends more per pupil than any nation except Switzerland. Nevertheless, overall student achievement has not improved greatly over the past decade.

Bush raised some hackles by proposing to terminate 40 education programs that duplicate other efforts or have not proven their effectiveness. If he is successful in eliminating all those (and presidents rarely achieve 100 percent success when they target the pork barrel), there would be a savings of $4.3 billion.

But Bush’s intent is not to save those funds but to shift them to larger initiatives, particularly his signature No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), that seem likelier to achieve results for larger numbers of students.

Among the targets for termination are some programs that critics of heavy-handed government involvement in education have questioned for many years, such as Regional Educational Laboratories and Women’s Educational Equity. Among others on the list are Alcohol Abuse Reduction, Exchanges with Historic Whaling and Trading Partners, Mental Health Integration in Schools, Smaller Learning Communities, and an assortment of vocational education grants.

School Choice Funds Boosted

On the other side of the ledger, school choice fared well among spending initiatives favored by the president. No Child Left Behind requires public school choice when families find their children stuck in chronically low-performing schools. However, most local school districts provide limited opportunities for parents to exercise that choice. The Bush budget proposes these additional reform outlays in response:

$50 million for a Choice Incentive Fund to build on the groundbreaking federal voucher program for the District of Columbia that won narrow approval from the 108th Congress. This fund would provide competitive grants to states, school districts, and nonprofit organizations that give parents opportunities to transfer their children to higher-performing public, private, or charter schools.

$27 million to encourage states and school districts to provide public school choice across district boundaries. One of the limitations of NCLB is that it calls for choice only within districts.

$219 million for grants to 1,200 new and existing public charter schools.

$37 million to assist charter schools with obtaining credit to buy, lease, or renovate school facilities. Coming up with adequate facilities has been one of the greatest challenges for organizers of charter schools, which are autonomous public schools that receive waivers from school district regulations in exchange for a promise to produce results.

High School Testing Sought

With respect to new initiatives, the main thrust of the president’s budget is to extend NCLB grade-by-grade accountability into high school. NCLB currently requires states to test students annually in grades 3-8 in reading and math, but they have to test high school students only once. The president would require them to test students in both those subjects in grades 9, 10, and 11.

Bush is seeking $250 million to help states develop the high school tests. He proposes spending $3.2 billion to assist states and localities in intervening to help high school students. Another $200 million would go to a Striving Readers Program to help middle and high school students who are still struggling to read.

Approval of Bush’s NCLB blueprint for high school reform is far from a slam dunk. Some congressional conservatives oppose further expansion of federal involvement in education, while many Democrats and school officials contend Washington is not fully funding No Child Left Behind and thus is sticking local school systems with the bulk of the bill.

Unspent Funds Increasing

A report released by the staff of the House Education Committee indicated localities aren’t always using the federal money available to them for education. Last year, states returned to Washington more than $66 million instead of spending it on students and schools. They still have access to more than $6 billion of unused education funds dating back to the Clinton administration, the report said.

With the release of Bush’s budget, “It’s only appropriate that we look back at how the money Congress has already appropriated has been used or not used over the past five years,” said House Education Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH).

The total of federal education dollars unused by states is increasing rather than decreasing, despite frequent complaints about Washington’s stinginess. As of January 2004, states had access to $5.75 billion of unused federal funds. By January 2005, that total had climbed to $6.05 billion.

Robert Holland (holland@lexingtoninstitute.org) is a senior fellow at the Lexington Institute, a think tank in Arlington, Virginia.
“Catholic schools [are] more effective than public schools in the education of urban minorities in almost every area of student achievement: dropout rates were lower, college graduation rates were higher, and attendance rates were significantly higher.”

TIMOTHY J. IGL, JOSEPH D. MASSUCCI, GERALD M. CATTARO
EDUCATION AND URBAN SOCIETY

Also, students in Catholic schools perform better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), according to report. She cites 2003 NAEP data showing that on the fourth-grade math test, 43 percent of Catholic school students scored at or above the level NAEP calls “proficient,” while only 32 percent of their public school peers did so. By eighth grade, 39 percent of Catholic school students scored at or above proficient, while only 27 percent of public school students achieved that level. The differences in 2003 NAEP reading results are similar. But while Catholic schools succeed where conventional public schools often fail, keeping open the schools that help close the “poverty gap” is a growing challenge.

McDonald’s report shows enrollment in Catholic schools nationwide is declining. In 1993-94, total enrollment at all grade levels was 2,576,845. A decade later, that number is down about 3.5 percent, to 2,484,352 students.

Still, approximately 47 percent of all students enrolled in private schools attend Catholic schools.

Demographic Pressures

One reason for declining enrollment is the “changing demographics in parishes, particularly inner-city parishes,” according to Dr. Karen Ristau, who will become president of the 200,000-member NCEA in July 2005. She says, “Many churchgoing Catholics [in those parishes] did not grow up in the tradition of attending the parish school.”

Enrollment in Catholic schools flourished until 1965, when it crested at around 5.5 million—more than double today’s enrollment. But several notable shifts began occurring at that time, both in the American social landscape and in the Catholic Church, which caused urban enrollment to plummet and schools to close.

Urban areas experienced decline as many families headed for the suburbs after the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1971 Swann decision, which mandated desegregation through busing. Poorer families that remained often lacked the resources to pay tuition. Yet Catholics, committed to social justice as part of the faith, continued to operate urban schools. Today, about 45 percent of all Catholic schools are urban or inner-city schools.

Internal Changes

About the same time, an important shift began taking place within Catholic schools themselves: staff composition. The Second Vatican Council, in 1965, called for greater involvement by lay people in Catholic schools. In addition, Ristau says, “Many religious orders that were once devoted solely to teaching, after Vatican [II] saw new opportunities to serve in social service agencies and in a variety of other pastoral ministries besides education.”

Those changes are still reverberating in the nation’s Catholic schools.

According to McDonald, in 1960 roughly 74 percent of the professional staff members in the nation’s Catholic schools were vocational Catholics belonging to various orders that did not receive competitive salaries. By contrast, present-day Catholic schools are staffed by about 85 percent laity.

To pay the increased costs of laity staffing, Catholic schools have had to increase tuition, which makes attending more difficult for poor students. Anecdotal evidence suggests charter schools may be attracting students whose parents want a quality education but can’t afford the tuition.

Tough Union Demands

Teacher unions are also beginning to make costly demands on Catholic schools in a few places. In New York City, for example, in September 2004 the Federation of Catholic Teachers challenged the Diocese of Brooklyn with unfair labor practices, forcing it into mediation.

“Enrollment in Catholic schools flourished until 1965, when it crested at around 5.5 million—more than double today’s enrollment.”

In Michigan, teachers at Brother Rice High School are attempting to organize themselves into a collective bargaining unit of the Michigan Education Association—the state’s NEA-affiliated public school union. The legality of this action is being challenged in court by the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation.

Added to these problems are shrinking charitable contributions to the church and parish closings. Catholic officials attribute these to a host of problems including financial losses from recent attention to past priest sexual abuse, economic conditions, and a shortage of priests entering the vocation. Ultimately, fewer parishes means less parish financial support for schools.

Devoted Parents

But some parents are finding ways to keep the school doors open. The Chicago Sun-Times reported in January 2005 that parents at St. Margaret Mary in Chicago had banded together to keep their school open. When the parents learned the diocese was considering closing the school in response to declining enrollment, they had the principal removed and raised $80,000 in pledges in two months.

Why are parents willing to make such sacrifices to keep their schools open? Researchers suggest they consider the results worth the sacrifice. After “visits to several dozen classrooms and interviews with eight principals,” Walberg and Peterson observed the following characteristics in urban New York Catholic schools:

■ “courtesy, fairness, and respect;
■ “a clear mission for learning;
■ “an academic curriculum taught well to whole classes;
■ “a note pad of assignments and notes for each subject;
■ “homework for completion and grading each day;
■ “a close connection between parents and teachers; and
■ “leadership, with the principal accountable to parents who can leave if dissatisfied.”

In a May 2004 article, “Brown at 50: The Dream Is Alive in Urban Catholic Schools,” in the peer-reviewed journal Education and Urban Society, University of Dayton researchers Timothy J. Igl and Joseph D. Massucci of Vermont Polytechnic Institute research to teaching, after Vatican II saw new

Continuing Challenges

Despite their high academic achievement and successful racial integration, keeping urban schools open is challenging. Part of NCEA’s plan to meet the challenges ahead involves advocating public policies that give parents school choice.

The organization’s Web site says, “NCEA supports the concept of full and fair parental choice in education which is supported by tax relief, vouchers, scholarships, and other aid to parents so they may seek the educational opportunities they want for their children.”

In addition, Ristau thinks the answer may lie with some of the very children in today’s Catholic classrooms. “One of the key challenges is developing leaders for the future—how we Catholic educators will replace our outgoing leaders with the next generation,” Ristau says. “One of the exciting possibilities about NCEA, as an association, is the opportunity to bring people together from schools, colleges, and universities to address this issue.”

Brian L. Carpenter (carpenter@mackinac.org) is director of the leadership development initiative for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan.
Private Schools Are Closing the Achievement Gap

by Andrew J. Coulson

A recent analysis of national test score data suggests private schools do a better job than public schools of closing the achievement gap between black and white students as they progress from fourth to 12th grades.

That was true despite the fact that the disproportionately higher dropout rate among African Americans in public schools tends to remove poor performers from the test-taking population of public school seniors.

Closing the achievement gap between black and white students has been one of our nation’s overarching goals for decades. However, there remains a gulf of more than 200 points between the SAT scores of black students and white students, and black children trail their white peers by significant margins on every subject tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Private Schools Do Better

One aspect of the very familiar achievement gap, however, is almost universally unknown: how it differs between public and private schools. This disparity can be documented by using a

“Average across subjects, the public school racial achievement gap is virtually unchanged between fourth and 12th grades. By contrast, the gap in private schools is an average of 27.5 percentage points smaller in the 12th grade than the fourth.”

U.S. Department of Education database to compute the average NAEP test score differences between black students and white students in both public and private schools. The results appear in the accompanying table.

As the table shows, there is a sizeable achievement gap between black and white fourth-graders in both public and private schools. It is also clear the private-sector achievement gap is narrower in the 12th grade than the fourth grade for all of the core NAEP subjects. Public schools, by contrast, see a larger gap in both writing and mathematics at the 12th-grade level than at the fourth.

Averaged across subjects, the public school racial achievement gap is virtually unchanged between fourth and 12th grades. By contrast, the gap in private schools is an average of 27.5 percentage points smaller in the 12th grade than the fourth.

Statistics Understate Difference

The achievement gap closes faster in private schools not because white private school students lose ground with respect to white public school students as they move to higher grades, but because black private school students learn at a substantially higher rate than black public school students.

Still, the comparison in the table is arguably unfair to the private schools. Economist Derek Neal has found that black students attending urban private schools are far more likely to complete high school, gain admission to college, and complete college than similar students in urban public schools.

Similarly, in a study comparing graduation rates of all Milwaukee public school students (of all income levels) with those of the low-income participants in the city’s private school voucher program, Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay Greene found the voucher students were more than one-and-a-half times as likely to graduate as public school students.

More remarkable still, Greene found this to be true even when he compared the voucher students with those attending Milwaukee’s elite group of academically selective public schools.

This higher graduation rate in private schools is not only a boon in itself; it also casts the private sector achievement gap reductions in an even more favorable light. Dropouts tend to be poor performers academically, so when they leave the test-taking population, the average test scores of the remaining students usually rises.

This dynamic should generally improve the test scores of public high school seniors, which means public schools have an even worse impact on the test score gap than the statistics show.

Andrew J. Coulson (editor@schoolchoices.org) is senior fellow in education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. This article is based on a study originally written for the Mackinac.org Web site.

White/Black NAEP Achievement Differences for Public and Private Schools

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* Negative number indicates a 12th grade black/white score gap that is smaller than its corresponding fourth-grade gap.

American Catholic Schools in Historical Context

Although they had already existed in America for more than two centuries, Catholic schools came into prominence in the late nineteenth century as Catholic immigrants found it difficult to integrate into America’s public schools.

In his book Market Education, The Unknown History, education researcher Andrew Coulson describes how the conflict between Catholics and Protestants over the appropriate worldview to teach in public schools sometimes escalated into violence.

In the “Philadelphia Bible Riots” of 1844, Coulson notes, a dispute occurred over reading the Catholic Bible in public schools. He writes, “thirteen people lost their lives and St. Augustine’s Church was burned to the ground.”

In 1875, Congressman James G. Blaine proposed a Constitutional amendment intended to prevent taxpayer support for Catholic schools. Although it failed narrowly along party lines in the U.S. Senate, many states that entered the union after 1875 incorporated similar language in their state constitutions.

After decades of such cultural tensions, the Supreme Baltimore Council of 1884, a meeting of American Catholic Bishops and other Catholic leaders, issued a decree that every parish would have a school of its own.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Catholic school enrollment was growing steadily, but opposition continued. For instance, Oregon passed a law requiring all children to attend public schools. A 1925 Supreme Court decision, Pierce v. Society of Sisters, struck down Oregon’s law, creating a legal precedent for parental choice in education that stands to the present day.

Although Blaine language (or wording similar to it) remains in 37 state constitutions today, the Supreme Court struck a blow to the root of Blaine in 2002, in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris. That decision, which some have likened in magnitude to the Court’s 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education, ruled it was not unconstitutional for children to attend religious schools (mostly Catholic schools in the Zelman case) with publicly funded vouchers.

— Brian L. Carpenter

INTERNET INFO


that assessment, according to the study, published as Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? in February 2005. Overall, the study said, “substantial proportions of high school graduates identify gaps in preparation for the skills and abilities expected of them today, and employers and college instructors offer more critical assessments.”

In addition to identifying graduates’ self-reported flaws, the report highlighted solutions that college recruiters, college instructors, and employers: “more rigorous courses and higher expectations for high school.”

Graduates Admit They’re Unprepared

The report was based on surveys of 1,487 public high school graduates from the classes of 2002, 2003, and 2004; 400 employers “who make personnel decisions,” such as owners, company presidents, and others; and 300 instructors who teach first-year students at two- and four-year colleges. The surveys were conducted between December 4, 2004 and January 5, 2005. Depending on the group surveyed, response errors ran from plus or minus 3.8 percentage points to plus or minus 6.33 percentage points.

According to the survey, 38 percent—nearly two in five—of recent graduates who went to college after graduation said there were gaps in their high school preparation for the expectations of college. Moreover, even among those who reported feeling extremely well prepared for college, 31 percent took at least one remedial college course.

Among recent graduates who went to work right after high school, 39 percent reported gaps in their preparation for the workplace. The employers who were surveyed agreed that, estimating 39 percent of recent high school graduates were “unprepared for the expectations that they face in entry-level jobs.”

Professors Unimpressed

The harshest assessment of recent graduates’ preparation came from college instructors. Only 18 percent of professors polled felt students came to college “extremely” or “very well prepared,” while a quarter reported students are “not too well prepared” or “not well prepared at all.”

Instructors estimated half of all students who arrive at their schools are inadequately prepared for college-level math and college-level writing. In addition, large percentages of instructors felt the public high schools are failing to adequately develop students’ abilities to do such things as “read and comprehend complex materials” (70 percent), “think analytically” (66 percent), and “do research” (59 percent).

Large majorities of graduates acknowledged they would have worked harder in high school had they known what they know now. Sixty-two percent of college students said they “would have taken at least one harder course,” as would 72 percent of recent graduates who did not go to college.

Only 24 percent of all surveyed high school graduates felt “they faced high academic expectations” in high school and were significantly challenged.

All Want Higher Standards

Large percentages of students, employers, and college instructors alike agreed students need more challenging coursework in high school. Eighty-two percent of college students, and 80 percent of working graduates, reported they would have worked harder in high school had their schools demanded more of them.

Similarly, large majorities of employers (83 percent) and college instructors (81 percent) agreed that making curricula more difficult would help alleviate the problem of inadequately prepared graduates.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the survey was that all three groups—students, college instructors, and employers—not only favored tightening high school standards, but they also supported requiring that students pass exit exams to graduate. Eighty-one percent of graduates endorsed the idea, as did 79 percent of instructors and 89 percent of employers.

In addition to higher standards and exit exams, other popular remedies included providing more Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes; “providing opportunities for real-world learning”; making coursework more relevant; and having teachers or guidance counselors give students course-taking advice early in high school.

‘Like their college instructors and employers,” the report concludes, “recent high school graduates say higher expectations in high school and tougher course requirements and tests prior to graduation would leave them better prepared for the real challenges they are now facing.”

Neal P. McCluskey (@cato.org) is a policy analyst at the Center for Educational Freedom, Cato Institute.

Achieve, Inc.’s new report, Rising to the Challenge, dearly shows that college instructors, employers, and recent public high school graduates are dissatisfied with graduates’ preparation for college or employment. But it’s much less clear who is to blame: schools or students? Nearly 40 percent of high school graduates surveyed said there were gaps in their high school preparation for college or employment. Employers and college instructors agreed, with the former estimating 39 percent of recent graduates were unprepared for entry-level jobs, and 25 percent of the latter saying incoming students were inadequately prepared for college.

While flaws in recent graduates’ preparation for life after high school were easily identified, the causes were not. Large percentages of graduates reported they did not work as hard as they could have in high school, noting that if they knew in high school what they discovered afterwards, they would have put in more effort.

Low Standards at Fault

The students tended to blame the schools, rather than themselves, for their limited effort. About 80 percent said that if their schools had demanded it they would have worked harder.

Public Agenda’s recently released survey, Life After High School: Young People Talk about Their Hopes and Prospects, corroborates Achieve’s findings. In Public Agenda’s report, 62 percent of graduates who went to work right after high school, and 78 percent who went straight to college, said they could have worked harder in high school.

But those students, too, tended to blame the schools for their problems, with 48 percent who went to work, and 38 percent who went to college, saying their teachers and schools “should have done a lot more” to prepare them for life after graduation.

So are low standards to blame for graduates’ shortfalls, or students themselves? In both Rising to the Challenge and Achieve’s December 2004 report, The Expectations Gap—A 50-State Review of High School Graduation Requirements, low standards are fingered. Just as large percentages of respondents in Rising to the Challenge thought increasing standards would improve high school students’ preparation, The Expectations Gap concluded every state should bolster curriculum requirements.

Students Don’t Value Academics

Other studies, however, suggest the problem might be that American students simply do not value academics. In 2001, The Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy surveyed foreign students who studied in American high schools, and in 2002 it surveyed American students who went abroad. Both surveys found American students care much less about academic studies than do students in other societies, and that U.S. students emphasize athletics and employment much more than do their counterparts.

— Neal P. McCluskey
by Kate McGreevy

Most high school students in the United States do not understand or are apathetic toward the First Amendment, according to a survey released in January by the University of Connecticut. The survey suggests media studies classes and student journalism give students a greater appreciation and understanding of First Amendment rights than they would have without that background.

For the project, “The Future of the First Amendment,” commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, more than 100,000 students, almost 8,000 teachers, and more than 500 administrators and principals at public and private high schools were surveyed.

“These results are not only disturbing; they are dangerous,” said Knight Foundation President and CEO Holding Carter III in the Knight news release. “Ignorance about the basics of this free society is a danger to our nation’s future.”

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances.

Civics Education Missing
Findings of the survey indicate that a majority of students are apathetic and uninformed about First Amendment protections. For example:

- Nearly 75 percent of students surveyed either do not know how they feel about the First Amendment or admit they take it for granted.
- 75 percent falsely believe it is illegal to burn the U.S. flag as a form of public statement; and,
- 50 percent think the government can censor the Internet.

“Schools are not teaching the principles of the First Amendment broadly enough,” Richard Lee Colvin, director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Columbia University, said in the report. “That’s in part because civics education has all but disappeared.”

The survey does not offer any direct commentary on traditional civics courses. It does suggest, however, that increased exposure to the First Amendment through news media in the classroom and through student journalism increases student appreciation of the First Amendment.

For example, among students who have completed courses in media or the First Amendment, 87 percent believe people should be permitted to voice dissenting opinion, the number drops to 68 percent among those who have not taken such courses.

A primary researcher for the study, Dr. Kenneth Dautrich of the University of Connecticut, acknowledged, “there are a variety of courses from which students might get knowledge of or form opinions about the First Amendment. The survey asked about their parents’ behavior, the extracurricular activities—like student newspapers—that they are involved in, etc. For each student we also have attitudes of the principal and the school environment—for example, is there a school paper, tv station, radio, etc.”

Media, Journalism Programs Waning
The report also reveals that media programs and journalism opportunities are waning in many high schools, and less than 20 percent of administrators surveyed consider journalism a high priority.

“The last 15 years have not been a golden era for student media,” said Warren Watson, director of the J-Ideas project at Ball State University. “Programs are under siege or dying from neglect. Many students do not get the opportunity to practice our basic freedoms.”

According to the survey, of the high schools that do not currently offer student newspapers, 40 percent had eliminated those papers in the past five years. Schools in lower-income areas had a more sizeable decrease in student newspapers, 21 percent points greater than in upper-income schools.

Administrators Blame Costs
Administrators cite financial constraints as the main obstacle to the expansion of student media options.

With public attention often fixed on No Child Left Behind, high-stakes testing, and myriad other educational measures, the authors of the report believe the survey is a call to action.

“Civic education is crucial to developing well-informed and responsible citizens,” said Dautrich, who conducted the research with University of Connecticut colleague Dr. David Yalof, of the school’s public policy department.

“By surveying students across the country as to their awareness and appreciation of First Amendment rights, Knight Foundation has provided a timely window into this important and often overlooked aspect of the educational process.”

Government, History Courses Needed
Victoria Hughes, president and founder of the Bill of Rights Institute, agreed.

“Knight Foundation has provided a great service with this comprehensive survey that spotlights the lack of civic knowledge among our high school students,” she said.

Hughes is optimistic because she believes there is general agreement among teachers and administrators in many states with regard to civics standards and the value of teaching the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. However, she notes two possible barriers to achievement.

“First, teachers do not always possess the knowledge necessary to teach, in a meaningful way, the First Amendment. Some are not comfortable going into great depth,” Hughes lamented. “Secondly, textbooks do not approach the Constitution with any sustained in-depth treatment. These issues are difficult, and teachers and students need appropriate resources.”

Hughes also warns that although media studies and student journalism are educationally beneficial for some students, journalism is not the answer for all.

“Students should be learning about the First Amendment and civic through the core curriculum—that is, in required American government or American history courses,” she said. “We have to get down to business and educate our students to be active, informed citizens.”

Kate McGreevy (kmgreevy@gmail.com) is a freelance education writer from Indiana. She formerly worked with the Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy in Washington, DC.

Students Benefit from Project CREO
by George A. Clowes
A total of 531 students transferred to better-performing public schools and more than 200 were able to receive tutoring services during 2003-04 as a result of help provided by Project CREO, according to a February 2005 update from Hispanic CREO, the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options.

Initiated in the fall of 2003 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Project CREO is a five-city outreach effort to educate parents about the school choice and supplemental services provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

A total of 22,775 parents were trained by Project CREO, with the largest number—7,744—being in Miami, Florida. The four other cities where parents were trained were Austin, Texas (5,226), Camden, New Jersey (2,620), Dallas, Texas (4,027), and San Antonio, Texas (3,154).

Of the 531 students who transferred to better schools through Project CREO, 219 were in Austin, 150 in Camden, 118 in Dallas, and 44 in Miami.

GAO Reports Few Transfers
Nationwide, of the nearly 3.3 million students eligible to transfer to better public schools under NCLB in the 2003-04 school year, less than 1 percent—just 31,500 students—actually transferred, according to a December 2004 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

While the GAO report identified “tight timelines and insufficient classroom capacity” as the major reasons for the low transfer rate, it also suggested school districts might need help in providing information on choice options to parents so they could make informed decisions. That is the focus of Project CREO.

George A. Clowes (clowesga@aol.com) is associate editor of School Reform News.

Further information on Hispanic CREO is available online at http://www.hcreo.org.

Latest California Test Scores Bring Good News for English Learners

by Don Soifer

When California voters passed Proposition 227 in 1998, opponents of the measure predicted it would be a disaster for students whose primary language is not English. But according to the latest test scores, the new focus on English fluency is producing remarkable improvements for English learners.

School Violence Is Under-Reported

by Kate McGreavy

School violence, although generally decreasing in the United States, is under-reported in many schools, according to a new report from the Reason Foundation. School crime data are largely unavailable and incidences of violence often downplayed.

Statistics Inconsistent, Dubious

Snell's analysis points to inconsistencies in reporting and defining school violence.

“Only 52 of the nation’s 92,000 public schools were labeled ‘persistently dangerous’ under NCLB in the 2003-04 school year. While Snell acknowledges most school violence is concentrated in a few schools, she said the “persistently dangerous” figure is misleading.

In the report, she gives the example of Los Angeles’ Locke High School: 14 sex offenses, 35 robberies, and 22 assaults from 2001 to 2002, yet not labeled “persistently dangerous.” Instead of expulsion, Snell noted, dangerous students are given “opportunities,” and the school’s records remain clean.

Schools consistently underreport violence figures and then make it extremely difficult for parents to learn what criminal activity is taking place on campus,” Snell stated. “Districts are essentially lying to parents about the reality of school violence.”

In her analysis of 80 large school districts across the country, Snell concludes 75 percent of them have no school crime data available through district or state-level Web sites. Florida is a notable exception; every school in the state must provide parents with crime data. Even there, however, the data are self-reported by schools.

Decentralization, Choice Called For

Snell offers several recommendations for improving school safety and communicating more effectively with parents. School choice, she argues, is a critical component.

“Acting as a critical component, principals are forced to keep track of tendencies that may lead to violence. The act of choosing and the related imperative for schools to make themselves ‘choice-worthy’ is the key to any serious anti-violence policy,” Snell writes. “Forced assignment to schools and the resulting reclassifying English learners when they become fluent in English.

Hastings Sacked from State Board

Ironically, shortly before the positive CEDLT results were announced, English immersion’s strongest advocate lost his seat on California’s state Board of Education. Reed Hastings, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who championed Proposition 227, was denied his seat by a vote of the State Senate Rules Committee.

Hastings was originally appointed by Democratic Gov. Gray Davis in 1999, and current Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger sought to reappoint him in 2004. But Hastings, a lifelong Democrat, had his nomination shot down by Democrats opposed to his position on bilingual education.

“What signal do you send to parents and children when a qualified and well-respected community leader like Reed Hastings is sacrificed to advocates of a narrowly focused agenda who wield power in Sacramento?” asked Margita Thompson, the governor’s press secretary, in a January 12 statement.
Rally
Continued from page 1

ed school choice programs gathered on the steps of the Florida Supreme Court in Tallahassee to join a group of 18 diverse organizations to file “friend of the court” briefs urging the court to uphold the state’s Opportunity Scholarship program. A lower court ruled against the program last year in response to a court challenge by school choice opponents.

On February 8, more than 2,000 parents, students, and teachers converged on the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison to urge legislators to lift a decade-old limit on student enrollment in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) that threatens to disrupt the program next year when participation is expected to surge beyond the cap.

“On January 24, parents and students who participate in publicly funded school choice programs gathered on the steps of the Florida Supreme Court in Tallahassee ... urging the court to uphold the state’s Opportunity Scholarship program.”

Choice Called “Civil Right”
At the Tallahassee rally, Bishop Harold Ray of West Palm Beach’s Redemptive Life Fellowship said school choice is fast becoming “the pre-eminent civil right of the 21st century.”

Ray is a senior administrator with the Redemptive Life Academy, a private religious school serving participants in all three of Florida’s K-12 school choice programs.

Across the state, almost 27,000 students now take advantage of the parental choice programs that state legislators have created over the past six years to provide parents with additional educational options:

• more than 700 children use publicly funded Opportunity Scholarships to transfer from public schools that receive failing grades from the state;

• almost 14,000 children with disabilities use publicly funded McKay scholarships to transfer from public schools that parents deem unsatisfactory; and

• about 12,000 children attend private schools with the help of privately funded scholarships, with businesses providing the funds through a tax credit program.

In November, the state’s 1st District Court of Appeals struck down the Opportunity Scholarship program, ruling it violated a provision in Florida’s constitution barring public funds being used to aid any religious institution—even though the scholarship funds provide aid to parents, not to institutions, an approach the U.S. Supreme Court has found to be largely acceptable under the Constitution. (See “Appeals Court Strikes Down Florida Vouchers,” School Reform News, January 2005.)

Decision Could Be Precedent
Although the Florida ruling dealt with only one program, parental choice advocates are concerned the court’s interpretation of the state constitution puts other pre-K, K-12, and postsecondary scholarship programs at risk, too.

“I would not be able to go to the school of my choice or complete my dream without my scholarship,” said college student Leah Coursat, who wins a state-funded Bright Futures Scholarship to attend Southeastern College, a private religious university in Lakeland, Florida.

Coursat’s concerns were shared by parent Micelle Emery, who wants to send her daughter Aislinn and son Erld to Alpha Christian Academy in Winter Park, Florida.

“Parents know their children and need to be able to decide what’s best for them in all areas, especially education,” said Emery. “Why should I lose my right to send my children to a school that promotes the values, the level of education, and the safety that is important to me simply because that school is religious?”

Throngs Cheers School Choice
At least 56 busloads of students, parents, educators and other supporters—totaling more than 2,000 people—rallied outside the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison at noon on February 8 to show support for lifting the MPCP enrollment cap.

“You must let Governor Doyle hear you,” rally leader Howard Fuller told the crowd. Fuller, a former Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent and now chairman of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, said the sight of thousands of students with varying ethnic and religious backgrounds was “exhilarating.”

To enthusiastic applause and chants of “lift the cap,” Fuller introduced the four legislators who sponsored the Senate and Assembly versions of the bill to raise the enrollment cap: Reps. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwau) and Jason Fields (D-Milwaukee), and Senators Alberta Darling (R-River Hills) and Jeff Plale (D-South Milwaukee).

Also well-received were Senate Majority Leader Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) and Speaker John Gard (R-Peshitgo), who both expressed strong commitment to school choice.

Bill Passed State Senate
After the rally concluded with a cheer of “Governor Doyle, lift the cap,” the group moved inside the Capitol building to thank other supportive legislators, filling up not only the Rotunda but also its three levels of balconies.

“We have never seen such an enormous show of support for parent choice,” said Susan Mitchell, vice chair of the Alliance for Choices in Education. “Milwaukee parents and students know that the enrollment cap means slow death for a program they value highly.”

Later in the afternoon, the Senate approved Assembly Bill 3, which would raise the current MPCP enrollment limit of 15,000 to 16,500, but for only one year. Since the bill was approved by the Assembly in January, it now goes to Gov. Jim Doyle (D), who vetoed two earlier bills to lift the cap.

George A. Clowes (clowesga@aol.com) is associate editor of School Reform News.
Profile: Marcela Garcini

by Sarah Faulkner

It’s difficult to get a complete picture of Marcela Garcini, director of Project CREO (Council for Reform and Educational Options), without looking at her as a mother, a fighter, and a leader in the school choice movement. She has seen both the need for, and the benefits of, school choice firsthand as an educator and a parent.

Garcini was born and reared in Mexico, where she graduated from the University of Mexico Valley and went to work for the government. In 1995, Garcini moved to the United States. When she began working in the Dallas Independent School District, she saw the differences in the educational systems between her native and adopted homelands.

“The educational system is very different in the United States,” Garcini says, pointing out that parents in Mexico don’t attend many meetings or interact with a school board. “When immigrants come to this country, it’s very hard to understand all of the extras,” she says.

Teachers’ Expectations Low

As an educator, Garcini saw a great number of immigrant students, as well as American-born students who had spent time in Mexico or who spoke Spanish as a first language. She saw “teachers who didn’t care and had low expectations” for these students, and “it opened my eyes from a professional point of view,” she says.

Despite it having been what she calls “a very disturbing point in my life,” Garcini made the most of her teaching years by forming lasting relationships with her students. She says the ninth- and tenth-graders she taught from 1999 to 2001 are still an important part of her life, even now as they graduate, go on to college, and get married. She says many people don’t understand “how important it is to be a good teacher, how much influence you can have on students.”

Education reform became even more important to Garcini when her oldest son was ready to start school. She is the mother of two sons, the oldest diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Because of the diagnosis, Garcini was worried about her son attending the public school. She had more than 1,000 students. “I knew he wasn’t going to receive the structure we were looking for” at that school, she says.

Help came in the form of a privately funded voucher that allowed her son to attend a private school. She calls the private school “the best place for my son,” and she is thankful for the voucher. “If you don’t have choices, your children can fail,” she says.

Hispanics Poorly Informed

Garcini has been director of Project CREO since 2005. The group is an initiative of Hispanic CREO, and its mission is to inform parents of their rights under No Child Left Behind. “When we talked to Hispanic parents, they had no idea of No Child Left Behind. We can see a barrier of communication,” Garcini says, noting some parents don’t even understand the concept, while others are being left out by public schools that aren’t “doing their job. Public schools should inform them,” she says.

She is passionate about helping other parents because “if you want a good education for your child, you need to become involved,” she says. “There’s not one parent who doesn’t want to see their children succeed.” To ensure that more children succeed, Garcini is helping parents learn about their choices and options.

Garcini considers herself a “fighter for school reform,” and she vows to continue the fight, no matter how long it takes. She is optimistic that school reform is working and more changes are on the way. She says, “every child in America deserves a good education. How can we deny education for children?”

She notes, “little by little, we’re making a difference.” She is encouraged when she sees “a mom who feels better about where her child is.” especially when that mom no longer has to worry about gangs or violence. She is encouraged by her own son’s success and believes “without that [private] school, he would have failed.”

“[Project] CREO is working very hard, and it will make a difference in a lot of children’s lives,” she says. “We’re ready to fight whatever comes.”

Sarah Faulkner (scummings 12002@yahoo.com) is an adjunct fellow with the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation.

School Choice Roundup

by Sarah Faulkner

ARIZONA

Arizona Working Toward Voucher System

Arizona Republicans vowed to increase their efforts to implement a voucher system for education, in hopes of giving parents more choices and saving money the state currently spends on public schools.

Committees in both the House and Senate are working on voucher bills, encouraged by Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano’s recent appearance at a legisliative committee meeting. Napolitano is interested in continuing the phase-in of all-day kindergarten, which won approval for state funding last year.

The Arizona Daily Sun reports that Napolitano told the committee she is willing to negotiate and plans to support anything that will enhance public education. State Sen. John Huppenthal (R-Chandler) told the newspaper he was satisfied by the “commitment to negotiate.”

“Now we’re faced with the opportunity to break up the Ma Bell of education to give consumers a choice,” State Rep. John Allen (R-Scottsdale) told the Daily Sun, “offering vouchers in education to the introduction of competition in the telephone industry.”

Arizona Daily Sun February 17, 2005

FLORIDA

Florida Gov. Bush Offers “A-Plus-Plus” Plan

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) is proposing a major expansion of the state’s voucher program by offering vouchers to any student who has failed state reading tests for three consecutive years.

That proposal is just part of Bush’s package of education law changes for K-12, which has been dubbed “A-Plus-Plus,” a sequel to the “A-Plus” plan Bush unveiled during his 1998 gubernatorial campaign. “A-Plus-Plus” will offer the vouchers, different levels of pay for teachers, and a later date for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), giving students additional time to learn.

The overall goal of the legislation is to attract more teachers to the teaching profession and assist students in having academic success in the middle grades,” State Sen. Evelyn Lynn (R-Ormond Beach) told the Tallahassee Democrat. Lynn is sponsoring the bill on Bush’s behalf.

Students who score at the lowest level for three straight years on the FCAT will be allowed to attend a new public school or receive a voucher for a private school. The Tallahassee Democrat estimates the measure has the potential to help tens of thousands of Florida students.

Through its three existing voucher programs, Florida already offers vouchers to more students than any other state. State Rep. Dennis Baxley (R-Ocala) was quoted in the Tallahassee Democrat as saying, “We’re on the right course and we need to do everything to keep improving Florida’s schools.”

Baxley added, “Florida schools are getting better, and the vouchers play an important role... If a child is doing poorly on the FCAT in public schools, [we think] that the private schools should have an opportunity to give that child a better chance of passing the test.”

Lynn called Bush’s plan “a natural extension of education reform we have started in K through 5.”

Tallahassee Democrat February 22, 2005

INDIANA

Indiana House Committee Approves School Choice

The Indiana House Education Committee recently approved a bill that gives parents the right to transfer their children, at state expense, to other public, private, or charter schools if their current public school is failing, as defined by federal law.

More than 200 parents and students gathered at the Statehouse in Indianapolis to support the bill, which they say gives parents more power in bettering their children’s education. “We are giving parents and children more options,” Rep. Bob Behning (R-Indianapolis), sponsor of the bill, told the Indianapolis Star.

Under No Child Left Behind, more...
NEW JERSEY

New Jersey's Jackson Calls for Change

The Rev. Reginald Jackson, an influential black leader in New Jersey, recently led a group of school voucher advocates in taking their campaign to the Statehouse. The group's goal is to see a bill introduced that will give poor families the choice of attending private schools with public funds.

The group of clergy and community groups is appealing to families in poor areas and election-year politicians. Jackson told the Newark Star Ledger he would take the fight to court if current measures don't effect a change. Jackson is probably best known in the state for his work in ending racial profiling by New Jersey State Police. He believes his fight for school choice is much the same, telling the Star Ledger, “we must pressure the state against this means of racial profiling.”

\[Image\]

Rev. Reginald Jackson

ohio

Ohio Governor Proposes New Voucher System

Ohio Gov. Bob Taft’s (R) new budget proposal includes funds to expand Cleveland’s voucher program, state aid for private schools, and a new set of vouchers that would cost families. The new voucher program is for children in failing public schools. Taft defines a failing school as one in which two-thirds of the children fail math and reading proficiency tests for three years in a row. If implemented, the plan would give up to $3,500 in public money to each of 2,600 students who qualified. The students would be allowed to attend the private school of their choice starting in the 2006-07 school year.

In a recent news conference, Taft said, “I have lost my patience with children [being] trapped in failing schools.”

Susan Bodary, Taft’s executive assistant for education and work force policy, told the Akron Beacon Journal that Taft committed himself to finding alternatives to failing schools after a series of meetings with large urban districts last year. In addition to the problems in the public schools in those districts, Bodary noted the Catholic schools that have failed in recent years are almost exclusively in urban, high-poverty areas that have been hit the hardest.

\[Image\]

Gov. Bob Taft

TEXAS

Texas Seeks Vouchers for Urban Students

Legislation was recently filed in Texas to allow urban students to use public funds to attend private schools. School voucher advocates told the Associated Press the bill is an important step in understanding how to meet the needs of students who aren’t being well-served.

The bill would apply to counties with more than 800,000 residents. Students would be eligible for vouchers if they live in the county’s largest district that has a majority of failing students, or if at least 90 percent of the students in the district were failing in the previous school year. In addition, students would have to meet certain conditions—being at risk of dropping out of school, being a victim of violence, or having difficulty with English, for example—to be eligible for assistance.

If the bill is passed, eligible students will have the choice of attending another public school or a private school.

Michael Sullivan, vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, told the Associated Press, “experience would dictate that there is a good thing,” noting other states have had success with voucher programs.

\[Image\]

Rep. Jodie Laubenberg (R-Parker) agreed, saying if the objective is to provide a good education, “then who can argue whether it’s going to a public school or the little Catholic school down the street?”

Lubbock Avalanche-Journal

February 19, 2005

Sarah Faulkner (scummings12002@yahoo.com) is an adjunct fellow with the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation.
New Computer Technology Increases School Security

High-tech mapping system aids first responders

by Paul H. Seibert

High-tech security will soon help protect an already secure environment at The Governor French Academy, a small, private college-preparatory school in Belleville, Illinois. Founded in 1983, the K-12 school has always offered a secure environment for students, but school officials are now taking that security into the twenty-first century with geographic mapping technology. Officials expect the system to be fully operational this summer.

Joining forces with the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Laboratory of St. Louis University, the academy is the first school in the St. Louis Metro East area to add the Crisis Intervention Response Application (CIRA) program to its arsenal of school security plans.

“Fire and police departments ... can access maps, blueprints, and interior photos on the disk to ‘see’ the building inside and out prior to arrival or entry.”

All of the information is stored on a CD-ROM provided to area fire and police departments, the first responders in an emergency. The agencies can access maps, blueprints, and interior photos on the disk to “see” the building inside and out prior to arrival or entry. CIRA “was created so first responders can easily walk through the building in case there is an emergency,” according to Jim Gilsinan, dean of the university’s College of Public Service. CIRA gives first responders the opportunity to plan more effectively in an emergency and clearly designate entry scenarios and action plans within a specified building, allowing speedier and safer response in any type of emergency.

Other Schools’ Adoption Expected

Seeking to disperse the technology to schools in the St. Louis area, the GIS Lab works with school staff and students to maintain and update the program after the initial program is written. Other schools are expected to follow the lead of The Governor French Academy in engaging the new technology.

The mission of the program is “to teach, to research, and to serve,” explained Gary Higgs, director of the GIS Lab. “We are looking for partners with which to develop and share this technology. And it doesn’t matter where those partners are in relation to St. Louis, Missouri,” he added.

Local police and even the U.S. attorney for the area are interested in getting more schools to participate in the program.

“It’s tactically wonderful to be able to look at something and have a layout of a building you’re going into and a plan of attack,” said Sgt. Don Sax of the Belleville Police Department. Sax said he hopes other schools and agencies will take advantage of digital mapping technology.

Students Participate in Mapping

CIRA offers a learning experience for students, too. Governor French Academy students already have begun measuring and mapping the academy’s campus to generate required blueprints, while students and staff from St. Louis University are photographing the academy’s interior using a digital camera with a fisheye lens. Generating the final CIRA disk is expected to take several months.

Implementation of this kind of mapping technology normally costs tens of thousands of dollars, but because of the university’s collaborative GIS program, the digitized mapping of The Governor French Academy will cost dramatically less.

Paul Seibert (seib@governorfrench.com) is director of Charter Consultants, a division of The Governor French Academy, Inc., of Belleville, Illinois, and editor of the Illinois Charter School Facs.

INTERNET INFO

Additional information is available from The Governor French Academy at 618/233-7542 and from St. Louis University’s Norman J. Stupp Geographic Information Systems Laboratory at 314/977-3384, or online at http://gis.slu.edu/projects/main.html.
**Stossel: Politicians’ Kids Go to Private Schools**

by George A. Clowes

“Politicians who promote public schools don’t always send their kids to them,” said ABC News journalist John Stossel in a segment of the 20/20 program broadcast on January 28, called “Public Schools for Poor Kids, Not Politicians’ Kids.”

You might think the people who fight for public schools would always send their children to those public schools, but that’s not the case, explained Stossel. By his count, he cited Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), who has called public education the “cornerstone of our democracy.” Her husband, former President Bill Clinton, also declared he was “unalterably opposed to a voucher system to give people public money to take to private schools.”

Yet when the Clintons were in the White House, they sent their daughter Chelsea to an exclusive private school.

Stossel pointed out that many poor families would like to exercise the same option as the Clintons, but don’t have the money. He cited the example of Ivan Foster, who wants to get his two children out of the dangerous public schools in Camden, New Jersey, where spending is almost $15,000 per pupil. If Foster could use those education tax dollars as a voucher, he could afford to send his children to a private school.

But many politicians oppose the idea of letting education dollars follow the child to whatever school their parents choose.

“[M]any politicians oppose the idea of letting education dollars follow the child to whatever school their parents choose.”

give people public money to take to private schools.

An Effective “Second Chance” School

by Charles V. Byrne

White Hat Management, an education management organization founded by David Brennan and headquartered in Akron, Ohio, serves nearly 15,000 students in various schools it operates across the country.

Among the most remarkable of the White Hat schools is the 23 Life Skills Centers: 18 in Ohio, two in both Colorado and Michigan, and one in Arizona. The Life Skills Centers offer an alternative education environment giving a “second chance” to high school-age students who dropped out of conventional schools but have since discovered the importance of a high school diploma.

Students enrolled in Life Skills Centers have a full and lively schedule. They attend class four hours a day, five days a week. Instruction is highly disciplined, without all the frills, and heavy on computer use with a teacher facilitator. Students have time for employment or family responsibilities. They also participate in some community affairs—e.g., a health fair or Black History Month events. When they graduate, they receive a state-recognized high school diploma, not a GED.

Each Life Skills Center has an aggressive placement department that assists students in seeking and securing employment. Students are given skills in resume writing and taught how to present themselves in an interview. At the same time, students are cautioned that “there’s no free lunch”—that they are not “owed” employment by any body and have to work hard to earn and keep their jobs. It’s an effective “tough love” program.

I had the pleasure of visiting the Lake Erie Life Skills Center on Cleveland’s west side. The student body is split evenly among white, Hispanic, and black students. Half of the staff is bilingual in Spanish. The center draws from several west suburbs, because no one else offers such a program.

The Lake Erie center’s administrator is Joe Czerwien, a former teacher and director of educational services for the Youngstown court system. In the court system position, he interacted with that area’s Life Skills Centers and found them effective in dealing with truants. When a change of political administrations took place, Czerwien was out of a job and sought out Life Skills.

Joe’s administrative assistant, Jose Leon, offers a good deal of enthusiasm as a past military man and teacher who came from Puerto Rico to teach. An inspirational force for the students, Leon hopes to return to Puerto Rico one day and establish a Life Skills program there.

The Lake Erie Life Skills Center enrolls 678 students in three tracks, with new students arriving daily. Master teacher Brenda Socha is responsible for curriculum development and the 32 teaching staff members.

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The center holds graduation ceremonies in June and December. Czerwien sees to it that it is a memorable event for students and guests alike.

In December 2004, I was invited to attend the graduation ceremony for 43 students. It was a moving experience, a classic pomp-and-circumstance ceremony. A staff member with a beautiful soprano voice sang. Distinguished speakers delivered inspiring messages for the students. Three students spoke at the ceremony as well, paying tribute to the encouragement they had received from the center’s staff. City Councilman Jay Westbrook was in the audience and acknowledged from the podium. Caerwien makes a point to be actively engaged in the community.

Of the 43 graduates in the December ceremony:
- 20 are going to college;
- four are going into the military;
- six are going to trade schools;
- one has secured a trade apprenticeship;
- three are working in careers.

Excellent results for an inner-city school! Life Skills succeeds in sparing many from a life of despair, one person at a time.

Charles V. Byrne (chasbyrne@home relay.net) lives in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. He is a former member of the Ohio State Board of Education.
Many entrepreneurs have discovered that Education with a capital E often requires a substantial investment in informational advertising before customers appreciate the superiority of a new marketplace offering.

But from the time he opened his first charter school in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1995, businessman J.C. Huizenga has found thousands of parents beating a path to his door for a chance to enroll their children in one of the 51 new schools he has opened over the past decade. The schools had a waiting list of 6,300 students at the start of the 2004-05 school year.

Huizenga is the founder and chairman of National Heritage Academies (NHA), a for-profit educational management company based in Grand Rapids. While most other K-12 firms have found it difficult to maintain growth and avoid losses, NHA has been profitable since 2000 and is one of the nation's fastest-growing companies. With revenues of more than $200 million, NHA serves nearly 27,000 students in Indiana, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, and Ohio. The company's aim is to create 200 of the highest-quality schools in the country.

Huizenga's vision in establishing National Heritage Academies was to offer schools that challenged children to achieve their greatest potential through a common-sense approach based on what parents expected schools to provide their children. NHA schools stress parental involvement and provide students with a back-to-basics curriculum—E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Sequence in a disciplined environment with strong academics and reinforcement of the moral guidance parents seek to impart at home.

Test scores at NHA schools are well above the national average on standardized tests measuring grade-level growth, and a recent Wirthlin Worldwide survey showed 96 percent of all NHA parents were satisfied with the education their children are receiving. "This ultimate account- tion their children are receiving. Parents were satisfied with the education their children are receiving. The survey showed 96 percent of all NHA parents were satisfied with the education their children are receiving."

"We said, "Hey, that worked so well, let's do it again." And we did!" recounts J.C. Huizenga, who opened his first charter school in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1995.

"If we do not succeed ... parents will beat a path to your door." Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door." Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson

"The Dutchmen of West Michigan are adamant about quality, but they're also thrifty. They don't want to pay a dime more than they absolutely have to. The result is that they get the maximum quality of education for the least amount of cost. I call that "educational equilibrium." Because of the marginal utility principle, any additional dollars spent result in marginally less value.

Correspondingly, any fewer dollars spent denigrate quality.

We don't want to jeopardize private schools, or, for that matter, public schools. In fact, we don't go into small school dis- tricts because we don't want to deplete a significant share of the students in a smaller district. When we open a new school in a new area, we create grades K-5 and then add a grade in each suc- cessive year until we mature to grades K-8. Our expectation for a mature school is an enrollment of about 700 students and we will make every effort to fill every last seat because we believe an empty seat is a child left behind.

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"Teach Michigan" to promote school choice as a means of helping them. Paul enlisted me in that effort. Teach Michigan was instrumental in helping win approval of charter school legislation in Michigan in 1994. That also was when my son was born. The conjunction of those two events made me start thinking about where I was going to educate my son and helped me under- stand education from a parent's perspective.

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happy because they want to see their children challenged.

After listening to parents’ needs and desires and wants for what happens to their child after they leave our school, we started to look at how we might create charter high schools. We’re still looking at it, but we recently announced that we would not be able to offer a high school option this fall. That was a major disappointment for the parents.

Our concern is if we try to do too much, we could lose quality—not only in high school but across the board. High school presents a whole different aspect of education from elementary school. Separate facilities; different teaching certifications; a learning curve on regulations; cars; dating. We looked at all of that and decided we couldn’t justify diluting our focus at this time. After all, we were already growing so fast that we’d been on the Inc. 500 list of fastest-growing companies for four years straight, and we did not want unmanageable growth to jeopardize our future.

**The moral focus we offer ... is based on the four Greek cardinal virtues: temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude. This is a philosophical concept, not a religious one.**

**Clowes:** A recurring issue with charter schools is that the funding doesn’t include capital needs, which the Goldwater Institute estimated some time ago to be $500 to $700 per student per year. What are your thoughts with regard to capital funding for charter schools?

**Huizenga:** In the states where we’re operating, we receive somewhere between $5,500 and $8,500 per student per year, which is notably less than the school districts receive. I must admit, even though we aren’t getting the capital component, we aren’t doing badly. And so, from a taxpayer value standpoint, I don’t think there should be a capital component. I believe we need to provide value not only to the child but also to the taxpayer. That’s the other part of what Milton Friedman talked about—school cost as well as school quality.

In our 10 years, we have saved the taxpayer a substantial amount. We have approximately $200 million in land and buildings the taxpayer hasn’t had to fund. In addition to that, we’ve paid somewhere north of $50 million in various taxes and oversight fees. Fifty million and $200 million add up to a quarter of a billion dollars.

**Clowes:** That’s real money.

**Huizenga:** As a taxpayer I think the amount is noteworthy. We also budget for future capital expenditures out of operating funds, so that as infrastructure needs to be replaced there will never need to be a supplemental millage against the taxpayer. That’s the beauty of the business model overlaid on the education model—it keeps everybody focused on what provides value.

**Clowes:** Do you get much criticism for being a business that’s in education, “making money off the backs of the children,” as some critics put it?

**Huizenga:** I’m proud to be a taxpayer entity. If we weren’t making money, we wouldn’t be paying taxes. We’re able to fill our schools only by providing an education that parents view is the highest quality of the choices afforded to them. If we can do that, pay a significant amount of taxes, and still have some left over, I think that’s quite an achievement.

There are some people who take issue with the fact that we are a for-profit organization. My answer to them is: That money doesn’t go into anybody’s pocket. That money goes into the next school that gets built. At the rate we’re growing, we’re plowing it all back into future schools.

I also believe that if you’re going to do something, you need to do it in a way that provides for future continuity. If we were going to grow and do it all on a not-for-profit basis, it would mean we’d have to seek contributions to fund what we’re doing. That’s not a sustainable model. The free market and the profit motive help for-profit organizations endure longer than the ones that are not-for-profit—unless they’ve got a huge endowment.

**Clowes:** Your curriculum focuses on grammar, heroes, and patriotism, among other things. Can you still get textbooks to cover those subjects?

**Huizenga:** The problems we see in education today are, I believe, driven more by pedagogy than curriculum. Yes, there are social studies textbooks and history textbooks that are way off the mark, but there are quality choices in every market, whether it’s widgets or education.

To the extent we can avoid it, I don’t want to create our own curriculum. In a free-market society, competing alternatives will drive quality curriculum choices. Our hardest decision then is to choose between better and best. The danger with creating a proprietary curriculum is that you end up with a “not invented here” syndrome. You have to invest a tremendous amount on maintaining your own curriculum, whereas if you buy it, it will be maintained and updated for you.

**Clowes:** Some people have raised concerns that National Heritage Academies promotes religion on campus. What gives rise to those concerns?

**Huizenga:** We are public schools. There is nothing religious to what we do. Because virtue is one of our hallmarks, there has been some confusion about this, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to set the record straight.

The moral focus we offer serves only to reinforce the values our parents practice at home. It is based on the four Greek cardinal virtues: temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude. This is a philosophical concept, not a religious one. From these four virtues stem qualities like courage, honesty, respect, integrity, fairness, and other virtues our forefathers sought to instill when they founded this great nation conceived in liberty.

The ACLU joined a lawsuit against us about five years ago on this very issue, and we demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that our schools have no religious component whatsoever. A federal district judge dismissed the case in summary judgment, and his ruling was so convincing that the ACLU chose not to appeal.

If the state is paying the bill, then we’d better be willing to follow the rules and we do. I myself have a deep, personal faith, but I’m not going to bend the rules in any way, shape, or form. If a parent wants to get a good, faith-based education, there are plenty of options out there. That’s not the market we wish to serve.
Hawaii Withholding Funds from Charters

Dept. of Education opens investigation

by Laura Brown

The U.S. Department of Education (DoE) has opened an investigation into the withholding of approximately $1.7 million in federal special education funding by local state education officials from Hawaii’s charter schools.

In at least one case, the withholding caused a local charter school, owned $160,000, to suffer such severe financial trouble that it is in jeopardy of being shut down.

State education officials have attempted to downplay the matter. The information became public on February 7 in a Joint Senate/House Informational Briefing at the state capitol on the Waters of Life charter school audit, during the testimony of Dewey Kim, former director of the state’s Charter School Administrative Office, who is now a charter school consultant.

In his review of the finances of Waters of Life charter school, which was recently criticized in an audit by State Legislative Auditor Marion Higa for financial mismanagement and subsequently is in jeopardy of losing its charter, Kim learned $160,000 in special education funds were withheld from the school by the Hawaii DoE over a two-year period. Higa confirmed at the hearing that she had discovered the withholding during the state’s audit. Chuck Higgins, director of the Hawaii DoE Charter School Office in charge of administering federal funds, would neither deny nor confirm the charge.

Missing Money Exacerbated Debt

Payment of the $160,000 owed to Waters of Life would be sufficient to cancel a large portion of the school’s debt and would reduce the threat of closure by the state. The total amount of debt incurred by Waters of Life during the first two years of operation was $237,000, primarily caused by a failed lawsuit filed against the school by the state attorney general to shut it down for alleged back payments on school lunches, substitute teachers, and required centralized services; a lawsuit by a local homeowners association for zoning violations; and by the Hawaii DoE’s failure to provide funding equal to other public schools.

Instead of suing the state, as another Big Island charter school did for money it never received, Waters of Life agreed to a five-year debt repayment plan with the state Board of Education (BoE) in a settlement agreement dated October 17, 2002. Waters of Life made all payments on time until the December 31, 2004 payment was delayed for 20 days due to an internal communications error prior to the three-week winter break.

Board Persisted in Attacks

Although the school’s administrator brought all payments current with a $10,000 payment to the Board of Education at its February 1, 2005 Charter School Committee meeting, the BoE scheduled a decision on whether to revoke Waters of Life’s charter at its February 17 meeting.

Ultimately, the BoE issued a reprieve for the school after the charter school’s attorney, Ted Hong, outlined a convincing case in his testimony that Waters of Life was entitled to due process under the law before its charter could be revoked. Closing the school would have displaced 181 students.

According to Kim, Waters of Life is not the only state school experiencing financial difficulty. He estimates a total of $1.7 million in special education funds were illegally withheld from other charter schools across the state.

By verifying the school’s fiscal and academic viability, Kim’s testimony undermined apparent attempts by the Board of Education, Department of Education, and House and Senate education chairs to expose the “failings” of Waters of Life, State Sen. Bob Hogue (R-Kailua) asked Kim if he felt the audit was part of a larger attack on all charter schools.

Kim replied, “I am apolitical, and I am not aware of any politics involved or any large-scale attempt to undermine charter schools, but I believe racial discrimination could be a factor, because Waters of Life is the only charter school in the state serving primarily African-American students.”

Racial Discrimination Suggested

Kim, who worked as an attorney general for several years and handled many discrimination cases during his tenure, stated that charter schools serve five under-represented groups in the Hawaii DoE system:

- African-American students;
- children of military dependents;
- newcomers from the mainland, especially Caucasian students;
- Hawaiian children who come primarily from rural areas, and
- special-needs students.

Kim’s statement on racial discrimination made lawmakers and school officials at the meeting visibly uncomfortable. The DoE is currently reeling from accusations of racism at Radford High School in Honolulu, where the reported harassment of several African-American students culminated in an attack by local students after a basketball game in January 2005.

School Managing Finances Well

Beyond providing an excellent educational opportunity to the Hawaii school system’s five under-served populations, Kim testified that Waters of Life was on solid ground financially.

The charter school’s investment in property resulted in an increase in value from $350,000 to $850,000, based on a recent appraisal. The school is planning to sell its school property and pay off its remaining debt to the state.

“With fair funding, charter schools will fulfill their potential to be incubators for change,” testified Jim Shon, director of the Charter Schools Administrative Office. “Benign neglect of charter schools by the state has led to problems for the charter schools,” he said.

U.S. Congressman Ed Case (D-HI) affirmed in a letter to the Hawaii Reporter dated February 9, 2005 that he had initiated a federal investigation in July 2003 into the Hawaii State Department of Education’s fiscal management practices. Specifically, Case asked the U.S. Department of Education to determine whether Hawaii’s charter schools are receiving the proper amount of federal funds for special-needs students.

The Hawaii DoE is now reaching out to Waters of Life in an attempt to resolve its debt and help the school find permanent facilities.
Judge Orders Sharply Higher Spending for New York City Public Schools

by George A. Clowes

Culminating a 12-year court battle over the funding of New York City's public schools, New York State Supreme Court Justice Leland DeGrasse issued a final decision on February 15 ordering the state legislature and governor to spend an additional $5.63 billion a year to educate the city's 1.1 million public school students.

That means an increase of $5,100 per child per year on top of current spending of about $11,500 per pupil. DeGrasse also ordered additional capital spending of $9.2 billion over the next five years, or another $1,700 per pupil per year.

Judge Shortened Deadline

DeGrasse’s ruling, which was not unexpected, affirmed the November 2004 recommendations of a judicial panel he established last summer when state legislators failed to comply with a 2003 court order to reform the state’s school funding system so that it provided all students with the opportunity to receive a “sound basic education.” (See “Big Apple Hits Jackpot in School Finance Case,” School Reform News, February 2005.)

“New York State Supreme Court Justice Leland DeGrasse issued a final decision ... ordering the state legislature and governor to spend an additional ... $5,100 per child per year on top of current spending of about $11,500 per pupil.”

While the 2003 court order gave state lawmakers 13 months to come up with a new school funding system, DeGrasse’s February 15 order gave the legislature just 90 days to implement the order. That means an increase of $5,100 per child per year on top of current spending of about $11,500 per pupil.

Separation of Powers Cited

In its response to the panel report, the state had argued the separation of powers doctrine precludes the judiciary from forcing the legislature to make specific expenditures on education. The state noted Article VII of the New York State Constitution vests the authority for appropriating state funds in the governor and the legislature.

“While courts, admittedly, have broad equitable powers, there is no precedent in New York for any court directly ordering the expenditure of funds. Such an order would be antithetical to the notion of separation of powers, one of the cornerstones of the democratic governments of both our nation and its states.”

ELIOT SPITZER, ATTORNEY GENERAL
STATE OF NEW YORK

Gov. George Pataki's (R) spokesman, Kevin Quinn, said the governor would continue to work with all parties to reach a consensus because that was the only avenue to achieve “true and timely reform” for the whole state and not just for New York City.

“While courts, admittedly, have broad equitable powers, there is no precedent in New York for any court directly ordering the expenditure of funds,” argued State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer (D). “For a court to do so would place it well beyond its judicial function and directly into the budget process. ... Such an order would be antithetical to the notion of separation of powers, one of the cornerstones of the democratic governments of both our nation and its states.”

Spitzer cited an 1898 Court of Appeals ruling that warned of the dangers of upsetting the balance of power among the three branches of government: “It is not merely for convenience in the transaction of business that they are kept separate by the Constitution,” the ruling said, “but for the preservation of liberty itself, which is ended by the union of the three functions in one man, or in one body of men. It is a fundamental principle of the organic law that each department should be free from interference, in the discharge of its
continued from page 1

“Financial aid and affirmative action programs are unlikely to increase the number of students in college ... because poor academic preparation is the most significant barrier to college attendance.”

authors conclude there is “some reason to believe that the standards and reform movement has been increasing the skills of our high school graduates. Finally, our results imply that we cannot increase participation in four-year colleges without addressing the problems of the K-12 education system.”

Financial aid and affirmative action programs are unlikely to increase the number of students in college, the authors say, because poor academic preparation is the most significant barrier to college attendance.

The study finds similarities in the rate of college readiness and college attendance, indicating “there is not a large pool of students who have the skills necessary to attend college but do not so because of lack of funds or other non-academic factors,” according to the authors. Therefore, they conclude, until more students graduate college-ready, aid and access policies will not significantly improve attendance rates for poor and minority students.

Blacks, Hispanics Still Lag
At present, little more than half of all black and Hispanic students graduate, and less than a quarter graduate with the skills and coursework required for college.

High school graduation and college readiness rates vary significantly by state, the study noted. The states with the highest graduation rates are New Jersey (89 percent), Iowa (85 percent), Wisconsin (85 percent), North Dakota (85 percent), and Minnesota (84 percent). The states with the lowest rates of graduation are Alaska (59 percent), Alabama (58 percent), Tennessee (57 percent), Georgia (56 percent), and South Carolina (53 percent).

Other findings include:

• a significant gap exists between graduation rates of white and minority students. While 73 percent of white students graduated, 56 percent of black students and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduated from high school with a regular diploma;

• college readiness rates also vary widely: 40 percent of white students graduated prepared for college, while 23 percent of all black students and 20 percent of Hispanic students were similarly prepared;

• college readiness and college attendance rates do not vary significantly. According to the most recent statistics, the population of college-ready graduates in 2002 was 1,325,825, and the number of entering freshman was 1,374,649 in 2001.

Government Numbers Questioned
The study employs a revised version of the Greene Method pioneered by the study’s co-author in earlier research. The method uses enrollment and diploma data from the Department of Education’s Common Core of Data.

The method compares the number of students who received their diplomas in 2002 to an estimate of the number who entered high school in 1998-99 and should have graduated in 2002. Calculations are made to account for population movement and for students who were held back in the ninth grade.

The Greene Method produces a lower graduation rate than the one calculated by the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The NCES figure includes GED earners, while these are excluded by the Manhattan Institute study for two reasons: The future prospects of GED earners are similar to dropouts rather than diploma earners, and in fact GED earners are dropouts from the K-12 education system. The NCES also uses a different body of data, one the Manhattan authors consider less reliable.

“Unfortunately, the calculations of high school graduation rates that we would hope would be the most reliable are inflated,” the report said.

Few Students College-Ready
To calculate college readiness, Greene and Winters use graduation rates, test scores from the Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and NAEP transcript research. They define college-readiness using three measures:

• the student must have graduated from high school;

• the student must have scored at or above the “basic” level on the NAEP reading exam; and

• the student must have taken the minimum core of high school classes required for college admission.

The “basic” level is the lowest level of achievement on NAEP exams. Students can score at the “advanced,” “proficient,” or “basic” levels. Those unable to meet the minimum threshold are considered “below basic.”

The minimum core is four years of English, three years of math, and two years each of natural science, social science, and foreign language. That is the minimum high school transcript necessary to be admitted to the nation’s least-selective four-year colleges or universities.

By these measures, only 34 percent of all students were found by Greene and Winters to be college-ready.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has noted that “80 percent of the jobs now require post-secondary training. We must do a better job in ensuring better high school graduation rates as well as making sure that those graduates take a rigorous course of study that prepares them either for college or the workforce.”

Krista Kafer (krista.kafer@heritage.org) is senior policy analyst for education at The Heritage Foundation.

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