**Waste Plagues NJ School Construction**

Many of New Jersey’s poorest students, who have been looking forward to leaving dilapidated school buildings and going to sparkling new ones, could be facing disappointment as a corporation created to build their new schools seems to be falling apart.

In August, John F. Spencer, chief executive officer of the Schools Construction Corporation (SCC), the state entity charged with building the new schools, resigned amid charges of fiscal misfeasance. In April, the state Inspector General had issued a report saying the SCC has been plagued by waste and mismanagement since its inception in 2002. In June, Spencer told the General...
Only 70% of all students in public high school graduate. Of those, less than 50% are qualified to attend four-year college.

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Parental Rights, Student Privacy Take Center Stage on Capitol Hill

by Robert Holland

Capital Hill watchers can expect to hear a lot of arguing this fall about schools recommending that parents medicate their children before sending them to class.

A longstanding U.S. Supreme Court ruling, Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925), held parents have the fundamental right to direct their children’s education and upbringing. Though federal courts have consistently affirmed the principle over the past 80 years, public school administrators have sometimes cajoled or coerced parents into putting their children on psychiatric medications, saying children deemed “hyperactive” cannot be in a classroom unless their attention is focused by Ritalin, a powerful stimulant.

The federal Individualswith Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), revamped in 2004, attempted to tilt the balance back to parents by forbidding states and schools from banning children from class when parents resist pressure to medicate them. The new IDEA mainly targeted Ritalin, the production of which has more than doubled in this country since 2000.

This fall, a stronger piece of legislation—the proposed Child Medication Safety Act of 2005 (H.R. 1790), sponsored by Rep. John Kline (R-MN)—will be debated. It extends the protection of parental rights to include psychotropic drugs such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft.

Kline, a member of the House Education Committee, had lined up 20 cosponsors by the August recess, including Rep. John Boehner (R-OH), the committee’s chairman.

Health and Safety Paramount

“Parents should never have to choose between their child’s health and safety and their ability to receive an education,” Kline said. “The Child Medication Safety Act will help restore the right of parents to make decisions in the best interest of their children.”

Specifically, the measure would require as a condition of receiving federal aid that each state “develop and implement policies and procedures prohibiting school personnel from requiring a child to obtain a prescription for a controlled substance or a psychotropic drug as a condition of attending school or receiving services.”

In a concession to educator concerns, the bill adds that teachers or other school personnel may share classroom-based observations with parents regarding behavior and academic performance, as well as their opinions as to whether a child should be evaluated for special education under IDEA.

Medical professionals are divided on the issue of limiting schools’ power to have children medicated. Lance Clawson, a child psychiatrist from Maryland, told the Minneapolis Star-Tribune on July 3, “if you tie the hands of the schools, they lose the right to advocate for the child.” But in the same article, Dr. Karen Effreim, a Minnesota pediatrician, said children often are incorrectly diagnosed. Instead of having a medical disorder, they simply may be eating the wrong foods, watching too much television, or suffering from sheer boredom.

Federal Student Database Nixed

Earlier this summer, a freshman member of Congress struck a blow for college students’ privacy rights. An amendment to higher education reform legislation offered by Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC) nixed a proposed federal database to track postsecondary students. The amendment won committee approval and will be part of a bill headed to the House floor for a vote this fall.

“Creating a federal database of personal information about every facet of a student’s life is not necessary for evaluating academic institutions and would violate the personal privacy of students,” Foxx said in a news release. “This amendment will help ensure privacy isn’t threatened simply because a student chooses to enroll in college.”

Foxx’s amendment threw a roadblock in the way of a proposed “unit record” system in which a massive federal database would collect and maintain personal information about college students. Though it is unusual for newcomers to have such impact, Boehner said Foxx is fast becoming one of the strongest congressional proponents of parental choice in education.
Texas Governor Requires School Districts in the State to Spend 65% of Their Funds in the Classroom

by Connie Sadowski

A fter the state legislature failed in two special sessions this summer to pass school finance reform measures, Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R) issued an executive order in August requiring every school district in the state to spend at least 65 percent of its funds directly on classroom instruction. Perry said improving classroom performance is too important to set aside until lawmakers overcome their differences.

“While I hope to one day reach a legislatively consensual school finance, we can no longer delay taking action that will benefit schoolchildren, parents, and taxpayers,” Perry said in an August 22 news release. “They deserve better than unfulfilled promises and continued delays. They deserve immediate action.”

If each district complies with the 65 percent formula, classrooms across the state could see $1.6 billion in additional funding without a tax increase, said Kathy Walt, the governor’s press secretary. State Sen. Jeff Wentworth (R-San Antonio) was one legislator who welcomed the formula. During the regular legislative session this spring, he sponsored an amendment that would have required the same thing, had it succeeded.

Court-Ordered Reform
The state was directed to reform its education finance structure this February by a district court decision finding the current system unconstitutional because “school districts lack meaningful discretion to set local tax rates and because the cost of providing an adequate education exceeds the funds available to districts through current funding formulas,” according to an analysis conducted by the Texas House of Representatives Research Organization.

U.S. District Judge John Dietz also found the system for funding school facilities violates constitutional standards for equity between property-wealthy and property-poor school districts. The state appealed directly to the Texas Supreme Court, which is expected to issue a ruling sometime this year.

Group Effort
Not all of the state’s districts needed to improve their classroom spending, said Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), who welcomed the formula. “My executive order will give taxpayers the accountability they deserve because it opens every school district’s financial books to public scrutiny,” Texas Gov. Rick Perry said.

“While we certainly agree in concept with the notion of directing more dollars to the classroom as in the 65 percent requirement, we have found that similar measures enacted in the past and which we supported have been easily thwarted by creative coding of administrative functions at the local level,” Fallon explained.

“HFT no longer wants the districts to be able to transfer their bloated staff support services into hidden budget line items titled ‘central office curriculum or staff development expenses’ that result in campuses carrying the burden of that expense,” Fallon said.

Greater Accountability
In addition to the 65 percent formula, Perry’s executive order calls for other sweeping reforms, such as greater transparency in reporting of funds used for non-instruction expenditures such as counseling, technology, funds for maintenance and construction, and dues for clubs and organizations.

Also included is better transparency in reporting funds for lobbying, consulting, public relations service fees, and legal fees—including fees spent on lawsuits against the state—and clear, concise reporting of money available in school districts’ rainy day savings accounts, Walt said.

Transparency in campus-level spending and reporting is just what Texas Eagle Forum President Cathie Adams says her organization will work toward.

“I am very pleased that Governor Perry and his Commissioner of Education firmly believe that more education dollars should be spent in the classroom,” Adams said. “It is a travesty that hundreds of thousands of dollars were previously spent on nonacademic expenses such as lobbyists and seminars, rather than in our children’s classrooms.”

INTERNET INFO

More information about the 65 percent requirement is available at http://firstclasseducation.org.


For more information on classroom spending in Texas, see the district-by-district information available online at http://www3.cpa.state.tx.us/districts.nsf/.
Assembly the corporation could complete only half the 135 projects it had under-taken with the $6 billion it had been allo-cated, and would need a fresh infusion of cash to do any more.

The SCC was created by an executive order of former Gov. James McGreevey to comply with a 1998 state supreme court ruling requiring New Jersey to improve the physical condition of schools in so-called Abbott districts—31 of the state’s poorest school districts. The order stemmed from one of many Abbott v. Burke cases decided since 1985, in which the court ruled the state had failed to provide a constitutionally mandated “thorough and efficient education” for all students.

“In April, the state Inspector General had issued a report saying the [Schools Construction Corporation] has been plagued by waste and mismanagement since its inception in 2002.”

Spending Excessive
According to Inspector General Mary Jane Cooper’s April 2005 report, the SCC had overspent on contracts:

- paying local governments more than $67 million to buy land already owned by the public, on which to build schools;
- selecting sites requiring extensive cleaning because of environmental con-tamination;
- paying for non-essential items such as parking facilities and synthetic turf for athletic fields; and
- paying “Project Management Firms” (PMFs)—essentially, private contrac-tors—more than $217.8 million above originally contracted amounts.

Cooper also identified questionable practices in the operation of the corpora-tion itself, including:

- paying bonuses to several employees, “a highly unusual perk for governmental entities”;
- hiring at least 22 contract workers, who were paid approximately triple the amount of comparable state workers; and
- maintaining three northern New Jersey “regional offices” within 20 miles of each other, but only one for central and southern New Jersey.

Some Decry Budget Constraints
In explaining to the General Assembly in June why the SCC could complete only half the work it had undertaken, Spencer said the funding “was signifi-cant, but it was never enough to deliver all the required state mandates that are needed in the Abbott districts,” according to the June 14 edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Home School Educates Children, Parents about ADHD
by Randolph Z. Scott

The Sharon School in Nicholasville, Kentucky doesn’t advertise, and it accepts only 20 students at a time. Parents must pay $4,000 a year to send their children there.

But the school isn’t an academy for children of privilege. The Sharon School devotes itself exclusively to the needs of children and their parents struggling with the difficulties of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The school’s founder and teacher, Helen Sharon, holds class in her basement.

Sharon says she started the school as “a response to a gap in services” she discovered while raising her ADHD-diagnosed son.

“I found out that parents must be experts on both the medical and educational care of their child, but nobody helps them. They are alone,” she said.

Educating Parents
Sharon, a former substitute teacher, said one of her goals is to educate parents on how to negotiate a school system ill-equipped to help ADHD children with the myriad difficulties they face.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, ADHD affects 3 to 5 percent of children in America. The principal characteristics of ADHD are inattention, hyper-activity, and impulsivity.

Although ADHD kids have a normal intelligence level, their disorder leads to poor academic performance. Sharon says other children often single out kids with ADHD for teasing or bullying. Such difficulties often leave the affected children confused and depressed.

“I want to build these kids back up and give them the reality, not the myth, of the disorder,” Sharon says.

Easing into the Mainstream
Most students attend The Sharon School for one or two years, with the goal being to help ease them back into public schools.

Sharon believes her program succeeds because it creates an environment in which parents, the school, and a child’s physician communicate and work together—something she calls “The Sharon School Model.”

A big part of the model is behavior modification, providing children with incentives to control their impulses. While at school, kids earn points for turning assignments in on time and for good behavior. They lose points for late assignments and misbehavior.

After the school day, a child’s points determine whether he or she can enjoy certain privileges at home. Parents must be as strict in enforcing the system at home as Sharon is at school.

Earning High Marks
As a home school, there is no independent assessment to show that students at The Sharon School are learning and achieving at the same rate as kids in public schools. But parents and former students claim the personalized help they received from The Sharon School has led to marked improvement in behavior and abilities.

Ann Dawahare, a former student, now volunteers at The Sharon School.

“In my other schools nobody ever taught me like this. They didn’t know how to teach to ADHD,” said Dawahare, who recently completed her sophomore year at Lexington Community College. “Instead of punishing students for their failings, Helen teaches them how to focus and to learn.”

Randolph Z. Scott (rzscot00@centre.edu) is an intern at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

INTERNET INFO
For more information on teaching students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, see “Time to Focus Correctly on ADHD,” September/October 2002, Intellectual Ammuni-tion, http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=10282.

The Sharon School was profiled by the Lexington Herald-Leader on June 5, 2005. The article is available online at http://www.kentucky.com/ml/d/6/11818949.htm.
The Public Schools Are Deservedly Collapsing
That’s why you need to read

ESCAPE TO LEARNING
An Educator’s Answer to the Public School Crisis
By Richard G. Neal

It seems common sense to offer a choice to parents as to what learning institute their children attend. However, the debate over this issue has embroiled America while doing little to benefit student learning.

The author has experienced the current system’s flaws firsthand, having served as a teacher at all levels – elementary, secondary, adult ed, community college, and graduate school. He served as an assistant principal, supervisor, director, associate superintendent, labor relations consultant, chief negotiator for school boards, and consultant on decentralized management. The author of numerous books and articles, he infuses his latest book with hard-earned knowledge gleaned from five decades of “unparalleled experiences in every nook and cranny of the government schools.”

The author translates the notion of federal responsibility into what he believes is federal control. Teacher unions, he posits, are doing their best to kill any chance to transfer to public school vouchers free of government control. The author describes how educrats, teacher unions, and politicians have joined in unwritten and silent agreement to turn the public schools into their own profit-making enterprise. He describes how educrats, teacher unions, and politicians have joined in unwritten and silent agreement to turn the public schools into their own private bureaucracy.

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The author describes how educrats, teacher unions, and politicians have joined in unwritten and silent agreement to turn the public schools into their own private bureaucracy. Exposed are the two biggest mistakes ever made in education – allowing the government monopoly to run the schools and allowing collective bargaining for teachers. The answer: Escape to Learning through equitably differentiated vouchers free of government control.

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 Illinois
Continued from page 1

director of public policy, was prompted to investigate the spending gaps after he read an article in the August 1 issue of the Chicago Tribune reporting, “the difference between the highest- and lowest-spending [school] districts was $19,361 per pupil in 2003-04, about $4,000 higher than the year before and the biggest school-spending gap in a decade.”

According to the article, Rondout Elementary District in Lake County ($7,357 per pupil spent more than Central School District 51 ($4,438 per pupil) spent the least.

Van Winkle’s analysis, titled Rethinking Spending Gaps: What Can Spending Gaps Tell Us about Waste in Public Education? is an attempt to find out what the $19,000 difference really means.

Periodically, Van Winkle said, the media report a story in which the spending gap between the highest- and lowest-spending districts in the state is presented as a meaningful statistic. “So a lot of what we’re trying to do with Rethinking Spending Gaps is undermine that interpretation of the statistic and say, ‘Hey, simply citing that gap really doesn’t mean anything,’” he said.

Why So Large?
“The truth is that spending gaps are not evidence of a maliciously ‘regressive’ education funding system, rather they are evidence of a complex, diverse, and free economy,” Van Winkle wrote. “Unfortunately, the way the education establishment uses this data is often misleading. Moreover, there are factors unique to Illinois that make these spending gaps appear more pronounced than they truly are.”

One of Illinois’ unique factors is its 887 school districts. By comparison, Florida has just 67 school districts, even though it has more students. “If Illinois had fewer school districts, Rondout would then be averaged in with several other schools to produce a district average that pupil eventually made lower overall spending than $23,799,” Van Winkle wrote. “The resulting gap would appear far less pronounced than it appears now.”

Another factor is the cost of living in different parts of Illinois. When an adjustment is made for the cost of living, the spending gaps shrink, Van Winkle said. In 2003, Standard & Poor’s worked with the National Center for Education Statistics to develop cost-adjusted data for Illinois’ spending gap; the results showed a 25 percent decrease in the spending gap, according to Van Winkle’s report.

What’s the Solution?
Leveling the funding field might sound like a good idea, but it is not a practical one, said Ronald Kazmar, vice president of the Plainfield School District 202 Board of Education.

“Are you ever going to eliminate the extremes? That’s a tough one,” he said. “Obviously, certain school districts are blessed with certain assets such as utility companies or major manufacturing companies or high levels of land valuation that enable them to tax more. Is it right to take that money away from them and give it to other school districts to redistribute that? To me that smacks of some pretty strong socialism, which I don’t think is the basis of this country.”

The other avenue would be school vouchers or school choice, Kazmar noted. However, he questions whether private and parochial schools would be required to meet the same regulations and requirements that public schools must meet. For instance, he said, public schools are not required to give a child with a learning and disciplinary problems who transfers to a private school some of the services that public schools would be required to meet.

Van Winkle notes that the “adverse selection” argument is unmitigated, but he believes parents have a right to take that money away from their children’s school to purchase what they believe is the best education for their children at a private school. "Are you ever going to eliminate the extremes? That’s a tough one,” he said. “Obviously, certain school districts are blessed with certain assets such as utility companies or major manufacturing companies or high levels of land valuation that enable them to tax more. Is it right to take that money away from them and give it to other school districts to redistribute that? To me that smacks of some pretty strong socialism, which I don’t think is the basis of this country.”

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Wisconsin legislators, said School Choice ongoing attacks on school choice by some gram. But the plan illustrates a pattern of funds from the MPCP to the Florence proposed saving the district by diverting both longtime school choice opponents, (D-Eland) and Russ Decker (D-Wausau), said.

Florence students will be absorbed by voted June 29 to dissolve the 600-student Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Instruction Tony Evers told the choice. Decker and Brekke’s bill, currently in circulation for co-sponsorship, would take money directly from the program that makes payments to parents participating in the MPCP. In the 2004-05 school year, the program gave vouchers worth up to $5,943 to about 14,000 low-income students in Milwaukee. By comparison, during the 2003-04 school year—the latest for which data are available—the Florence County School District spent $10,628 on each of its 600 students.

Opponents of the Florence referendum say poor fiscal decisions led to the district’s financial problems. The

"After failing to receive voter support for a $2.25 million district-wide referendum, the Florence County School Board voted June 29 to dissolve the 600-student district on July 1, 2006."

Milwaukee

Continued from page 1

A comprehensive set of rules that took effect in September 2005. Milwaukee

State Sens. Roger Brekke and Russ Decker, longtime oppos-

Wisconsin

School Choice Opponents Propose Diverting Voucher Funds

by Mike Ford

Two Wisconsin state senators are trying to garner support for a plan to divert voucher money from low-income city children enrolled in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) to a school district in far northern Wisconsin.

After failing to receive voter support for a $2.25 million district-wide referendum, the Florence County School Board voted June 29 to dissolve the 600-student district on July 1, 2006. If that happens, Florence students will be absorbed by neighboring schools.

"If this county won’t support quality education, I have no problem sending [students] somewhere that will," Florence School Board President Dan Brereton said.

In response, state Sens. Roger Brekke (D-Eland) and Russ Decker (D-Wausau), both longtime school choice opponents, proposed saving the district by diverting funds from the MPCP to the Florence County School District. At press time, the proposal was unlikely to be approved, as both houses of the Wisconsin legislature support the 15-year-old Milwaukee program. But the plan illustrates a pattern of ongoing attacks on school choice by some Wisconsin legislators, said School Choice Wisconsin President Susan Mitchell.

"This bill is yet another reminder of the serious threat that some politicians pose to the future of educational options for low-income Milwaukee parents," Mitchell said.

Opponents Level Charges of Waste

Decker and Brekke’s bill, currently in circulation for co-sponsorship, would take money directly from the program that makes payments to parents participating in the MPCP. In the 2004-05 school year, the program gave vouchers worth up to $5,943 to about 14,000 low-income students in Milwaukee. By comparison, during the 2003-04 school year—the latest for which data are available—the Florence County School District spent $10,628 on each of its 600 students.

Senators Oppose Voucher Program

Both Brekke and Decker have a history of attacking the MPCP. In 2001 and 2002, they voted for legislation to drastically cut the program’s funding. Those proposals ultimately failed in floor votes. Decker in particular has long claimed the Milwaukee program reduces state aid available to school districts—a claim that has been contradicted every year since 2001 by nonpartisan Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau reports. Brekke echoed Decker’s misinformation in his 2004 election campaign.

Brekke’s office did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Mike Ford (ford@parentchoice.org) is a research associate at School Choice Wisconsin.

INTERNET INFO

More information on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is available through PolicyBot™, The Heartland Institute’s free online research database. Point your Web browser to http://www.heartland.org, click on the PolicyBot™ button, and select the topic/subtopic combination Education/Vouchers: Milwaukee.
can flourish.” The president praised ALEC and its work on results-oriented education policies.

“When we spend money on education at the federal level, I expect people who are spending that money to show the taxpayers results,” Bush said. He encouraged state lawmakers to question their local educators and school board members about their districts’ academic achievement rates, noting, “you can’t correct a problem until you diagnose the problem.”

Ed Secretary Emphasizes Achievement

The following morning, U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings spoke to conference attendees about federal education policy and her commitment to raising student achievement with the support of results-oriented state policies.

Spellings noted rising test scores and a narrowing achievement gap between the United States and other developed nations, as evidenced by the results of the 2004 Long-Term Trend Assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress—the “nation’s report card”—released July 14.

With nine-year-olds making more gains in the past five years than from 1971 through 1999, and nine- and 13-year-olds’ math scores at all-time highs, Spellings said, “High standards and accountability make a lot of sense and are the key to improving test scores. For those who want to set the bar lower, I say, ‘Get real.’”

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Choices Drive Improvement

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, noted that in the 14 years since the charter school movement began, national experts have had the chance to analyze state laws and find those that allow charter schools to best serve students. She lauded legislators for their interest in reform.

“Legislators are the key to creating sound education policy,” Allen said. “Thanks in no small part to ALEC members, we today have 41 charter school laws in 40 states and the District of Columbia. More than one million children are being educated in charter schools, Allen said.

“The emerging lessons learned show that sometimes even strong-sounding language can have an unintended consequence on the health and growth of charter schools,” Allen noted. “Strong laws ensure multiple paths to having charters approved, streamlined and equitable funding, and freedom from copious education rules. The key to the next generation of charter schools is to ensure that these tenets are firmly implanted in law.”

Lori Drummer (ldrummer@alec.org) is director of ALEC’s Education Task Force.

Competition Creates Choices

With the educational options provided for by the No Child Left Behind Act—including student tutoring and the ability to transfer to a better-performing school—and the creation of school vouchers in the District of Columbia, the federal government has made significant progress in promoting parental involvement in education, Spellings said.

“Parents today have more choices than ever before—public schools, charter schools, private schools, parochial schools, cyber schools, and home schools,” Spellings said. “And the competition is driving everyone to improve.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings spoke to the American Legislative Exchange Council’s annual meeting on August 4.

The National Council of Education Providers sponsored an ALEC workshop titled “Charter Schools and Beyond,” specifically addressing the benefits of educational competition. Leaders of some of the nation’s most successful charter school ventures and representatives of the Center for Education Reform, Connections Academy, Mosaic Education, and Edison Schools shared their experiences.

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Alternative Principal Programs Gain Ground

by Kate McGreevy

This summer, former Massachusetts state legislator Mark Roosevelt got a new job in the private sector.

The long, contentious approval process was colored by dissent from board members and community members alike before a narrow vote gave Roosevelt his new job.

Roosevelt wasn’t being asked to run a Fortune 500 company—he was hired as superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools in Pennsylvania. Though Roosevelt chaired the Massachusetts Joint Education Committee, co-created the state’s education reform law while serving in the state legislature between 1986 and 1994, and is also the former director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, he has never led a school or even taught professionally. He completed a 10-month training program for urban superintendents offered by the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation.

To critics, Roosevelt’s lack of formal educator training makes him ill-equipped to lead the Pittsburgh school district. To others, it makes him the perfect choice.

“These programs are very promising, and if they grow, the competition could help traditional education schools by forcing them to improve and become more relevant to the realities of life in a school today,” said Mike Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. “The best thing about these programs is that they are bringing new talent and new kinds of people into public education.”

Administrators Avoid Problem Areas

Since 1983, when A Nation at Risk rattled educators, policymakers, and parents alike over the state of education in the United States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved. Some, States, various school reforms have been attempted, contested, and shelved.

In March 2005, Dr. Arthur Levine, dean of Columbia University’s Teacher’s College, published Educating School Leaders, a four-year study concluding, “the majority of [educational administration] programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the nation’s leading universities.”

While Levine recommends a general restructuring of current administrator preparation programs, one major problem could be the administrator programs offered by many of the nation’s education graduate schools.

While Levine recommends a general restructuring of current administrator preparation programs, one major problem could be the administrator programs offered by many of the nation’s education graduate schools.

Hess is encouraged that these programs embrace a broad and strategic approach to the identification, preparation, and hiring of principals, but he believes they should be monitored closely.

“Notably, principal preparation places an evident premium on ‘niceness,’ at the expense of preparing leaders to make difficult choices regarding faculty, budgets, programs, or confronting and remedying mediocrity.”

Dr. Frederick Hess
American Enterprise Institute

“If a principal arrives at a school and the culture is not conducive to learning, we work with principals to make adjustments to the school’s culture that will provide a foundation for student achievement.”

Mike Petrilli
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

“Accountability Crucial

Highly selective, NLNS features a year of classroom training and a mentorship, plus two years of additional support. Although New Leaders looks for 10 criteria when selecting each class—including the ability to lead adults and the skills to design and execute strategic plans—Davis noted that above all, applicants must have high standards for all children and be willing to hold themselves accountable for each child’s achievement.

“The most important quality we look for in New Leaders is the unwavering belief in the potential of every child to learn at high academic levels,” Davis said, “and the recognition that, as the leader, I am responsible for making that happen.”

New Leaders are trained to understand how accountability affects student achievement.

“Accountability is a significant component of our training program,” Davis said. “If a principal arrives at a school and the culture is not conducive to learning, we work with principals to make adjustments to the school’s culture that will provide a foundation for student achievement.”

Jury Still Out

Hess is encouraged that these programs embrace a broad and strategic approach to the identification, preparation, and hiring of principals, but he believes they should be monitored closely.

CONTINUED at right
KIPP Foundation Program Trains New Breed of School Administrators

by Kate McGreevy

The reformers behind the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) are not strangers to innovative education reform. Therefore, it should come as no surprise they are now training principals not only to lead schools, but to found them.

KIPP was conceived in 1994 by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, two teachers who earned tremendous success delivering their program to underserved students at charter schools in Houston and New York. In 2000, GAP, Inc. founders Don and Harris Rosen wanted to help replicate that success and funded the KIPP Foundation, which now oversees 38 schools using the KIPP model, focusing on students spending more time in school and rigorous college-prep classes in under-resourced communities.

One of the most important components of that model, said KIPP consultant Pam Moeller, is school leadership.

“The Foundation sets out to find phenomenal teachers with impressive records of measurable success with under-erved students, who have the capabilities and desire to have an impact beyond the classroom walls to successfully lead entire schools,” Moeller said.


division itself was a reaction to traditional principal preparation programs that did not offer the kind of training we believe is necessary to lead a KIPP school,” Cobb said.

The KIPP School Leadership Program includes a classroom component that focuses on instruction, organization, and operations, and an intensive three-month residency. The program is designed to serve three constituencies: Fisher Fellows, who are hand-selected to establish their own KIPP schools; current junior leaders at KIPP schools, such as assistant principals and deans; and a handful of leaders working for like-minded organizations, such as YES College Prep, Achievement First, and Noble Street.

“Quality is our guide—some years we have eight students; some years we have 17,” Moeller said. “The key is finding individuals with the potential to start successful KIPP schools.”

Real Experience

The program’s residency component provides Fisher Fellows with unique opportunities, not only to be exposed to the daily grind of school leadership but also to reflect on the needs different schools face during their development. “All Fisher Fellows must complete a three-month residency—it’s the time when theory meets reality,” Moeller explained. “To get them thinking about leadership techniques and the needs of schools at different levels of maturity, we place them in schools that are well-established, like our academies in Houston and New York, and they also spend time at schools that are just starting and still attempting to define their cultures. At the end of the residency, they are better equipped to make their vision a reality.”

Cobb agreed, noting how principals’ roles have changed over the years—particularly in autonomous schools, such as charters or contract schools, which are the forms KIPP schools usually take.

“Depending on the school’s structure, the principal is expected to bring different strengths,” Cobb said. “At KIPP public schools, for example, we need leaders who are well versed in a wide range of issues from instructional matters to management. KIPP school principals are CEOs of small nonprofit businesses, essentially.”

Tougher than Government

KIPP, like New Leaders for New Schools, a national education leadership program founded in 2000, places a premium on training principals to address student achievement issues early and often.

“At KIPP schools we believe that data and results should drive the day-to-day, so our principals are trained to make decisions, with teachers, about instruction on a regular basis,” Moeller said.

KIPP’s accountability model is more rigorous than the accountability required by the No Child Left Behind Act, Cobb added.

According to an August 2005 report issued by the Education Policy Institute, a nonprofit, international education research group, KIPP schools are posting successes with fifth graders in reading, language, and math. Fifth graders are enjoying average gains that far exceed the norm for their grade level, setting KIPP apart as a system achieving unprecedented success with previously underserved populations.

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by Greg McConnell

Last November, after Huntley, Illinois narrowly passed a referendum raising taxes to support four new schools in District 158 (D-158), a certified public accountant with three children in the district discovered the newly administered tax increase was more than double the 55 cents per $100 of property value that had been advertised to voters.

A few weeks later, voters learned through the press they’d been misled. Worse, they found a $5 million grant for the district had been sitting idly in the state capital for 18 months. Though D-158 Superintendent Steve Swanson knew about the grant before the referendum passed, the information wasn’t disclosed to voters. In the resulting outrage, D-158’s financial director announced early retirement, and Swanson resigned in February.

Practically overnight, the district went from “flat broke” to a $3.4 million surplus, possibly climbing to $9 million next year, according to an article in the August 14 edition of the Northwest Herald. Now School Board President Michael Skala is in the unprecedented position of trying to find ways to reverse the tax hikes. No taxing body has ever asked to have the rate reduced under these circumstances, he said, so there’s no model to follow. The district brainstormed four possible solutions this summer, but nobody knows yet if any are feasible.

“It’s going to take many years to recover from the problems and the mistakes that were made,” Skala said, “but you have to look forward and move forward and try to do the best you can from that point into the future.”

Warning Signs

In June 2005, state auditors found more than $2 million in errors, mostly in transportation accounts the district’s independent auditors had missed, said Larry Snow, a former financial analyst. Inspired by the debacle to run for the school board, he has been a member since April.

“Not only were there lots of errors, but multiple important documents have disappeared,” Snow said. “That’s serious stuff. This no longer looks like an innocent error.”

Snow didn’t pay much attention to the school district’s referendum ads until he heard the district was beginning to keep elementary kids in school until 5:00 p.m.—something he considered “anti-American.” That’s not the way he grew up, he said, so he decided to attend his first board meeting as a concerned citizen.

Tony Quagliano, the certified public accountant who later discovered the accounting error, said he supported the referendum at first because he “pretty much went along” with the financial information the school district was disclosing. However, he became suspicious when he started reading newspaper reports of what school board members were saying about the effect Illinois’ property tax cap had on school funding. He knew what they were saying was wrong.

Cold Shoulder

Quagliano began questioning board members and administrators and doing his own research to test the accuracy of the school district’s information and learn more about Illinois laws regarding school funds and how they’re raised.

Snow and Quagliano worked independently, poring over the district’s budget and proposed tax increase. They found revenues tended to be understated and expenses overstated. The proposed tax increase, they said, seemed excessive.

Both Snow and Quagliano sent fiscal analyses to D-158 to shed light on the subject. They received no response.

“When someone comes along who has the actual ability and skill to go through the actual numbers, you’re not received like, ‘Oh, well thank you very much,’” Snow said. “You’re received like, ‘Why are you anti-education? You’re against kids.’”

Blowing the Whistle

As a compromise, Snow had suggested reducing the proposed tax hike to 20 cents per $100 of property value, even though even that increase seemed unnecessary to him.

When D-158 decided to move forward with the 55-cent referendum, threatening not to open any new schools if it failed, Snow sent an 18-page letter to 3,000 residents in the district detailing the administrators’ faulty accounting, consulting Quagliano on the key calculations.

D-158, Snow wrote, probably had enough money to open three of the four new schools without a tax increase, and it was untrue to say no new schools could open if the referendum failed. The letter made such a splash that the school district issued a formal response to discredit it.

Greg McConnell (gjmce@yahoo.com) is a freelance writer in Palatine, Illinois.
Student Achievement Emerges as Civil Rights Issue in Maryland

by Alison Lake

The Anne Arundel County, Maryland, board of education agreed to settle an 18-month-old federal class-action civil rights lawsuit in August, pledging to improve student achievement, after local and national groups complained the county places disproportionate numbers of minority and low-income students in special education programs.

“The Anne Arundel County law chief unexpectedly resigned one day after civil rights leaders and involved parties, including the superintendent, signed the landmark agreement September 7,” the Community Education Committee (CEC), a group of local citizens and parents supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), filed the lawsuit in May 2004. The CEC alleged unacceptably high numbers of the county’s African-American students were dropping out, being placed in special education classes, falling proficiency tests, or being expelled or suspended.

The complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. The U.S. Department of Justice later picked up the case and helped mediate the resolution in August.

“Serving Students Better

Carl O. Snowden, an Anne Arundel County aide and NAACP member, belongs to the CEC. Prior to the law suit’s filing, he said, the group met with the county school board to address the issue, without success. “This is a problem which has been systemic to the education system for years,” Snowden said, and this is not the first time the issue has been raised about too many African-Americans being placed in special education classes.”

CARL O. SNOWDEN
COMMUNITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Agreeing on Goals

Snowden applauded the settlement but said he is skeptical “these major goals can be met.”

Anne Arundel County School Board President Konrad Wayson said one of the best aspects of the settlement was that it resulted from collaboration among the community, schools, and parents. “We recognize that it is the parents and the community that contribute significantly to a child’s success,” he said.

When asked specifically how the achievement gap between minority and white students would be closed, Wayson said, “We have a review committee being put together that will go and look at the statistics and take it from there, whether it’s with teachers, curriculum, etcetera.”

Alison Lake (alake@mdpolicy.org) is managing editor and media director at the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

Early Intervention Program Aims to Keep Kids out of Special Ed

by Wendy Cloyd

A Colorado Springs, Colorado school district is implementing a pilot program to address one of the greatest challenges classroom teachers face: meeting struggling students’ needs as soon as they appear.

“Responsiveness to Intervention is, first and foremost, about good teaching: Even before students are formally classified as having ‘learning disabilities,’ those who need more assistance receive additional interventions.”

MICHAEL HOCK
WESTED

Since federal rules and regulations for the revamped Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act have not been sent to the state level yet, Colorado Springs School District 11 is launching a pilot project using a new special education model called Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI).

New Model

Under the RTI model, educators begin giving extra help to struggling students as soon as a potential learning problem is identified, long before a child qualifies for special education. While RTI does not exclude entry into special education at a later date, in many cases special education becomes unnecessary because of early intervention, analysts say.

The National Research Council on Learning Disabilities, a project of the U.S. Department of Education, is currently conducting research on alternative methods of identifying learning disabilities. RTI will be an important part of the evaluation, according to the group’s Web site.

Patty Luttrell, special education staffing coordinator at Colorado Springs’ Stratton Elementary School, is excited about the RTI pilot program because, she says, it will allow the school to help needy students while providing classroom teachers with much-needed support. Training in the model will be given to all teachers in the school; special education teachers will be used for early intervention and helping regular education teachers identify students’ needs.

“We used to have to wait until at least third grade to test them to see if they needed academic or behavioral support,” Luttrell said. “RTI will allow us to provide research-based interventions before we look at using all the time and money it takes to assess a student for special education services.”

Early Intervention

In a traditional school setting, when a student has difficulty learning, a teacher may refer him for special education testing. If the results show a “severe discrepancy” between ability (intelligence testing) and academic performance (standardized achievement testing), the student may have a learning disability. A team of teachers, psychologists, and specialists will develop an Individual Education Plan defining services the student will receive.

But the discrepancy model is a “wait to fail” approach, said Michael Hock, a program associate at WestEd, a nonprofit regional education laboratory serving Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon and Washington. “It has failed to identify students who need more assistance receive additional interventions,” he explained.

“With this solid system in place in the general education classroom, a teacher is able to quickly identify students who need still more help. And for some students, the early support may make special education eligibility unnecessary. So RTI is as much a prevention model as an identification model.”

Practical Value

Stephanie Shepard, who teaches kindergarten at another Colorado Springs school, said that although most teachers do try to help struggling students, earlier intervention would be “a very good thing.”

“We have so many of those kids that we just know need some extra support,” Shepard said. “We do work in tandem with special education, but often don’t get any help in the classroom. “I have had little ones in my classroom that have needed extra help and I’ve often thought, ‘I don’t know what I’ll do if I don’t have that [extra help],’” Shepard said. “I think about it even when I’m at home. I go online, I try to come up with ideas to help. A program like RTI makes a lot of sense to me.”

Wendy Cloyd (wendy_cloyd@hotmail.com) is a freelance writer in Colorado Springs, Colorado.


INTERNET INFO


INTERNET INFO
State Takes Over Special Education in Baltimore

by Alison Lake

A 20-year-old lawsuit against Baltimore City’s failing special education system ended in July when a federal judge ordered the state to assume control of the program.

Attorneys representing Baltimore children with disabilities argued 10,000 special needs students in Baltimore City were not receiving adequate services, such as appropriate classroom instruction and physical and speech therapy. The state board of education is expected to oversee the district’s special education programs for the next three years.

“A 20-year-old lawsuit against Baltimore City’s failing special education system ended in July when a federal judge ordered the state to assume control of the program.”

Parents How To: Make the Most of Online Schools

by Michael Coulter

The development of the Internet and the increasing public desire for educational choices have brought about a wide variety of online programs for school-age students. There are public and private schools that offer full-time or part-time programs, programs for gifted students and programs for those seeking to catch up, and religious and non-religious programs. Different programs have varying resources, teacher availability, and professional support.

How can parents best navigate this online world to supplement their children’s education?

Start by finding out which resources are available to you, by checking out your state education department’s Web site. Some states, such as Pennsylvania, have charter schools that allow students in their districts to take classes online; others, like Florida, have state-run virtual charter schools open to all students.

Some school districts permit students to take online courses and transfer the credits to their public school. Before signing up, make sure your home district will accept the virtual school’s accreditation.

Know the Approaches

After researching the options, look into the details—programs differ enormously.

“There are at least four models of online education,” explained Howard Richman, who edits the newsletter of Pennsylvania HomeSchoolers, an organization offering online Advanced Placement courses and test preparation programs.

One model is Richman’s, which he describes as a “community of learners.” Students and the teacher communicate through e-mail, though not simultaneously. Other programs adapt correspondence courses to the online world; still others simulate the classroom model, putting all students and teachers online in real time, Richman said.

Richman said some programs have no formal structure, allowing students to pursue their own interests as long as they like, giving them “greater control over pace and topics.”

“How can parents best navigate this online world to supplement their children’s education?”

Know Curricula, Student

It’s important to find out all you can about the curricula of programs you are considering, said Mike Maslayak, national director for children and families at K12, a company providing curricula to charter schools, state-run virtual schools, and public school districts. How is the program presented? How does it structure your child’s time? Does it afford multiple opportunities for learning concepts? Does it provide clear benchmarks?

Beyond that, it helps to be familiar with the way your child learns, to find the best fit for him or her. Some programs offer only a video and workbook for lessons; at the other end of the spectrum, a teacher helps keep the child on-task. In others, students set the pace themselves.

Is your child academically advanced? According to the August 10 issue of The Wall Street Journal, online programs for gifted students are competitive; several are offered by well-known universities, such as Johns Hopkins, Duke, and Northwestern.

Are you choosing a college prep program for your high school student? If so, you need to know if the program you are choosing for high school offers a diploma, because not all do.”

Know Your Commitment Level

Maslayak advised asking yourself whether you can make the commitment required by the program you’re considering.

“How can you organize your day so that you do the program?” he asked, because parental involvement is a key to students’ success. The program you use must also be user-friendly, Maslayak said.

While students often can access teachers in online programs, parents should make sure they also have that access, in order to best help their child, Richman said.

Michael Coulter (mecoultar@gcc.edu) teaches political science at Grove City College in Pennsylvania.
Public School Choice Grows in Massachusetts

by Michael Coulter

An obscure Massachusetts law passed in 1991 enabling students to attend public schools outside the district designated for them by the government is beginning to force public schools across the Bay State to compete with each other for enrollment.

During the 2004-05 school year, more than 9,000 K-12 students took advantage of the interdistrict choice program—up from 6,000 a decade ago and 1,000 in the 1991-92 school year, the program’s first. More schools are taking part as well. In 1991, only 32 schools accepted students from outside their district, but last year, 149 of the state’s 328 public school districts welcomed them.

“The program has grown, and that shows there is a growing demand to change schools,” said David Armor, who with Brett Peiser cowrote a study of Massachusetts’ interdistrict choice program in 1997.

“During the 2004-05 school year, more than 9,000 K-12 students took advantage of the interdistrict choice program—up from 6,000 a decade ago and 1,000 in the 1991-92 school year, the program’s first.”

Choices Are Limited

The law restricts interdistrict choice to 2 percent of all public school students and does not provide transportation to those who choose it. Students in the Boston and Springfield metro area have their own program, known as METCO. Created in 1966, the program aims to expand opportunities for students in large urban districts and reduce racial imbalance in suburban districts. It also provides tutoring services and transportation for students selected for the program.

About 3,000 students participated in METCO last year, and another 16,000 are currently on a waiting list, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education Web site.

While an increasing number of Massachusetts parents are taking advantage of interdistrict choice, and 23,000 children in the state are attending charter schools, only 3 percent of students statewide choose to attend a public school outside their district. Massachusetts does not have tax credits or vouchers, and it does not require homeschooled students to report to their home districts.

Having a choice of public schools is nice, said David Salisbury, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, but given the cap on the number of students who can participate and the fact that schools can reject students, it bears little resemblance to true free-market competition.

“It’s like saying you can choose different post offices,” Salisbury explained. “It’s a part—but only a part—of creating a competitive education industry. It’s not an indication that people don’t want choice, but an indication that there are relatively few choices.”

Districts Seek Students

One district that has always accepted students from outside is the Boston suburb of Avon. Getting students from other districts “provides us with ethnic and cultural richness,” Avon Public Schools System Superintendent Margaret Frieswyk said. “It also helps us fill empty seats and provides a vital revenue stream for the district.”

Under the law, the student’s home district sends 75 percent of the cost of tuition, up to a maximum of $5,000, to the receiving district. The amount of funding following special-needs students to their new districts is determined on a case-by-case basis.

Last year, 145 of Avon’s 750 students came from outside districts, mostly to attend the high school. Only one Avon resident attended another district’s school, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education.

Students Seek Choices

Another district welcoming students from outside is the Clinton Public School System, a 2,000-student district located 35 miles west of Boston. Last year, Clinton received 120 students from other districts and sent 41 of its resident students elsewhere.

Clinton Superintendent Gerry Gaw said the funds that follow students are significant for his small district. Without them, he says, the district couldn’t maintain its 20-to-1 student-teacher ratio and might even have to lay off staff.

Gaw said parents from outside Clinton choose it for a variety of reasons.

“For some, it’s a matter of convenience,” said Gaw, speaking of students who live in other districts close by, or whose parents work in or near Clinton. Others choose it for the small class sizes and because “our facilities and fields are spectacular.” He noted most of the facilities are either new or have been remodeled in the past decade.

Frieswyk said her district’s size might make it attractive to some parents, particularly those who like the “personal attention” students there can receive.

Size Matters

Armor said a school district’s size plays a role in the impact interdistrict choice has on it.

“In our earlier study, we saw that the program affected different kinds of schools differently, and I have no reason to believe that this dynamic has changed. In large districts, where the students who left constituted only a small percentage, there was no substantial effect. They saw no need to change,” he explained.

“It did, however, have a substantial effect on the smaller school district,” Armor continued. They would have meetings and discussions to find out why some students left. They were shocked and weren’t aware that some were unhappy with what they offered. In response, they made changes to keep and attract students.”

Between 1995 and 2005, the number of students participating in Massachusetts’ public school choice program increased 53.76 percent, from 6,039 to 9,285. Approximately 1 percent of the state’s public school students exercised choice in the 2004-05 school year.

“On average, it’s 1 percent, but it accounts for a great deal of money,” Armor said. “The government pays $5,000 a student to send them to another school.”

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Michael Coulter (mlcoulter@gcc.edu) teaches political science at Grove City College in Pennsylvania.

INTERNET INFO


Updates published by the Pioneer Institute in 1999 also are available online, at http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artid=8412 (part 1) and http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artid=8413 (part 2).
Push for Universal Preschool Grows

by Lisa Smell

The Institute for America’s Future and the Center for American Progress, co-chaired by Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D), on August 23 called for $325 billion in a federal education spending over the next decade, including more than $9 billion a year to create a nationwide, universal preschool program.

Although the coalition has not released a specific plan, typical universal preschool proposals call for replacing the current largely private, parent-driv- en preschool system with a tax-funded system that would likely add one or two years of “voluntary” preschool for all children onto the current K-12 public education system.

In 2005, at least 40 states provided some taxpayer funding for preschool programs, usually for at-risk children, and at least 28 considered legislation to begin doing so or expand their current funding. Eight states, including Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma, now offer universal preschool.

The problem with such proposals, said Lance Izumi, director of education studies at the California-based Pacific Research Institute (PRI), is “in addition to the huge cost of transferring control from private providers to the government, the evidence for state-run preschool helping academic performance in later years is shaky at best.”

California Provides Test Case

California may become the national prototype for universal preschool. Hollywood director Rob Reiner is promoting “Preschool for All” as a June 2006 ballot initiative. Golden State taxpayers already spend more than $3 billion a year to subsidize preschool for low-income children. “Preschool for All” would generate at least $2.5 billion more per year to supply universal preschool, through a special tax on Californians who earn more than $400,000 annually.

Reiner’s plan is particularly interesting because the bulk of that $2.5 billion won’t be spent getting low-income kids ready for school—it will subsidize middle- and upper-income kids already attending preschool, as 66 percent of California’s four-year-olds currently do. Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California at Berkeley, said the initiative will increase preschool enrollment by just 11 percent statewide.

Universal preschool advocates in California base their claims for the benefits of preschool on a 2005 RAND Corporation study stating that making universal preschool available in California would yield $2.62 in benefits for every $1 spent.

“Every dollar we spend on early learning saves $17 in the long run,” said Bender, citing the Perry Preschool Project, a study conducted in the 1960s finding that early education leads to higher earnings and less risk of criminal activity, “but we don’t focus on just the dollars saved.” She pointed out that early education students’ greater productivity and lower crime rates in adulthood are good for all.

To test the pre-K initiative’s effectiveness, all kindergarteners entering public school are screened, and providers who fail to prepare students adequately will be penalized.

“Results of a Georgia State University study of third graders who had participated in their pre-K program showed that students performed equally well, regardless of whether their provider was public or private and the type of college degree held by the provider,” Cobb said. “We’re focusing on what will come out of the program, instead of what goes into it.”

Goldwater Institute Executive Director Darcy Olsen, who has done extensive research on early education, corroborated Izumi’s findings.

“If early education programs were essential building blocks for success, we would expect to see at least some relationship between increased enrollment and student achievement,” Olsen said.

In her 2005 study Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten, she wrote that after 10 years, Georgia’s universal preschool program “has served over 300,000 children at a cost of $1.15 billion and children’s test scores are unchanged.”

In addition, historical trends in preschool enrollment and later achieve-
ment are unpromising. The enrollment rate has climbed from 16 percent in 1965 to 66 percent in 2004, but despite the change from home education to formal early education, overall student achievement has stagnated since 1970.

Accountability Is Questionable

In addition, poor management and questionable educational quality have plagued some government-run preschool programs. Head Start, a voluntary, government-run early education program, should be a good indicator of the likely success of an expanded, national preschool program. A 2005 investigation by the House Committee on Education found that because of fraud and poor management, a significant share of the nearly $7 billion American taxpayers invest in Head Start annually never reaches disadvantaged children.

On August 15, the Los Angeles Times reported that a federal audit of the Los Angeles County Office of Education—one of the nation’s largest recipients of Head Start grants—found minor to severe safety, administrative, and fiscal problems. If Reiner’s initiative passes, that same office will control the entire Los Angeles preschool market.

In contrast to the state-run universal preschool model, the American Legislative Exchange Council says there are better ways to educate children.
“Direct Instruction” Narrows Wisconsin’s Achievement Gap

Phonics, repetition raise reading, math scores, especially among minorities, low-income students

by Sean Parnell

A new report shows that “direct instruction” (DI), a teaching method relying heavily on phonics and repetition, has helped raise reading and math scores, particularly among minority and low-income students, in Milwaukee’s public schools. The report, prepared by Prof. Sammis White of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, was released by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI) in July.

“[L]ow-income fifth graders with five years of DI averaged 660 for reading and 630 for math, better than the average score for all low-income fifth graders of 646 in reading and 626 in math.”

White’s report examined the test results of 23,000 third- through fifth-grade students, comparing them based on how many years of DI they had received, their economic and ethnic backgrounds, and other factors.

White found low-income students with five years of DI tracked between third and fourth grades increased their reading and math scores more than higher-income students did. Reading scores for low-income DI students rose by 4.2 percent, compared to 3.9 percent for higher-income students. Math score improvements were even more impressive, rising 6.6 percent for low-income DI students, compared to 4.7 percent for higher-income students.

Given the fact that DI students are generally poorer and more likely to be minority than non-DI students, White believes this evidence shows great promise for closing the “achievement gap” between low-income and minority students and their peers.

The study found low-income fifth graders with five years of DI averaged 660 for reading and 630 for math, better than the average score for all low-income fifth graders of 646 in reading and 626 in math. “The difference in reading is about equivalent to one half year of progress,” White wrote, “and the 660 is again earned by a lower-income population, suggesting an even greater achievement.”

Madison Sees Impressive Results

WPRI also released an account of DI used by one school in Madison that further bolsters the evidence showing the approach benefits students.

Lapham Elementary School, a kindergarten-through-second grade school, decided in 1999 to abandon the Madison district’s preferred reading program, known as “Balanced Literacy” and based on the theory that children can learn reading without explicit phonics training and practice, in favor of a phonics-rich program called “Direct Instruction: SRA

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DIRECT continued

Reading Mastery® for first graders.

The results have been impressive, particularly for black students. By the time Lapham students reach third grade, their reading scores are near the top of the district.

Before switching to DI, only 9 percent of black third graders at the school achieved at the “advanced” level for reading. By 2003, 38 percent were “advanced,” compared with 9 percent of “advanced” black students district-wide that year. For low-income students, 32 percent were at the “advanced” level for reading in 2003, up from 19 percent in 1998.

Despite its success, DI’s future at Lapham is in doubt. The principal who pushed for teachers to focus on phonics has left, and the new principal has made Balanced Literacy the school’s reading program once again. Apparently responding to pressure from administrators in the Madison school district, two new first-grade classrooms were made “off-limits” to DI in 2004.

Research Supports DI Expansion

White recommends that the Milwaukee Public Schools expand use of DI in the classroom.

Among other steps, he suggests giving teachers stipends to attend DI training seminars offered by the district, increasing funding for DI programs, and creating a Center for Direct Instruction at a local college or university to expose more teachers to the concept. He also calls for exposing more administrators and principals to DI, in order to overcome their reluctance to support phonics-rich reading programs.

WPRI President James Miller agreed with White’s findings. “Our recent study on Direct Instruction shows enormous potential for the education of poor, inner-city students,” Miller said.

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Table of Contents

Introduction Joseph L. Bast, The Heartland Institute

1. Taxes and Budgets
Scott Hodge, Tax Foundation
Robert Genetski, Robert Genetski Financial Advisors
Greg Blankenship, Illinois Policy Institute
Hon. Frank Lasses, Wisconsin - Second Assembly District
Jon Caldara, Independence Institute

2. Environment
James M. Taylor, Environment & Climate News
Jim Johnston, The Heartland Institute
S. Fred Singer, Science and Environmental Policy Project
Wendell Cox, Wendell Cox Consultancy
Jay Lehr, The Heartland Institute

3. Keynote Address
John Fund, The Wall Street Journal

4. Education
George Clowes, School Reform News
Robert Enlow, Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation
David Salisbury, Cato Institute
Lee Walker, The New Coalition for Economic and Social Change

5. Health Care
Conrad Meier, Health Care News
Jane Orient, Association of American Physicians and Surgeons
Lee Tooman, Golden Rule Insurance Co.
Merrill Matthews, Council for Affordable Health Insurance

6. Digital Economy
Steven Titch, if&i News
Raymond Gifford, The Progress & Freedom Foundation
Lynne Kiesling, Center for Applied Energy Research
Dan Miller, Chicago Sun-Times

7. Law
Maureen Martin, Lawsuit Abuse Fortnightly
Andrew Stephans, U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform
Paul Fisher, McGuire Woods, LLC
Joseph A. Morri, Morris & Da La Rosa

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A new worry about the quality of public education reinforces the case for empowering parents to send their children to any school they wish, public or private.

Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates detailed the problem last February in an impassioned speech before a meeting of the National Governors Association. Using words like “appalled” and “ashamed,” Gates argued that, not only do poor and minority children receive an inferior education, but the public system as a whole is “obsolete,” harming all students, even the privileged.

Comparing today’s high school education to a 50-year-old mainframe computer, Gates said that our schools were created “to meet the needs of another age.” He predicted that, until we reinvent them, “we will keep limiting — even ruining — the lives of millions of Americans every year.”

In the months since Gates raised the issue, opinion writers across the political spectrum have echoed the call to rethink the fundamental organization of public schooling. The future of education “requires a set of big ideas,” wrote New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman on April 29. Saying that only 12 percent of U.S. seniors are proficient in science, conservative Daniel Gelernter declared in the May 13 Los Angeles Times that “public schools have lost the right to exist.”

What strikes so many observers of public schooling is that in the 165 years since Horace Mann’s invention of our current educational system, the nature of manufacturing has evolved from reliance on physical labor to sophisticated industrial robots, the nature of military service from riding horses to mastering “smart” weapons, and the nature of accounting from paper journal keeping to the use of computerized spreadsheets.

Yet in all that time the underlying structure of public education, with its fixed grade levels, uniform class structure, and one-size-fits-all curriculum, has remained essentially unchanged. In truth, the assumption that we best educate kids by herding them by age into classrooms in public buildings for nine months of the year, thirteen years in a row, rests on remarkably little scientific evidence.

On those rare occasions when relevant studies are undertaken, the results give little support to mainstream practices. In 1999, for example, Dr. Lawrence Rudner of the University of Maryland made international headlines with research showing that the best educated pupils attend neither suburban public schools nor elite private academies, but home schools managed by stay-at-home mothers with no teaching credential of any kind.

It is tempting to blame our antiquated system on the foot-dragging of teacher unions, but the resistance to reform is much deeper and more broadly based. The problem in many American communities is that the public school, as outmoded as it may be, has nevertheless become the organizing center of civic and social life — so much so that most people are incapable of imagining anything different.

For students raised on Hollywood films and adolescent soap operas on UPN and WB, the high school has become the indispensable stage on which teenage emotions are to be expressed.

As for the parents, politicians can no more imagine life without local boards of education and PTAs than realtors can appraise homes without reference to the variety of sports teams and extra-curricular activities at district high schools. Gates himself warned that some of the strongest resistance to education reform comes from the legions of fathers more invested in coaching baseball than in improving student math scores.

But if we are psychologically incapable of designing a better educational system, at least we can do the next best thing: empower parents with enough choices so that the trial and error of individual decision-making will inevitably point us in new directions.

If we already knew how to improve education, explains Paul Peterson, a professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, “it would be easy to fix, but because we don’t know what works, that’s why we have to have competition. That’s why we want to let 1000 flowers bloom. [To] see what happens on the ground.”

Advocates of school choice have long argued that public funding of private and even home-based education would help poor, minority, and learning-disabled students, but it is now clear that there is another justification.

Only by injecting more options into our ossified educational system can we generate needed, if unpredictable, changes for all.

Lewis M. Andrews, Ph. D.
Executive Director