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School Reform News

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THE MONTHLY NEWSPAPER FOR SCHOOL REFORMERS

Vol. 9 No. 9 October 2005

Waste Plagues NJ School Construction

by Neal McCluskey

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 malfeasance. 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

JERSEY p. 5

New Milwaukee Accountability Measures Work

by Mike Ford

Five schools have been removed from the 15-year-old Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), and 51 others that applied for inclusion have been turned away over the past 18 months, thanks to stringent accountability measures enacted last year.

A bipartisan group of Wisconsin legislators provided the impetus in March 2004, when they adopted the

MILWAUKEE p. 8

Illinois Schools' "Spending Gap" No Mystery

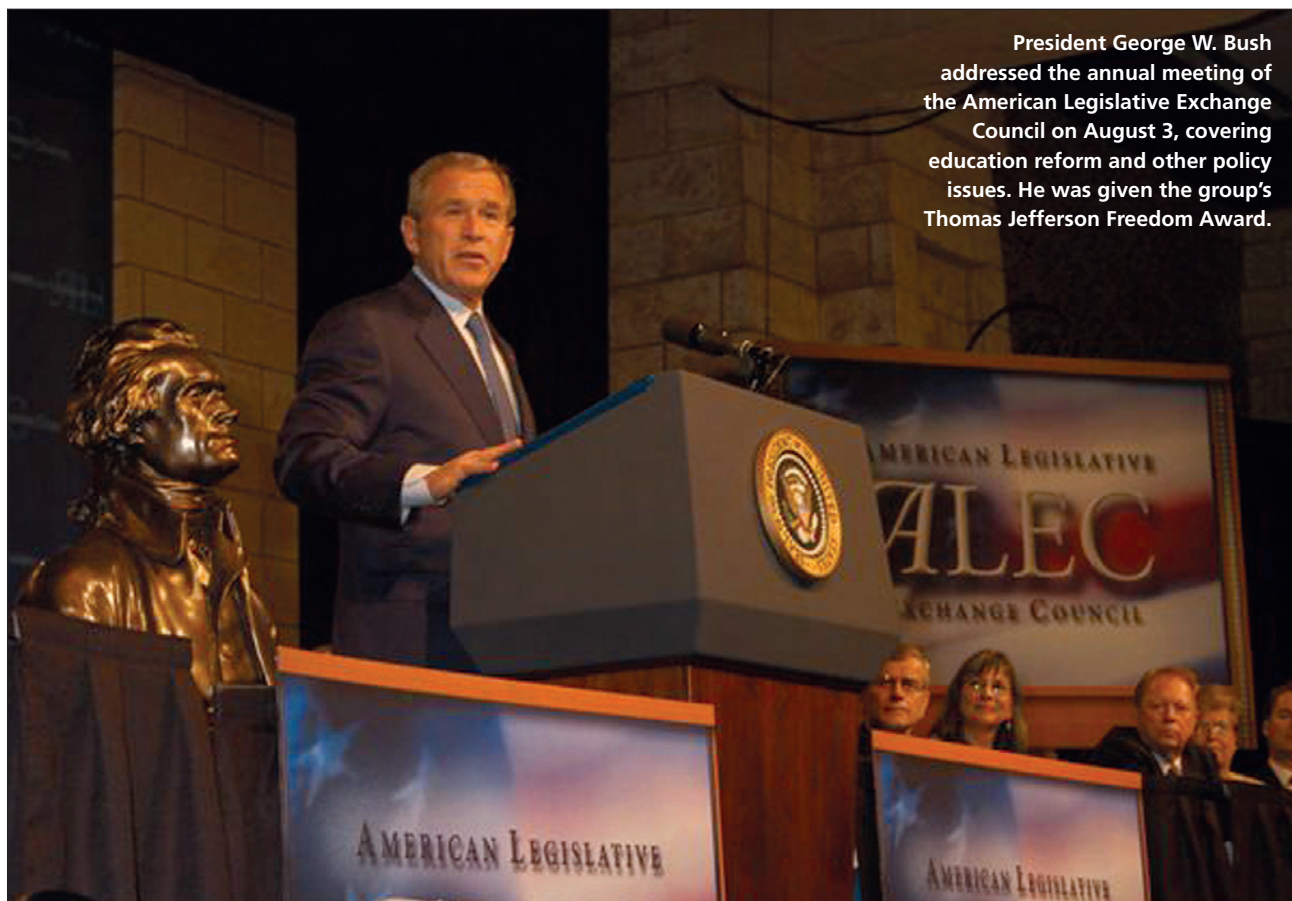
by Greg McConnell

More than 800 separate school districts and varying costs of living across the state of Illinois are two of the factors contributing to a per-pupil spending gap of more than \$19,000 between the costliest and least-expensive school districts in the state, according to a new report from the Illinois Policy Institute.

Mike Van Winkle, the institute's

ILLINOIS p. 6

Education Highlighted at ALEC Annual Meeting



President George W. Bush addressed the annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council on August 3, covering education reform and other policy issues. He was given the group's Thomas Jefferson Freedom Award.

by Lori Drummer

Education policy topped the agenda at the 32nd annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in Grapevine, Texas in early August. More than 2,000 state legislators, business leaders, and public policy experts gathered at the Gaylord Texan hotel to participate in the conference.

In addition to a meeting of the Education Task Force, meal sessions and workshops throughout the three-day conference highlighted education reform.

President Calls for Results

On August 3, President George W. Bush accepted ALEC's Thomas Jefferson Freedom Award, given annually to an individual who has

established an exemplary record of accomplishment in advancing free markets, limited government, federalism, and individual liberty.

In his acceptance speech, Bush touched on issues ranging from national security to domestic policy, stating, "the role of government is not to create wealth; the role of government is to create an environment in which the entrepreneurial spirit

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CAPITOL HILL BEAT

Parental Rights, Student Privacy Take Center Stage on Capitol Hill

by Robert Holland

Capitol 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 Individuals with 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 Effrem, 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.



Union Misused \$5 Million

Despite the summer heat in Washington, DC, newspaper dispatches on the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) embezzlement trial must have sent cold chills down the spines of teachers and retired teachers who paid dues to the American Federation of Teachers' affiliate in recent years.

According to federal prosecutors, former key WTU officials devised an elaborate scheme to hide their misuse of some \$5 million—dues money they spent on pricey furs, major dental work, tickets to Washington Wizards basketball games, art, and other amenities.

A star government witness was former union president Barbara A. Bullock, currently serving a nine-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to helping lead the covert raid on the union treasury. Bullock admitted racking up nearly \$1 million in charges on the union's American Express card for personal luxury items.

According to the August 19 edition of the *Washington Post*, when Bullock was asked if it was fair to say she liked to shop, the former union chief replied, "No, that's not fair. I lovvve to shop!"

Robert Holland (rholl176@aol.com) is a policy analyst for the Lexington Institute, a public policy think tank in Arlington, Virginia.

Texas Governor Requires School Districts in the State to Spend 65% of Their Funds in the Classroom

by Connie Sadowski

After 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 legislative consensus on 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 Peggy Venable, director of the Texas chapter of the watchdog group Americans for Prosperity. "As reported by the school districts themselves, 217 school districts currently spend 65 percent or more on classroom instruction, but we want to see the other 800-plus independent school districts focus more dollars on instruction," she said.

According to the order, "Texas public schools will be required to spend an increasingly greater share of funds on direct classroom instruction as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) until the goal of 65

percent is reached." The NCES has defined direct classroom instruction as "instructional expenditures for activities directly associated with the interaction between teachers and students" including teacher salaries and benefits, textbooks, and supplies, according to its Web site.

Perry has directed Texas Education Agency Commissioner Shirley Neeley to design and implement a new financial accountability and reporting system for Texas schools. Neeley has assembled a task force of 13 school superintendents and two regional office staff members, and has invited representatives from organizations she had not named at press time as ad hoc members. The task force's purpose is to define which instructional costs are to be used when determining whether Texas school districts are spending 65 percent of their operating costs on instruction.

"My executive order will give taxpayers the accountability they deserve because it opens every school district's financial books to public scrutiny," Perry said. "Taxpayers may find they have the best-run schools in the state of Texas, or they may find areas where their schools should be getting more for their money. With greater transparency in our schools, parents will be empowered to demand change if needed at the local level."



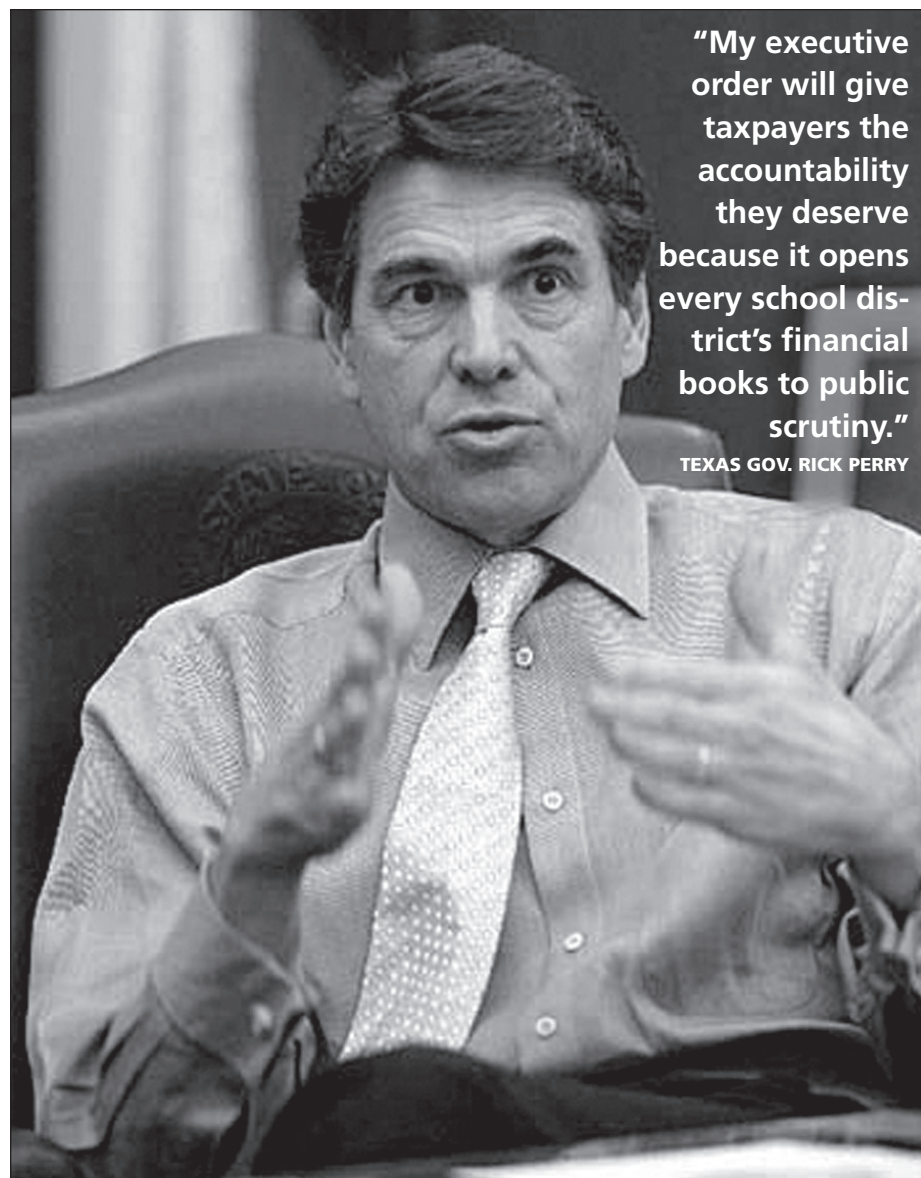
"Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R) issued an executive order in August requiring every school district in the state to spend at least 65 percent of its funds directly on classroom instruction."

Increased Transparency

Not all educators across the state are so sure the order is going to work. Lonnie Hollingsworth Jr., director of legal services and governmental relations for the Texas Classroom Teachers Association (TCTA), said he has misgivings about the 65 percent rule.

"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," he explained.

Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), agreed that district administrators can be creative when coding expenditures, noting, "some items listed as classroom expenditures may not really be spent on actual classroom instruction."



"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

"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 dol-

lars 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."

Connie Sadowski (connie@ceoatx.org) is director of the Education Options Resource Center at the Austin CEO Foundation.

INTERNET INFO

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

For a report on Louisiana's adoption of the 65 percent requirement, see "La. Lawmakers OK 65 Percent Education Funding Measure," *School Reform News*, July 2005, <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=17374>.

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/>.

Jersey

Continued from page 1

Assembly the corporation could complete only half the 135 projects it had undertaken with the \$6 billion it had been allocated, 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 overseen such waste as:

- 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 contamination;
- paying for non-essential items such as parking facilities and synthetic turf for athletic fields; and
- paying "Project Management Firms" (PMFs)—essentially, private contractors—more than \$217.8 million above originally contracted amounts.

Cooper also identified questionable practices in the operation of the corporation 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 significant, 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*.

David Sciarra, executive director of the Newark-based Education Law Center, which was involved in much of the Abbott litigation, agreed. "Everybody knew in 2000 that that [\$6 billion] was a down payment," Sciarra said.

Legislators Not Convinced

Some legislators, however, blamed the corporation for much of the funding shortfall. According to a June 14 report from The Associated Press, Assemblyman William Payne (D-Essex) said, in response to Spencer's testimony, "it's just mind-boggling that we could have possibly adopted this initiative with the kind of lapses in controls that we are finding."

In response to Cooper's report, the SCC adopted a self-imposed reform plan. Among its goals were to alter its audit schedule and reduce the PMFs' responsibilities. On August 15, the SCC announced it was close to meeting those goals but had missed its self-imposed deadline for doing so. Three days later, Spencer resigned.

Devolution Suggested

In light of the revelations of mismanagement and Spencer's departure, the SCC's future is uncertain at best. Sciarra

noted that while there clearly were some problems to be fixed, "this is an agency that has accomplished a lot." One useful reform, he said, might be to "decentralize the program a little," giving the Abbott districts more control over their projects.

Gregg Edwards, president of the Center for Policy Research of New Jersey and former executive director of the New Jersey Senate, agreed that devolving responsibility, as well as some of the construction costs, to local districts would be a move in the right direction.

"There ought to be some local contributions," he said.



Former New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey created the Schools Construction Corporation in 1998. The agency is under fire for waste and mismanagement of funds.

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

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, hyperactivity, 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 Ammunition*, <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/mld/kentucky/11818949.htm>.

Escape to Learning



The Public Schools Are Deservedly Collapsing

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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 reform while asking for more money that will do nothing to improve student learning. He describes how educators, teacher unions, and politicians have joined in unwritten and silent agreement to turn the public schools into their own private turf. 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

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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 (\$23,799 per pupil) spent the most, while 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 would certainly reflect 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 must provide education to everybody, including disabled students, which may require additional teaching staff or sending a student to an outside institution and paying the tuition.

If you allow school choice to occur as it's now structured, Kazmar said, you're going to have what's now called “adverse selection”: All the children with the learning and disciplinary problems will be left in public schools, while the rest go to private or parochial schools through school vouchers.

School Choice Provides Option

Van Winkle, however, thinks the “adverse selection” problem has been exaggerated. He supports school vouchers as a very good solution, although he believes they might not work in every area of the state.

“The ‘adverse selection’ argument is painfully weak,” Van Winkle said. “In reality, with vouchers in hand, kids with learning and disciplinary issues could be some of the first to abandon the public school system precisely because they have more to gain from transferring to private schools that specialize in coping with their particular challenges.”

Van Winkle also notes high spending gaps illustrate how more money doesn't always translate into a better education. For example, data from 2003 showed Rondout spent \$7,357 more per pupil than the Kenilworth School District, yet Kenilworth's third- and fifth-graders had higher reading proficiencies.

“Don't necessarily listen to the advocates who just point out a spending gap and say that means we need to increase spending,” Van Winkle said. “It's much more complicated than that. Look at *where* schools are spending their money, instead of how much they are spending.”

Greg McConnell (gjmc90@yahoo.com) is a freelance writer based in Palatine, Illinois.

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Mike Van Winkle's report, *Rethinking Spending Gaps*, published by the Illinois Policy Institute in August 2005, is available online at www.illinoispolicyinstitute.org/education/archives/2005/08/rethinking_spending.php.

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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 school districts.

"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 Breske (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 Breske'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."

Florence County Taxpayer Alliance cites an early retirement package providing full, free health care to employees 20 years after they left the district, up to age 75. Last year alone, the retirees' health care cost more than \$400,000.

According to the state Department of Public Instruction, average teacher salaries in Florence are nearly \$40,000, while the county's average individual income is \$34,000. Teacher fringe benefits average an additional \$21,730 a year per teacher.

"[T]hey're spending beyond the means of those who pay the bills," said state Rep. Frank Lasee (R-Bellevue).

Senators Oppose Voucher Program

Both Breske 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



Wisconsin State Sens. Roger Breske and Russ Decker, longtime opponents of school choice, want to divert voucher funds to a school district in northern Wisconsin.

Legislative Fiscal Bureau reports. Breske echoed Decker's misinformation in his 2004 election campaign.

Breske'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.

Milwaukee

Continued from page 1

legislation now referred to as Act 155. Its main provisions arose from a cooperative planning effort by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and School Choice Wisconsin, a nonprofit Milwaukee group that supports school choice.

Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* last year, when the law was first used to prevent schools from participating in the city-wide voucher program, that schools with academic problems often have financial problems as well. "These new accountability requirements had a major impact in that they kept schools out that didn't do adequate planning," he said.

Growth Requires Accountability

The MPCP is the nation's oldest program providing public support for parents who choose private schools for their K-12 students. Enrollment in the program has grown from 337 students at seven schools in 1990-91 to 14,427 students at 117 schools in 2004-05. To be eligible for the program, students' family income must be at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty level



(\$34,274 for a family of four in 2005-06).

The program's rapid growth has been accompanied by problems at some participating schools. Legislators called for reforms to strengthen the program following news media reports during the 2003-04 school year that highlighted financial malfeasance at several schools. The most widely reported incident was that of David Seppeh, administrator of the Mandella Academy for Science and Math, using state voucher payments to buy two luxury cars.

Act 155 requires schools seeking to enter the MPCP to demonstrate fiscal

viability and, once admitted, to follow sound fiscal practices. The law allows the Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction to remove from the program any school failing to comply with the new fiscal oversight guidelines, and to close immediately any school that presents an "imminent threat to the health and safety of students."

Following enactment of Act 155, state officials, under Evers' direction, worked with a group of Milwaukee private school principals and accountants to develop permanent administrative rules defining fiscal viability and sound fiscal practices. The result is a compre-

hensive set of rules that took effect in September 2005.

Problem Schools Called Atypical

Susan Mitchell, president of School Choice Wisconsin, said a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* series published earlier this year "demonstrates that problem schools in the MPCP are atypical." The paper's reporters visited 106 schools participating in the program. At schools representing less than 5 percent of total program enrollment, the newspaper found, "professionalism appeared lacking, facilities were not good, and the overall operation appeared alarming when it came to the basic matter of educating children."

Overall, however, the paper identified more positive qualities about schools and students enrolled in the MPCP than negative ones.

In addition to provisions of Act 155, schools participating in the MPCP must meet all health and safety laws or codes that apply to public schools, comply with the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, follow uniform financial accounting standards, and file an annual independent financial audit by a certified public accountant.

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

ALEC

Continued from page 1

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 for good reasons. We now have proof that those concepts are really helping students achieve their dreams.”

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.



ALEC/Reflections Photography

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, Mosaica Education, and Edison Schools shared their experiences.

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.

INTERNET INFO

Model school choice legislation prepared by the American Legislative Exchange Council, as well as bills proposed in states across the country, 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/Model Legislation.



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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 dissents from board members and community residents 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, however, have gained traction—including heightened accountability, parental choice, and achievement standards—thanks to the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Roosevelt's hiring highlights an aspect of reform that has been slow to crystallize: educational leadership. In an era characterized by greater accountability and growing pressure to increase student

achievement, are principals prepared to lead?

One thing is certain: Today's principals have complex jobs. According to a 2003 report released by the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, they juggle instructional, cultural, managerial, financial, and political roles.

A study completed in 2003 by Marguerite Roza, a research assistant professor of public affairs at the University of Washington, suggests that enough certified administrators exist, but their distribution, particularly in underperforming districts, is uneven. They tend to avoid districts offering "low salaries and [with] high-minority and high-poverty student populations."

Traditional Programs Lack Practicality

"We primarily have a quality problem," Petrilli agreed. "There are plenty of people receiving the credentials to be a principal; there aren't nearly enough people with the skills to be an effective principal."

According to studies by two national education experts, one major problem could be the administrator programs offered by many of the nation's education graduate schools.

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, such as creating a graduate program similar to the Master of Business Administration while doing away with the Ed.D. degree, Dr. Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, suggests going one step further by revising their content. Hess and his colleague, Andrew Kelly, have written extensively on principal preparation.

Principals' Education Needs Overhaul

"[We] examined the content of principal preparation, particularly the skills, knowledge, and perspectives addressed in the syllabi and readings," Hess said.

"We found the substantive content of these courses poses particular concerns."

Hess and Kelly's review of course syllabi and readings revealed alarming deficiencies in certain areas. Hess noted, "Just 2 percent of the 2,424 course weeks analyzed addressed accountability in the context of school management or improvement, just 11 percent made any mention of or reference to data or empirical evidence."

"We concluded that programs are still training principals for a world of conventional school stewardship," Hess said, "leaving them unprepared for the rigors of modern accountability, personnel management, or team leadership."

Like Levine, Hess is concerned that the leadership skills administrators need are not being developed in graduate schools, noting that the curricula often do not address these duties.

Programs Must Develop Leaders

"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," Hess said.

Hess said decentralization, charter schooling, and flexible rules for teacher hiring and compensation mean principals' roles matters more today than in the past.

While many parents and policymakers are alarmed by that idea, others are encouraged by the bevy of fresh, alternative administration programs providing future principals with innovative, effective training and also bringing much-needed competition to the educational leadership market.

Like the alternative teacher-certification programs that strive to attract successful professionals from a variety of fields, alternative principal programs are selective, rigorous, and designed to prepare principals for the day-to-day challenges of leading effective schools. Several have been cited by the U.S. Department of Education. (See sidebar on page 11.)

Alternative Programs Show Promise

While typical criticisms leveled at traditional education administration programs might mention low admission standards, weak curricula, lack of mentorship, and a tendency of such programs to be expensive for participants, many alternative administration programs are highly selective and feature practical curricula and residencies as well as modest stipends for participants.

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), a national leadership program founded in 2000, is perhaps the best known of these programs, with branches in Baltimore, Chicago, Memphis, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.

In 2001, NLNS recruited and trained 13 principals in Chicago and New York; in 2005, it received 1,100 applications for 90 slots.

"When New Leaders' co-founders thought about the needs of urban schools, they took particular notice of the principal



"We primarily have a quality problem. There are plenty of people receiving the credentials to be a principal; there aren't nearly enough people with the skills to be an effective principal."

MIKE PETRILLI
THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION

quality and quantity issue, and decided to create a program that would attract talented leaders and prepare them well to dramatically increase student achievement," explained Jacquelyn Davis, executive director of NLNS's Washington, DC branch.

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



"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

ALTERNATIVE continued

"I think these programs should be judged on their merits," Hess said. "It's important not to fetishize any particular approach—imagining that any program which adopts a 'business school' model, for instance, is necessarily effective.

"That said," Hess continued, "I have been quite impressed with the caliber of candidates recruited by New Leaders for New Schools, the criteria utilized by the program, and the content and organization of its instruction."

Over the past few years, Hess said, several alternative programs dealing with "reasonable but minor steps to bolster internships, foster cohorts [or] add instructional time" have received accolades for their innovative models—praise he said is misplaced.

"Proponents of these programs have argued that their reforms have successfully addressed the key concerns regarding preparation. However, I have questioned the strong claims made on behalf of these heralded programs," Hess said. "Kelly and I examined several highly touted reform efforts and found little evidence that these programs were retooling the skills being taught, broadening the body of knowledge being taught, or making efforts to seek out especially promising candidates. In short, current reforms have amounted to less than we might hope."

Leadership Drives Achievement

Davis said leadership—traditional or otherwise—plays a huge part in education reform.

"We believe the principalship is a lever—the right people, trained well, with strong networks of support, can change schools and the lives of children," she said. "Talented principals foster a higher level of achievement by selecting and cultivating good teachers, involving parents, aligning the standards and curriculum, and ultimately having a much greater impact on the lives of underserved students."

Kate McGreevy (mcgreevy@gmail.com) is a freelance education writer living in New Mexico. She formerly worked with the Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy in Washington, DC.

INTERNET INFO

For more information, see "Learning to Lead? What Gets Taught in Principal Preparation Programs," by Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly, http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.22534/pub_detail.asp.

"Filling the Leadership Vacuum," by Dr. Andrew Levine, <http://www.tc.edu/news/article.htm?id=4985>.

Innovations in Education: Innovative Pathways to School Leadership, from the U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/admins/recruit/prep/alternative/index.html>.

New Leaders for New Schools, <http://www.nlins.org>.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, <http://www.edexcellence.net>.

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 Doris Fisher 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 underserved students, who have the capabilities and desire to have an impact beyond the classroom walls to successfully lead entire schools," Moeller said.

Mother of Invention

Darryl Cobb, KIPP's chief learning officer, said the in-house Leadership Program was created to address deficits in offerings for education of school administrators.

"Our Leadership Program grew out of necessity—the genesis 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 nonpartisan, 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.

Kate McGreevy (mcgreevy@gmail.com) is a freelance education writer living in New Mexico. She formerly worked with the Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy in Washington, DC.

INTERNET INFO

For more information on the Knowledge Is Power Program, visit its Web site at <http://www.kipp.org>.

Alternative Programs Commended

The U.S. Department of Education in August commended six alternative administration programs for their effectiveness, in the report *Innovations in Education: Innovative Pathways to School Leadership*.

The honorees were New Leaders for New Schools, Boston Principal Fellowship, First Ring Leadership Academy (Cleveland), Leadership Academy and Urban Network for Chicago (LAUNCH), New Jersey Expedited Certification for Educational Leadership (NJ EXCEL), and Principals Excellence Program (Pike County, Kentucky).

Though the Department of Education noted the programs are new and fairly experimental, "all are based on the premise that by inventing new pathways to school leadership, attracting experienced and successful leaders, focusing on the essential elements of school improvement, and clearing unnecessary hurdles along the path, they can attract high-quality

professionals to lead schools where they are most needed," the report's authors wrote.



"Suspicious" Accounting Error Leads Illinois School District to Seek Tax Cut

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



"Practically overnight, the district went from "flat broke" to a \$3.4 million surplus, possibly climbing to \$9 million next year ..."

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.

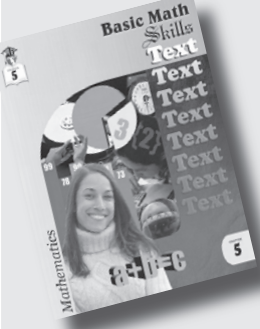
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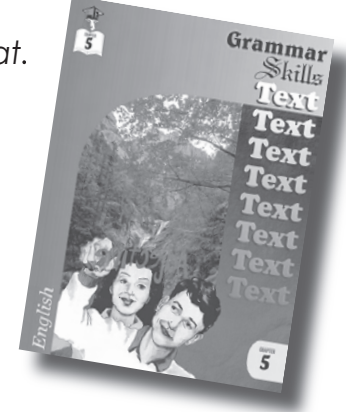


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Student Achievement Emerges as Civil Rights Issue in Maryland

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 schools 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

proficiency on math and reading tests in two years. Goals include a 90 percent graduation rate; increased participation of minority students in Advanced Placement courses, the SAT, and academic competitions; and an achievement gap “among racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups” of “no more than 10 percent,” according to the August 24 edition of the *Annapolis Capital*.

Signatures on the settlement by involved parties and civil rights leaders were expected in the first week in September, as *School Reform News* was going to press. Anne Arundel County school board members could not be reached for comment.



“This is a problem which has been systemic to the education system for years, 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

(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, failing 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 lawsuit'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.”

Previous lawsuits had been brought against the county by individuals, but this time, Snowden said, “there was a community feeling that the best way to deal with this issue was from the standpoint of a class-action complaint.”

In the settlement, school officials agreed to help 85 percent of African-American students in the county reach

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, et cetera.”

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

INTERNET INFO

For more information on the achievement gap, see “No Excuses: Closing America's Racial Gap in Learning,” written by Abigail Thernstrom, published in the April 2004 issue of *American Experiment Quarterly* and available online at <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artid=15377>.

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, Nevada, and Utah that has analyzed RTI. A student in first grade may not yet have fallen far enough behind his peers to qualify for special education intervention, but teachers may have already noticed a potential learning problem.

Hock, who directs WestEd's Northeast Regional Resource Center's Learning Disabilities Initiative, says RTI offers a more promising alternative because schools don't wait for formal identification of a learning disability before providing targeted interventions.

“RTI 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,” 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.”

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INTERNET INFO

For more information on the National Research Council on Learning Disabilities and its research on RTI, visit <http://www.nrcl.org/research/rti.shtml>.

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 school 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."

Union Wanted Access to Funds

Attorneys at the Maryland Disability Law Center (MDLC), who have fought the Baltimore school system for better special education services since 1984, call the case "an ongoing systemic reform lawsuit."

Specific claims in the case considered this year included understaffing, lack of materials and resources, and a lapse in services. The July decision met opposition from the Baltimore Teachers Union and the city school system, among others. The school district and MDLC had presented alternatives to the federal judge.

"Rather than a state takeover, we'd have preferred better access to existing funds," said Marietta A. English, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union. "Through our in-house committee, we are now in the process of trying to recommend improvements to the whole special education program. The jury is out on whether state officials will choose to work with us. We know our role—to continue working to get resources to the teachers and children."

State Moved Quickly

For others, the decision did not come soon enough. Brian Cox, executive director of



the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, a public policy and advocacy organization, said, "It is inexcusable that this problem has continued for so long and special education students have not received the services they are rightfully due."

Dr. Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state schools superintendent, vowed to help the 10,000 Baltimore students needing special education services. In a news conference August 22, she noted her appointed leader of the effort, Dr. Henry Fogle—a nationally recognized expert in special education instruction and management issues and

assistant superintendent in Carroll County, Maryland—would be

"moving to the city" himself to facilitate his work to meet those students' needs.

The state, using \$1.4 million of federal money that went unused for two years, was to appoint eight managers from school systems statewide to manage and evaluate the city's special education program. Five managers were in place on August 29, the first day of school.

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

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 curriculum is college-preparation material," said Dr. Howard Liebman, principal of the University of Miami Online High School. "You also 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.

"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.

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INTERNET INFO

For more information on virtual classrooms and distance learning, see "Internet Reshapes Outlook for Rural Schools," *School Reform News*, November 2003, <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artid=13549>, and "The Public Schools Come Home: Online Education Is Changing The Roles of Schools, Teachers and Parents," by Marc Eisen, published in the October 2002 issue of *Wisconsin Interest*, available online at <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artid=11558>.

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.

Year	Students Exercising Interdistrict Choice	% Increase	Total Public School Enrollment	% Exercising Choice as Share of Total Enrollment
1995-96	6,039		900,215	0.67%
1996-97	6,506	7.75%	918,203	0.71%
1997-98	6,867	5.55%	930,780	0.74%
1998-99	7,204	4.91%	943,433	0.76%
1999-00	7,343	1.92%	951,886	0.77%
2000-01	7,292	-0.69%	958,977	0.76%
2001-02	7,560	3.68%	952,822	0.79%
2002-03	8,085	6.94%	960,186	0.84%
2003-04	8,869	9.70%	957,926	0.93%
2004-2005	9,285	4.68%	952,293	0.98%

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.

"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 areas 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 other than the one designated for them by the government. 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 other 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

"It's like saying you can choose different post offices. It's a part—but only a part—of creating a competitive education industry."

DAVID SALISBURY
CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM
CATO INSTITUTE

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."

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

INTERNET INFO

David Armor's 1997 case study of the Massachusetts interdistrict choice program, "Competition in Education: A Case Study of Interdistrict Choice," published by the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, is available online at <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artid=9060>.

Updates published by the Pioneer Institute in 1990 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).

Florida's Voluntary Pre-K Program Gives Parents New Options

by Jenny Rothenberg

One of the nation's largest early-learning school choice initiatives kicked off August 15 when more than 90,000 four-year-olds headed to class in Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program.

Lynn Cobb, education council director for the Florida House of Representatives, said she expected that number to swell to 100,000 students by September, as *School Reform News* was going to press. "The response has been positive, even from skeptics," she said. "Basically, everyone that was looking for blood in the water didn't find any. There are a few details to work out, but so far, the reaction has been very good."

The program—created after a 2002 constitutional amendment began requiring a "high quality," free, universal pre-K program—is one of only eight universal pre-K choice programs in the country. Georgia started the trend in 1995, followed by Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia, Kentucky, New York, and California. According to the Education Commission of the States, a nonpartisan education policy group, more than 40 states nationwide fund preschool programs, usually for at-risk children.

Florida's program allows parents of any resident four-year-old to choose among public, private, and faith-based providers for a 540-hour school-year program or an intensive 300-hour summer program. Other states don't always cover higher-income families. The Florida legislature drafted the law to include nonpublic providers after public school districts reported they lacked the space and facilities to accommodate the expected number of students.

Early-Learning Coalitions Cooperate

Private providers are compensated

about \$2,500 per student per year, based on payment structures established by the Florida Department of Education. The funds flow through 32 local Early Learning Coalitions, which then electronically transfer payments to providers, capturing about 5 percent or \$125

"One of the nation's largest early-learning school choice initiatives kicked off August 15 when more than 90,000 four-year-olds headed to class in Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program."

per student for administrative costs that include recruiting providers, certifying and registering students, and monitoring compliance with the law, said Paula Bender, chief executive officer of the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

With the help of local public schools, Bender's coalition has recruited and trained 800 providers and held face-to-face interviews with more than 19,000 four-year-olds since June 4 in South Florida alone.

The \$2,500 pays for about three hours of daily instruction, after which many parents choose wrap-around daycare services. In order to ensure that low-income families can participate, providers are prohibited from requiring them to purchase those extra services.

"Right now we are just working to get children enrolled," Bender said, "but as soon as we're done, we'll focus on site visits, ensuring the school is using the curriculum it said it uses, that they are

focusing on literacy, and that their student-teacher ratio is what it should be."

Program Designed from Scratch

Florida lawmakers studied Georgia's 10-year-old universal pre-K program while creating their own, but they didn't copy it, Cobb said.

"We really had to create our own program, because we could not phase in the standards required by the constitutional mandate and because we are limited by class size restrictions," she explained.

Among those standards are a 1:10 teacher-student ratio and instructor credentialing that includes extra literacy training. Though the program doesn't give participants a specific curriculum to follow, it does require a focus on literacy and phonetics preparation.

Saves Money, Changes Lives

"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 activ-

ity, "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."

Jenny Rothenberg (jrothenberg@stepupforstudents.com) is a public relations associate at Step Up for Students, a Tampa-based initiative of the Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program.



Push for Universal Preschool Grows

by Lisa Snell

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 additional 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-driven preschool system with a taxpayer-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.

Government-Run Programs Fail

But in a June 15 PRI newsletter column, Izumi offered a detailed critique

of RAND's research, pointing out the small sample sizes and questionable research techniques used to extrapolate the benefits of universal preschool for all children.

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-

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PRESCHOOL continued

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 with-



"[I]n 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."

LANCE IZUMI
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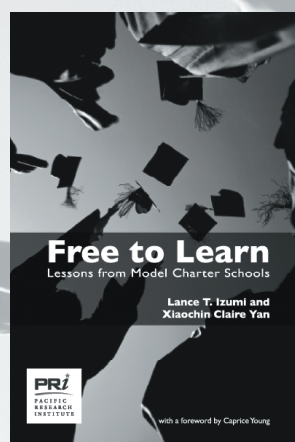
out expanding the state education monopoly, such as tax credits for early education.

A tax credit approach, the organization

says, could help create more quality preschools for low-income children, with the most efficiency for taxpayers and the greatest satisfaction for parents. In Pennsylvania, for example, the state expanded the existing K-12 corporate tax credit program in 2003, giving corporations a 100 percent credit for the first \$10,000 and up to a 90 percent credit for remaining contributions up to \$100,000. To date, \$5 million a year is used to target Pennsylvania's low-income children with preschool scholarships.

Lisa Snell (lsnell@reason.org) is education director at the Reason Foundation in Los Angeles.

Why do some charter schools succeed while others fail?



Some of California's charter schools, often serving low-income regions, are shattering the status quo and producing remarkable gains in student achievement. Discover the reasons for their success in the new book ***Free to Learn: Lessons from Model Charter Schools***, published by the Pacific Research Institute — a leading California think tank at the forefront of education policy.

"Free to Learn chronicles the record of charter schools in high poverty areas achieving remarkable results where students in traditional schools were failing. The innovative methods used in these successful charter schools and outlined in this book should be a roadmap for educators, policymakers, and parents seeking the best educational opportunities for students."

Charles Poochigian
California state senator

Order *Free to Learn* (\$14.95 + shipping and handling) at
www.pacificresearch.org or call 800.276.7600/email smartin@pacificresearch.org

INTERNET INFO

The Center for American Progress's universal preschool program, *Getting Smarter, Becoming Fairer: A Progressive Education Agenda for a Stronger Nation*, is available online at <http://www.americanprogress.org/site/pp.asp?c=biJRJ8OVF&b=994995>.

The text of California's "Preschool for All" initiative is available online at <http://www.earlyeducation.org/pfa1.pdf>.

The American Legislative Exchange Council's model legislation addressing education is available online at <http://www.heartland.org/IssueSuiteTopic.cfm?issId=3&istId=214>

More research and commentary on preschool programs 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 choose the topic/subtopic combination Education/Preschool.

"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 the others.

White wrote, a "few-points distinction between students on several comparisons of test scores ... may seem immaterial, but they are not," pointing out that gains of .8 percent to 2.9 percent may represent a full year's progress for students.

Improvement Increases over Time

The study found the improved test scores were made mostly by students with several years of exposure to DI. Students who had been taught using DI in some grades but not others did not show the same gains. It also found students who received DI were generally poorer and more likely to be nonwhite.

For example, fourth graders with five years of DI, who are more likely to be poor than those with no DI, averaged scores of 632 for reading and 619 for math on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts

(WKCE) tests, only one point behind students with no DI in each subject.

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, bet-

ter 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."

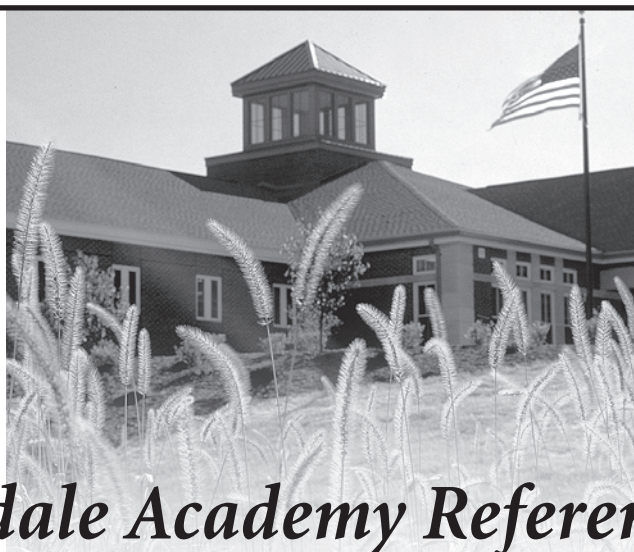
Madison Sees Impressive Results

WPRI also released an account of DI used by one school in Madison that further bol-

sters 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

CONTINUED at right



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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.

Sean Parnell (parnell@heartland.org) is vice president - external affairs for The Heartland Institute.

INTERNET INFO

The two Wisconsin Policy Research Institute reports are available online at <http://www.wpri.org/Reports/Volume18/Vol18no4.pdf> and <http://www.wpri.org/WIInterest/Vol14no2/Esp14.2.pdf>.

See also: "High-Poverty Students Excel with Direct Instruction," *School Reform News*, December 2002, <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=10753>, and "Direct Instruction: A Quiet Revolution in Milwaukee Public Schools," *Wisconsin Interest*, <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=9145>.

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Edited by Joseph L. Bast and Dennis Byrne
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“THE OTHER GOOD REASON FOR SCHOOL CHOICE”



A MESSAGE FROM THE YANKEE INSTITUTE

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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