By Jenny Rothenberg

peaking to a crowd of 4,000 parents, students, and educators gathered at the Florida state capitol in Tallahassee on February 15, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) announced plans to save the state’s Opportunity Scholarship Program, struck down by the Florida Supreme Court on January 5, and protect the state’s other two voucher programs from a similar fate. It was the largest school choice rally in U.S. history.

Bush is asking the legislature for a temporary fix for the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which gives any student assigned to a public school that has failed two years out of the past four the option of transferring to another public school or using a scholarship to attend a private school.

Ninety-eight percent of Florida’s Opportunity Scholarship students are minorities, and 100 percent are low-income, making them eligible also for one of the state’s other vouchers—the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which is open to any student who qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch. Bush asked the legislature to allow Opportunity Scholarship students to attend a private school.

By Kate McGreevy

Three states currently have tax credit programs that give children a broader range of school choice. If a federal bill currently pending in Congress passes, the entire nation could follow their lead.

The SCHOOL Act of 2005 (H.R. 2426), introduced last spring by Rep. Mark Green (R-WI) in an effort to legislate federal tax credits for donors to scholarship organizations, is progressing through Capitol Hill. At press time, the measure had eight cosponsors and was pending in the House Subcommittee on Education Reform.

The bill is modeled on tax credit programs that give children a broader range of school choice. If a federal bill currently pending in Congress passes, the entire nation could follow their lead.

By Neal McCluskey

Californians won’t vote until June on television-actor-turned-movie-director Rob Reiner’s initiative to create statewide, government-funded, universal preschool. But his “Preschool for All” ballot proposal, Prop. 82, has been causing a statewide stir for months.

Reiner, who starred as Mike “Meathead” Stivic in the 1970s TV comedy All in the Family and directed such films as This Is Spinal Tap and Sleepless in Seattle, is an old hand at California education policy.

By Jenny Rothenberg

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2006 Editorial Calendar

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Hill Leadership Changes May Strengthen Education Reform Efforts

By Robert Holland

When the chairmanship of a major congressional committee changes hands, policy wonks’ antennae are activated immediately. As any civics student knows (or should know), many of the most significant decisions of any legislative body come in committee. And a forceful chairman can have a big effect on the outcomes.

Thus it was that the House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and the Workforce was the center of attention this spring, following transfer of the chairmanship from John Boehner (R-OH) to Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA).

Boehner, who played a key role in shaping and enacting the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law after becoming Education Committee chair in January 2001, won an upset victory February 2 in the three-way race to become House Majority Leader, replacing Tom DeLay (R-TX). House Republicans then tapped McKeon to take over for Boehner as chairman of the Education Committee.

Choice Advocate?

McKeon has been a member of the Education Committee since 1993 and has chaired its Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness since 1995, but he has not been known for the strong advocacy of vouchers and other forms of school choice that Boehner brought to the table. McKeon’s signature issues have been workforce preparation and containment of sharp tuition increases in higher education.

Upon assuming the Education Committee reins, McKeon asserted his determination to address what he called the “new realities” of the global economy.

“The new realities that I discussed in my chairmanship bid are an economy that is worldwide, high-tech, and highly competitive,” McKeon said in a February 18 statement. “The edge that America brings to the table is innovation and adaptability. If we lose that, then we will lose not only our standard of living, but our position of global leadership.”

Bush Supporter

That declaration strongly suggests McKeon will be a staunch supporter of President George W. Bush’s Competitiveness Initiative, part of which entails boosting up math and science instruction in order to prepare American youth to be successful workers in a global economy. However, some Capitol Hill observers believe McKeon could also take up the cause of school choice.

“Chairman McKeon has been a loyal supporter of school choice,” said Dan Lips, education policy analyst for The Heritage Foundation. “But he’s never had the opportunity to be a leader on the issue. In his new role, he now has the opportunity. Case in point is the president’s new $100 million Opportunity Scholarship proposal. Chairman McKeon can prove his true support for school choice by taking an active role in backing the new initiative.”

National Policy

Another consideration is that education is not likely to slip off Boehner’s radar now that he has become majority leader.

Larry J. Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, said that boded well for the creation of a national education policy.

“For the first time in a long time, the country has a House Majority Leader who is an education policy wonk,” Sabato said. “The evidence is substantial that Boehner really cares about the field of education, and he can be reasonably expected to focus some attention on the subject.

“In his new role, Boehner has the power to make things happen, far more even than as a committee chairman. At the same time, he has to be responsive to the continuing grumbling from the GOP House caucus about various provisions of No Child Left Behind. ‘I’d be surprised if he didn’t use his expertise and reflect his caucus in attempting further alterations of the law, plus some new initiatives to encourage school choice.’

John Boehner

U.S. Representative - Ohio

Howard P. “Buck” McKeon

U.S. Representative - California

“Chairman McKeon has been a loyal supporter of school choice. But he’s never had the opportunity to be a leader on the issue. In his new role, he now has the opportunity.”

Dan Lips

The Heritage Foundation

Strong Support

Such initiatives “might or might not ever get by the Senate,” Sabato noted. However, he pointed out, “The Republican House has got a tough election in November.

“At the very least, Boehner has to help generate a strong turnout if the GOP base is to fend off a real takeover bid by the Democrats. These education issues matter to the conservative base. Maybe they can assist in countering the base-depressing effects of overspending and corruption.”

Should the Republicans lose control of the House in November, the likely new chairman of the Education Committee would be George Miller (D-CA), currently the ranking minority-party member. Miller supported NCLB but contends the Republican administration has failed to fund it fully.

Robert Holland ([rhol1176@aol.com]) is an author and journalist who writes frequently about education.
“Over the last couple of years, we have had a few efforts nationally on behalf of school choice. What I wanted was a broad step forward. From the results in Milwaukee, we know that school choice can have promising effects. This legislation is one way, one important vehicle, to advance the cause of school choice.”

MARK GREEN
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE - WISCONSIN

Green said, “It benefits the entire community: Lower-income families are provided with more schooling options, and businesses, struggling with a shortage of well-educated employees, will invest in educational improvement. Finally, private schools, many of which have seats available, will be able to open their doors to a broader range of students.”

Under Green’s measure, SGOs must be certified by the federal secretary of education, have nonprofit status, and designate at least 90 percent of their income for scholarships. Most importantly, they must distribute scholarships to low-income students at a ratio that mirrors the demographics of the county in which they distribute funds, with at least 30 percent of first-time recipients being new private school students. For example, if 50 percent of the school-age population of the county is designated as low-income, 50 percent of the scholarships awarded must be given to low-income students.

To be eligible, a student would have to reside in a household whose annual income does not exceed 2.5 times the free- and reduced-price lunch level.

Accountability Stressed
Green emphasized the level of accountability written into the law and also welcomed suggestions for improvement.

“The legislation is a broad outline, and the key is implementation,” he said. “Accountability is incredibly important to both the school choice movement and to the legislation of tax law. Our hope is that the hearing will help us tweak the legislation to ensure its success.”

Derided As ‘Radical’
The SCHOOL Act has not met favor with some by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP), a nonprofit group that monitors legislation affecting philanthropic practices and accountability.

“This bill creates a financial incentive for individuals and corporations to support controversial school voucher programs,” said NCRP Communications Director Naomi Tacuyan. “This tax credit would further a radical privatization agenda and draw money away from public programs that benefit the neediest in society.”

Tacuyan explained that NCRP’s main opposition to H.R. 2426 is the “potential loss of funding for existing public programs.”

Green said those concerns are unwarranted.

“This legislation does not take money from anywhere,” Green noted. “It simply makes it more attractive for businesses and individuals to assist low-income children.”

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, D.C.

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Make a Difference is both a compelling memoir and convincing proof that we now know important answers to help solve America’s poverty problem—without spending any more of the taxpayers’ money.

Author Gary MacDougal spent years working in Illinois inner cities and rural communities—talking with “ladies in the backyard,” befriending community leaders, and working with local organizations in his quest to find solutions that have long eluded academic researchers and politicians. As chairman of the Governor’s Task Force on Human Services Reform, MacDougal was the catalyst for the complete overhaul of the state’s welfare system, which included the largest reorganization of state government since 1900.

Eight years after MacDougal’s suggestions were implemented, Illinois now stands well ahead of California, New York, and other big-city states, with a spectacular 86 percent reduction in the welfare rolls since reform implementation in 1996, second only to Wyoming among all fifty states. The welfare rolls in Chicago’s Cook County have been reduced an amazing 85 percent, with studies showing that most who left the rolls are working, and at pay above minimum wage.

MacDougal’s extraordinary journey shows the way for the rest of the nation and proves there are ways we can all help provide a ladder of opportunity for those in poverty. We each can Make a Difference in the ongoing effort to end America’s poverty problem.
Chicago Board of Ed Approves Virtual Academy

By Michael Coulter

On January 26, the Chicago Board of Education approved the establishment of the Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS), a hybrid online school and "bricks and mortar" facility. Approval of the proposal is now pending before the Illinois State Board of Education.

The Chicago board has been approving new schools as part of its Renaissance 2010 program, which aims to create 100 new schools over the next four years "by replacing low-performing schools with schools that provide new educational options to underserved communities, and relie[e] overcrowding in communities experiencing rapid growth," according to a November 16, 2005, news release.

"We want to offer diverse and innovative opportunities for every student in the system," explained Chicago Public Schools (CPS) spokesman Malon Edwards. "We want to make sure that every child has a chance to learn, and this school could provide opportunities for those who are gifted, those who struggle academically, students who might be homebound because of a medical condition, or for other reasons."

MALON EDWARDS
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by K12, Inc., a for-profit company headquartered in Virginia that provides curriculum for virtual schools in 12 states and a dozen school districts nationwide with intra-district programs. CVCS’s charter was approved for five years. Its first board will be composed of parents of the students enrolled in the school, and board appointments are not subject to approval by the Chicago Board of Education.

K12 also provides curriculum and management services for the Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School (PAVCS), started in 2001. The 4,800 students enrolled in the PAVCS receive computers, textbooks, and other academic material from K12 and are assigned to a teacher who works with the parent or guardian overseeing the educational program. Chicago’s plans call for a similar arrangement, but with one important difference.

"This model will include a 'brick and mortar setting' where students can meet teachers and get additional services," said Jeff Kwitowski, director of public relations for K12.

During the first year, up to 600 students from kindergarten through eighth grade could enroll in CVCS. They would receive a computer, textbooks, and other materials. An adult or guardian will work with them as they go through the program.

Tracking Instruction Time

Illinois state law requires students to receive 300 minutes of instruction each day. Edwards said the CVCS proposal was tabled at the Chicago Board of Education’s November meeting because of questions regarding that requirement. But Kwitowski said the online model actually lends itself well to tracking instructional time.

"An online school tracks attendance and work that is done each day. We’ve tracked work by students in other online schools, and our teachers can see what students are doing,” Kwitowski said. “We take accountability very seriously.”

However, the minutes-per-day instruction requirement remains a concern for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

“How will we know that these kids are getting an education? Who will be the parents or guardians assisting the students, and how will we know that they’ll be able to help the students with this program?” asked CTU publicist Rosemaria Genova.

Other Union Concerns

"Who’s going to make sure that the laptops are not stolen and sold for drugs?” Genova continued. “What about families without phone lines? Will those be paid for by the school district? And how will students be able to use the office, which will be located downtown?”

The CTU also expressed concern about the school’s funding. According to the Chicago Board of Education, CVCS will receive approximately $5,075 per student from Chicago Public Schools during the 2006-07 academic year. The CTU contends the proposal has not been clear about the total amount CVCS will receive, and that CVCS could ultimately receive much more funding.

Final Approval

At press time, the Illinois State Board of Education was still considering the proposal.

Illinois State Board of Education spokeswoman Meta Minton said that, though discussions were continuing, the state had not received a formal proposal from the Chicago Board of Education by late February, and so was unable to place it on a future meeting agenda.

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

Internet Info

For more information on virtual classrooms, see


 Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, each of which will receive up to $120,000.

State Rep. Dwight Evans (D-Philadelphia), who was instrumental in getting the grant for the city, expressed optimism that it will produce positive change.

“Getting parents involved helps us set a better tone in our neighborhoods and schools,” Evans told the Philadelphia Daily News on January 19. “Parents are extremely essential to the educational reform movement underway in Philadelphia.”

Efforts Backfire

Despite Evans’ optimism, in other parts of the country efforts to increase parental involvement have sometimes created parental frustration rather than a sense of inclusion.

In New York City, for example, the chancellor’s Parent Advisory Council (PAC), composed of representatives from each of the city’s 32 local districts, voted in February to boycott the district’s annual “lobby day” in Albany, to protest being left out of major district decisions. Parents conducted their own lobby day two weeks before the one sponsored by the city’s Department of Education.

“Parents are very angry ... they are trying to make a point,” said Tim Johnson, chairman of the PAC, according to a February 10 New York Daily News article.

The problem with programs like those in New York City and Philadelphia, says Charlene Haar, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Education Policy Institute and author of The Politics of the PTA (Transaction Publishers, 2002), is that while parents might be more involved in district schools, they get no greater influence over how the schools are run. Programs in which parents are allowed only to “staff greeting desks” or undertake other tasks that “do not disturb the status quo,” said Haar, “do not qualify as meaningful parental involvement.”

Approaches Differ

Increasing parental involvement in the schools along the lines Haar thinks are meaningful, such as having parents monitor teachers or examine test scores, are not objectives of the Parent Volunteer Program in Philadelphia. Haar would prefer to see parents have more control over deciding what their children will actually learn in the classroom and how they are taught.

“The Parent Welcome Desks and Parent Patrols are a part of the scaffolding we are building to encourage parents/caregivers to become more involved in their children’s education,” said Mary Yee, director of Philadelphia’s Office of Family Engagement and Language Equity Services. When it comes to parents “controlling their children’s education,” she said, “parent-led efforts must be in the forefront.”

Increasing parental involvement in education as described by Haar wasn’t Evans’ main goal in pursuing the state grant. It is actually the first part of the representative’s “Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia,” said Evans’ Communications Director Tim Spreitzer, which is a “10-year commitment to combat youth violence.”

“Getting parents involved helps us set a better tone in our neighborhoods and schools. Parents are extremely essential to the educational reform movement underway in Philadelphia.”

Dwight Evans
State Representative
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“Two papers from the Pioneer Institute argue the time has come to push for vouchers. We’d love to see it happen. Parental choice and competitive pressure to improve schools should not be limited by the state’s caps on charter school enrollment and the massive waiting lists that have emerged.”

Boston Herald editorial
“Time State Gave Vouchers a Try”
February 5, 2006

INTERNET INFO

For more information on parent volunteer programs, see


Keisha Jordan, president and CEO of the Philadelphia BAEO, echoed that sentiment, saying the program could be “very empowering” for parents and in the long run could “help to improve relationships between parents, teachers, and administrators.”

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Researchers to Study Milwaukee Choice Program

By Mike Ford

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) at Georgetown University will conduct a five-year longitudinal study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the nation's oldest and largest school voucher program for low-income families.

The SCDP, led by chief investigator Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, previously won a nationwide competition to evaluate the two-year-old Washington, D.C. voucher program in 2004. Wolf said the Milwaukee evaluation is intended to provide the most comprehensive study yet conducted of an active school choice program.

"The central goal is to conduct a thorough and reliable study that sheds light on what policies and approaches help low-income, inner-city students learn," Wolf said.

Wolf spoke to state legislators about the study on January 19. Plans for the Milwaukee study follow previous unsuccessful attempts by legislators and school choice supporters to evaluate the program. Those efforts were blocked by the Wisconsin State Senate in 2002 and by Gov. Jim Doyle (D) in 2003. Both plans were strongly opposed by the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), the state's largest teachers union.

Strong Union Opposition

Sam Carmen, director of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, a WEAC affiliate, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel for a January 23 story the planned study is "not the sort of accountability we think is necessary to really make fair comparisons between the success of students or schools generally." In February, Carmen's union sponsored radio ads suggesting "elimination" of the Milwaukee program is the union's preferred option.

The five-year study planned by the SCDP has initial financial support from three foundations, and several others were evaluating proposals at press time. Funding commitments have already been made by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

"I am especially pleased that foundations from across the ideological spectrum on school choice have expressed an interest in supporting this important study," Wolf said.

Noteworthy Team

Wolf's team includes John F. Witte, the University of Wisconsin researcher who evaluated the MPCP from 1990 to 1995. Another notable partner is the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), which will assist in study design and in assembling a group of MPS students whose test scores will be compared with students in the choice program.

"MPS will serve primarily to facilitate this study and ensure that it is a real apples-to-apples comparison," said Deb Lindsey, MPS director of assessment and accountability.

The Georgetown team will be assisted by an advisory panel of well-known scholars with a range of views on school choice programs, including Witte and Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas.

Important Contribution

Wolf briefed a group of about 20 legislators on January 19 at the state capitol in Madison, explaining there will be annual MPCP performance reports starting in the fall of 2006. Overall, about 35 reports will be released over the course of the five-year study.

Gerard Robinson, a senior fellow at Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning and author of the 2005 report “Survey of School Choice Research,” sees the study as an important contribution to the growing body of research on school choice.

“The Georgetown study will expand the scope and depth of what we know (and do not know) about MPCP's impact on student achievement and other factors important to the learning environment of lower-income students.”

GERARD ROBINSON
INSTITUTE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF LEARNING
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Union Opposes Bonuses for Florida Teachers

By Jenny Rothenberg

The Florida Board of Education unanimously approved a merit bonus plan on February 21 for the state’s public school teachers. It is the nation's first statewide performance pay plan based on student achievement. Before the close of the business day, teachers unions had already filed a lawsuit against it.

Under the plan, known as the “Effectiveness Compensation” plan, or E-Comp, 5 percent or higher annual bonuses would be awarded to teachers whose student achievement is measured by the Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the state’s standardized measure of student learning gains, ranked in the top 10 percent.

Since 2002, state law has required that a portion of each teacher’s pay be based on student achievement. In a February 10 news release, Florida K-12 Public Schools Chancellor Cheri Pierson Vecke explained the E-Comp plan gives schools a “minimum framework” to comply with that law.

Derided as Luxury

Teachers unions claim the plan is unfair because it measures teacher performance on a single dataset, would infringe on their ability to engage in collective bargaining, and would create division among teachers. In Florida, teachers’ salaries are currently based on level of education and years of experience.

Florida Education Association spokesman Mark Pudlow said another big problem is that the Sunshine State is losing teachers to other states and other professions because of low base pay. Florida’s pay is $6,200 below the national average while housing costs in the state have risen significantly over the past few years.

“It’s kind of like getting a big-screen TV when you have a hole in the roof of your living room,” Pudlow said. “This is something we’d be willing to talk about, but we are losing teachers [too quickly]. We need to solve the problem of having a reasonable salary before we start talking about extras.”

State Education Commissioner John Winn said in the February 10 news release that the plan is “a different way of doing business. If we are to attract and keep the best and brightest teachers, then we must reward excellence in what matters most: student learning.”

Superintendents Supportive

All districts were required to provide bonuses under the 2002 law, but last year 24 districts (36 percent) did not provide any bonuses for teachers, according to the Florida Department of Education’s E-Comp Web page. E-Comp would require that all teachers’ salaries be tied in part to their students’ performance, but individual districts would have to develop specific plans in negotiations with teachers unions. Teachers who have been disciplined would be ineligible for bonus pay. Because not all students take the FCAT, alternative assessments would have to be devised for their teachers.

At least one union, the Florida Association of District School Superintendents (FADSS), says it would like to work with the Education Commission to make the plan workable. FADSS President Michael Lannon told the South Florida Sun-Sentinel on February 22, “We need to be your partner, and we need to have time to be able to do that.”

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

INTERNET INFO

For more information on Florida’s performance pay plan, visit the E-Comp Web site at http://www.floridaecomp.com/ecomp.asp.

Racial Integration for Colorado Charter Schools Explored

By Nick Toper

Leaders of Colorado’s school choice community walked away with plenty to think about, but no plan of action, from a January conference on the impact of school choice policies on student racial integration and segregation.

The day-long event, titled “Diverse Choices: Making School Choice Work for All Colorado Students,” was held January 23 at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Kevin Welner, an associate professor of education at the school who served as one of the event’s chief organizers, said the conference accomplished the goal he had going in: for Colorado school choice advocates to pick the brains of those in other communities who’ve had success not only in getting choice programs implemented but also in ensuring they serve a diverse base of students.

“In Colorado, choice has tended to lead to segregation,” Welner said. “Not in other states. We wanted to hear from people in those states about their experiences.”

Designing Consciously

Among those who attended were education analysts from communities with successful choice programs, as well as lawyers and legal experts who laid out the legal implications of pursuing such choice options as race-conscious student-assignment policies. In a pair of rulings (Gratz v. Bollinger, 2002 and Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003), the U.S. Supreme Court found fixed numerical goals and quotas unconstitutional. Each applicant must receive individualized consideration, the Court held, and admission decisions cannot be based on race alone.

“What we were hearing primarily is that the rules matter,” Welner explained. “A given school choice plan, in and of itself, doesn’t tell you if you’re going to wind up with integration or segregation. It’s how it’s structured.”

Nina Lopez, public affairs director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools, one of the local choice advocates who attended the conference, said:

“Providing equal access to school choice options requires that the design and implementation of choice be conscious about attracting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds,” she said. “Providing students and parents with the ability to choose a school can be rendered meaningless if there is no meaningful way for those schools to be accessed by a cross-section of students within a particular community.”

Integrating Deliberately

As for why diversity and integration are important for individual students and the student body as a whole, Lopez cited a May 2002 study of Denver’s public schools by the Piton Foundation, a local organization devoted to improving public education and strengthening low-income Denver neighborhoods, which cosponsored the January conference. The study found marked differences in student achievement corresponding positively to the degree of diversity of students in particular schools.

Lopez explained, “Exposure to diverse viewpoints and experiences can be a powerful force in the socialization that occurs in our schools.”

As for next steps, both Welner and Lopez acknowledged nothing concrete was established as far as what Colorado should pursue, although the information from the conference will help in planning a response.

“The examples provided could serve as the context for school districts and state policymakers to consider taking a more affirmative step in encouraging diversity in a choice environment,” Lopez said. “Choice in and of itself does not necessarily encourage diversity; rather, it is one potential tool among many that school districts and educators may use to help accomplish their broader educational goals.

“Districts often fail to implement a strategic plan that might be able to help them identify those goals that they wish to pursue and what tools, including charters, are available to help them accomplish those goals,” Lopez said.

Nick Toper (nicktoper@yahoo.com) is a freelance writer in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

INTERNET INFO

To listen to a podcast of the January 23 conference, visit the University of Colorado at Boulder’s School of Education Web site at http://www.colorado.edu/education/podcasts/


The test of the two U.S. Supreme Court decisions 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 search for document #18705 (Gratz v Bollinger (2002)) and document #18706 (Grutter v Bollinger (2003)).
We are proud that such a diverse group of people mobilized for one cause. We had representatives from every race, creed, and economic status gathered in Tallahassee, and I think the message was loud and clear: ‘Legislators, protect our scholarships. We will remember your vote on this issue when it is time for your re-election.’”

MICHAEL BENJAMIN
FLORIDA ALLIANCE FOR CHOICES IN EDUCATION

dents to transfer to the Corporate Tax Credit program, to prevent them from being forced back into their assigned public school in August before the rest of his plan can take effect.

Bush's second strategy is a joint resolution, which must be approved by three-fifths of the state legislature, to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot in November that would protect the scholarship programs. The language of the amendment had not been finalized at press time.

Diverse Group Gathered
The rally was sponsored by the Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), and the Florida Alliance for Choices in Education (FACE).

“We are proud that such a diverse group of people mobilized for one cause,” said organizer Michael Benjamin, executive director of FACE. “We had representatives from every race, creed, and economic status gathered in Tallahassee, and I think the message was loud and clear: ‘Legislators, protect our scholarships. We will remember your vote on this issue when it is time for your re-election.’”

Justices Divided
The Florida Supreme Court on January 5 ruled 5-3 that Opportunity Scholarships violate Article IX, Section 1 of the Florida Constitution, which states, “Adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high-quality system of free public schools.”

The dissenting opinion, written by Justice Kenneth Bell, whom Bush appoint- ed in 2002, found the Article IX mandate does not preclude alternative educational options or indicate public schools are the only method through which the state can provide for the education of its children, which the majority opinion held. The majority pointed to minutes from meetings of the Constitution Revision Committee, which rejected attempts to include language both prohibiting and allowing the

state to issue vouchers, before the 1998 election.

By contrast, Bell agreed with a lower court, which had found, “[N]othing in Article IX, Section 1 clearly prohibits the Legislature from allowing the well-delineated use of public funds for private school education, particularly in circumstances where the Legislature finds such use is necessary.”

Hispanics, Business Represented
Several of the state’s top elected officials, including Senate President Tom Lee (R-Brandon), Speaker of the House Allen Bense (R-Panama City), and Speaker-Designate of the House Marco Rubio (R-Miami), attended the rally and pledged to support the scholarship programs.

The Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce was represented at the event by president Julio Fuentes, a school choice supporter, and five board members who represent some of the largest Hispanic-owned and -run businesses in Florida.

The Hispanic Chamber and other business leaders signed onto the school choice movement in Florida in late 2003, following the release of the final six chapters of the Florida Chamber Foundation-sponsored New Cornerstone Report—the result of a 14-year study that examined factors contributing to the state’s economic health, including health care, education, and housing. The report concluded one single factor had the most impact on Florida’s economic health and the future of commerce in the state: education.

Since then, Fuentes and the chamber have promoted school choice to business leaders who have day-to-day contact with elected officials and contribute to their campaigns.

HCREO, which is based in Washington, DC, plans to hold summits and roundtable discussions in Florida later this year in hopes of bringing more business leaders on board and helping them create a coalition with parents.

“These business leaders have made a stand for school choice. They want to spearhead this issue to address the crisis now,” HCREO Membership Director Maite Arce said. “We hope it will result in influencing legislators to support school choice and increase educational options that are available for parents. That’s our main goal: to give parents a stronger voice and more options.”

INTERNET INFO
The January 5 decision of the Florida Supreme Court 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 search for document #18311.
Private, Charter School Performance Questioned

By Kate McGreery

A January 2006 report from the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education has stoked a debate about the veracity of the claim that private school students outperform their public school counterparts.

Using figures from the math component of the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as the Nation’s Report Card, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana researchers Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski compared the performance of fourth- and eighth-grade private school students with that of their public school peers.

“Researchers and policymakers have known for some time that private schools have higher raw scores on these types of tests,” Chris Lubienski said about the results’ significance, “but we also know that they serve, on average, more advantaged populations with characteristics that are already associated with higher test scores. We had rather comprehensive data and methods available to account for those differences in populations served in public, private, and charter schools. Once those differences are considered, they more than explain the differences in test scores.”

Questioning Study’s Purpose

Sister Dale McDonald, director of public-policy and educational research at the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), was skeptical of the study’s value.

“What’s the purpose?” McDonald asked. “They are looking at one subject and one test, and trying to draw generalizations. Most likely, they are trying to figure out how well a school is doing based on isolated factors, and we don’t believe those isolated factors help us better understand our schools.”

The Lubienskis’ study, “Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data,” was funded through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) but was contracted out to the Lubienskis to maintain scientific credibility.

Neutralizing ‘Private School Effect’

The Lubienskis—who controlled for socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, disability, English proficiency, and school location, and then grouped students with similar characteristics—compared performance by students in Catholic, Lutheran, conservative Christian, other private schools, and charter schools to average public school achievement.

According to their findings, public schools significantly outscored Catholic schools in both fourth-grade and fifth-grade and Lutheran schools outperformed all private school types. Charter schools performed slightly lower than public schools at the fourth-grade level, but slightly higher at the eighth-grade level.

Chris Lubienski pointed out the findings have limitations but indicate the issue needs further research and attention.

“We think the data and analysis are significant enough to point researchers and policymakers to the need to check their assumptions on this issue,” Chris Lubienski said. “Also, we think this points to the need for further study using a variety of datasets and methodological approaches, also looking at different subjects and grade levels.”

Questioning Methodology

The Lubienskis’ methodology has drawn criticism from the private school community. The Lubienskis say they used Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) to extract “nested,” or multi-level information. HLM allows researchers to examine individuals within an organizational unit that needs analysis itself—in this case, the individuals are students and the organizations are schools. The Lubienskis then made comparisons by demographics. This entire process has been criticized for its limitations.

“The same procedure could be carried out with any two sets of data: public suburban schools and public urban schools, crop yields in Iowa and Kansas,” said Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education. “The approach would be the same: Neutralize the observed advantage of Set A and then go on to demonstrate that, absent the advantage, Set A is no better off than Set B.”

McDonald agreed, noting the theoretical nature of the study.

“We are not greatly concerned with the Lubienski study,” McDonald said. “It’s an academic exercise in which certain factors were considered and certain factors were removed—you could just as easily arrive at different conclusions with the same data.”

Providing Snapshot

NAEP data, which in 2003 included more than 340,000 students in 13,000 schools, is presented as a snapshot by the National Center for Education Statistics, a nonpartisan, nonpolitical federal research group. Researchers, policymakers, and educators all use NAEP results to track performance trends.

The Lubienskis acknowledged their study—which is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, like the NAEP data it draws from—cannot justify broad conclusions. They believe they have localized

“We think the data and analysis are significant enough to point researchers and policymakers to the need to check their assumptions on this issue.”

CHRIS LUBIENSKI
STUDY AUTHOR

“The report from the Lubienskis does not address factors like school climate or location, for instance, that we think are important,” McDonald explained. “Parents do not choose schools based on NAEP performance—there is a ‘so what’ factor about isolating NAEP scores at all.”

Consider Many Factors

Parents consider a variety of factors such as safety, teacher quality, academic strength, and religious values when choosing schools for their children, McDonald said. Performance on tests like NAEP might not play a role at all for some parents, she noted.

McTighe added that the Lubienski study is too hypothetical, given the variables of actual school settings.

“Children do not attend statistically modeled classrooms in computers,” McTighe said. “They attend real classrooms in real neighborhoods with real classmates and real teachers. You can’t go into a real class and reconstruct it by excluding certain factors. It is what it is.”

Measuring Implications

While the Lubienskis admit causal relationships between their findings and the quality of private, charter, and religiously affiliated schools cannot be made, they contend policymakers eager to bring market-based reforms to education should reexamine their assumptions.

“We clearly show that policymakers should not assume that private schools are more effective simply because private school average achievement tends to be higher than that of public schools,” Sarah Theule Lubienski said. “What our study shows is that the achievement gap that typically favors private schools washes away when one accounts for demographic differences.”

While any long-term implications of the Lubienski study for school choice cannot yet be known, the NCEA and many other Catholic organizations continue to support school choice efforts nationwide.

“The NCEA holds that parents are the principal educators of their children,” McDonald said. “They have the right to determine the kind of education that they want for their children. As a Catholic organization, we believe that being poor should not limit that right—be it to choose public, charter, or private schools, through voucher, scholarship, or tax credit programs.”

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INTERNET INFO


For more information on Catholic schools, visit the National Catholic Education Association Web site at http://www.ncea.org.

For more on private schools, see the Council for American Private Education Web site at http://www.capenet.org.
States Should Remove Charter Caps, Report Says

By Krista Kafer

A January report from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) urges state leaders to focus on stronger oversight and application processes to improve charter schools, instead of imposing arbitrary limits on their size and number.

“Charter caps work against the most disadvantaged children,” NAPCS President Nelson Smith said in a news release accompanying the report. “Charter schools open doors for low-income families. There are schools that have achieved educational wonders with traditionally underserved student populations. This type of success should be replicated, not blocked.”

Removing Caps

In the 1990s, when charter schools were first introduced, lawmakers enacted limits to slow expansion. Now that charter schools have proven themselves a valuable part of the education landscape, the report said, those limits have become obsolete and a barrier in the family decision-making process.

“Charter caps work against the most disadvantaged children,” NAPCS President Nelson Smith said in a news release accompanying the report. “Charter schools open doors for low-income families. There are schools that have achieved educational wonders with traditionally underserved student populations. This type of success should be replicated, not blocked.”

Removal restrictions:

- **The number of charter schools in a state:** In 16 states, the law restricts the number of charter schools that may be opened throughout the state or in a certain geographic area within the state. In Alaska, for example, only 60 charter schools may open. Illinois limits the total number of schools to 60, of which 45 must be in Chicago and its suburbs.
- **The number of new schools opened annually:** Seven states set a limit on the number of schools that may open in a year. In New Mexico, only 15 new schools and five conversion schools—former traditional public schools that want to operate under a charter—may open. New Mexico also imposes a restriction on the number of schools that may open in a five-year period.
- **Limitations on authorizers:** Eleven states place restrictions on the number of charters that may be approved by a particular authorizer. In Indiana, for example, the mayor of Indianapolis may charter up to five schools a year.
- **Restrictions on student numbers:** Laws in four states restrict the number or percentage of students who may attend charter schools. In Rhode Island, charter schools may serve no more than 4 percent of the school-age population.
- **Restrictions on financial performance:** The state board of education may enroll no more than 250 to 300 students in a single district, or up to 25 percent of a district’s student population, whichever is less.
- **Other limitations:** Five states impose other restrictions. Missouri law, for example, allows only Kansas City and St. Louis to have charter schools.
- **Meeting Caps:** In 10 states, such restrictions are severely limiting charter schools’ expansion, the report notes. Of these, eight states—Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island—have met their caps; the other two, Illinois and New York, are likely to do so later this year.

Ziebarth argues such limitations prevent families from accessing options and reformers from replicating proven school models. Instead of relying on these limitations, he recommends establishing rigorous application processes, strong oversight mechanisms, and funding and renewal processes that are transparent to the public.

“It would be an extreme step for the state Supreme Court to declare charter schools, the preference now for more than 880,000 Arizona students, unconstitutional due to such a constipated reading of the uniformity clause.”

Columnist Robert Robb
Arizona Republic
February 15, 2006

**INTERNET INFO**

“To understand the underlying cause of so many of today’s contentious policy debates—over issues ranging from education reform to tax policy and even to foreign affairs—one has to recognize that trillions of dollars in future wages and benefits have been pledged to people who work for all levels of government: federal, state, and local. These are promises made by politicians in the name of average American taxpayers who ultimately will not, indeed cannot, make them good.

As bitter as political squabbling has become in recent years, this acrimonious skirmishing is mild compared to the looming conflict between public employees and the voters who subsidize them. Taxpayers will win in the end by the sheer force of their numbers, but with consequences that few have dared to imagine.”

—from America’s Second Civil War: The Public Employment Complex vs. Taxpayers

Download your copy today at www.yankeeinstitute.org
Publishers Concerned About Google Print

By Steven Titch

A controversy has been brewing in publishing circles about the Google Print Project, the search engine's plan to digitize the entire world's printed material in an effort to build the mother of all literary search indexes.

Need to know the precise act, scene, and line citation for “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet? Type it in the Google Print search field. Not only will you get your answer, but dozens, if not hundreds, of other citations where the phrase has been used since.

Ambitious, to be sure. But Google Print is already underway, digitizing the contents of entire collections of the libraries at Harvard, Stanford, and Oxford universities, the University of Michigan, and the New York Public Library, to name just a few.

It is testament to the vision of Google and a powerful example of how the Internet can take information that would have been impossible to collect, collate, and cross-reference in the print world and deliver it cheaply and easily to an individual anywhere. This would have great value for cash-strapped school districts and homeschoolers. Google Print is hard to dislike.

Publicizing Works

Yet the Association of American Publishers is concerned. All this scanning and digitizing, they say, amounts to unauthorized copying and distribution—in essence, a copyright violation. Google has defended the practice by saying it falls under the classic “fair use” doctrine of copyright law. Google argues it is only doing what literary indexers, like books such as The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature or Granger's Index to Poetry, have done in the past—providing a one- or two-sentence excerpt from a copyrighted work that points researchers to the actual source.

Another argument Google proffers is that, unlike Napster or other file-sharing services, Google Print will not resell or repackage entire copyrighted works, and thus won't deprive rightful owners of the rightful income from their work. In fact, the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals opined, in Kelly v. Arriba Soft (2005)—a case where Arriba was sued for reproducing thumbnails of copyrighted photos on its search site—that the search engine actually aided the copyright holder by raising awareness of his work.

All these points are valid. Yet they rely on interpreting “fair use” in a pre-Internet context. Google Print itself, as a mass market, for-profit enterprise, calls on courts and lawmakers to rethink how the definition applies.

Sharing Fairly

To the user, Google appears to be doing nothing different with copyrighted content than indexers have done in the past. But Google is, in fact, monetizing that copyrighted content in a way that was not possible before the Internet.

The publishers of Granger's and The Reader's Guide derive revenues from sales of those volumes to libraries. There is no mass consumer market. The sole purpose of these indexes is, indeed, to direct researchers to a published work.

Google Print is not quite the same. Yes, it's pointing researchers to complete works, and it is not illegally copying or reselling copyrighted material, elements at the heart of the “fair use” test. Nonetheless, Google is using copyrighted material as a resource to create a new and potentially lucrative revenue stream for itself. In doing so, it introduces a commercial aspect to indexing that did not exist before. As we understand Google's intentions today, the literary content Google Print is amassing, although it is displayed a few sentences at a time, will be a tool to sell advertising.

This amounts to something more than noncommercial fair use. Publishers are correct to realize that under this scheme they are providing the raw material that undergirds the Google business plan, but receiving nothing in return. Google may have discovered value where it did not exist previously, but that does not negate the publishers' right to demand compensation that reflects the new value.

Monetizing Property

A fair solution is simple. It starts by getting past Google's self-justifying rhetoric that the Internet upends all previous business models. For all of Google's vision, its business plans seem to depend heavily on getting valuable resources for free, be it municipal right-of-way, carrier bandwidth, or use of
derived revenues from sales of those volumes to libraries. There is no mass consumer market. The sole purpose of these indexes is, indeed, to direct researchers to a published work.
Preschool
Continued from page 1

bailot initiatives. In 1998 he championed a successful proposal, Prop. 10, that raised cigarette taxes by 50 cents per pack and sent the resulting revenue to early childhood development programs. In 2004, he worked on a proposition that would have increased commercial property taxes in the state to raise funds for preschools, but he pulled it before he had gathered enough signatures to get it on the ballot.

Ironically, the earlier success of Prop. 10 has led to the most recent obstacle for “Preschool for All.”

Improper Payments
According to reports that surfaced at the end of February, the First 5 California Children and Families Commission—a child development organization created by Prop. 10 and chaired by Reiner—spent $23 million between November 2005 and January 2006 on ads promoting preschool. Critics claim that by having First 5 pay for those ads, Reiner improperly used taxpayer dollars to promote Prop. 82. Reiner and First 5 responded to those accusations by saying nothing improper took place with the ads. Nonetheless, in order “to avoid any political distractions,” according to a February 24 letter to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), as reported by the San Francisco Chronicle on February 26, Reiner took a leave of absence from the commission and will not return until after taxpayers vote on Prop. 82.

While causing a significant uproar, questions about Reiner’s politicking are only the most recent troubles for Prop. 82. Even before questions about ad funding came up, opposition to the initiative had been gathering.

Rob Reiner

Poor Aim
For instance, critics have pointed out for months that Reiner’s program would not target the poor but would instead cover all Californians—including the estimated 66 percent of 4-year-olds already attending preschool. That was one of the main concerns state Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata (D-East Bay) cited when he withdrew his support for the proposition in early March. Critics also have argued that the program, which will cost an estimated $2.5 billion per year, is simply too expensive.

“Preschool is a great idea, but is this the right vehicle?” state senator and former teacher Tom Torlakson (D-Antioch), who withdrew his endorsement of Prop. 82 after the First 5 revelations, asked in the March 6 issue of the Los Angeles Times. He went on to say that under the Reiner plan, “lots of money will end up in the pockets of California where children are already in preschool. ... Any opportunity should be more targeted.”

In addition to its targeting problems, some critics have argued the initiative, which would be funded by a 1.7 percent increase in the tax rate paid by upper-income Californians (single people making more than $40,000 annually or families making more than $80,000) would drive wealthy taxpayers out of the state.

“The new tax represents an 18 percent tax increase on wealthy Californians,” wrote Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare at the Los Angeles-based Reason Public Policy Institute, in a February report. “With wealthy Californians already leaving the state in search of lower tax rates in states like Nevada, Texas, and Washington, adding an additional tax burden will exacerbate the problem.”

‘Pure Speculation’
A RAND Corporation analysis of Prop. 82 asserted that for every dollar California put into preschool, $2.62 would return to it through increased productivity, fewer people using social services, and other benefits.

Snell took issue with those findings, noting the Chicago program involved numerous intensive school and family interventions that are not part of “Preschool for All,” including health screenings, child care, and meal services. Snell said RAND “just put a number” on its benefit projection “and it is pure speculation.”

Finally, critics note that in places where universal preschool is already available, it hasn’t produced many gains. Oklahoma and Georgia have had universal preschool for several years, Snell wrote, but in “a recent analysis of the top 10 best and worst state performers” on National Assessment

“[Questions about [Rob] Reiner’s politicking are only the most recent troubles for Prop. 82. Even before questions about ad funding came up, opposition to the initiative had been gathering.”

Likely Support
Despite Prop. 82’s stumbling blocks, many of its supporters remain optimistic. Ted Lempert, president of the Oakland-based, bipartisan, child advocacy group Children Now, said he thinks the chances of Preschool for All passing remain “very, very good” despite Reiner’s problems and the defection of high-profile supporters such as Perata.

“The larger issue,” Lempert said, “is that people believe we need really good preschool.”

A Field Poll of 507 likely voters conducted February 12-26, which found 55 percent of voters would support the initiative once they learned of it, seemed to support Lempert’s optimism.

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INTERNET INFO
For more information on California’s Preschool for All proposal, see supporters’ Web sites at http://www.yeson82.com and http://www.childrennow.org, as well as these articles and reports:


Sen. Clinton Raps School Vouchers

By Glenn Thrush

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton slammed private school voucher proposals [February 21], predicting that vouchers would eventually lead to the creation of taxpayer-financed white supremacist academies or even a government-funded “School of the Jihad.”

Clinton, a longtime voucher foe who earned the backing of the [New York City] teachers union in 2000, says government financing of sectarian groups would incite ethnic and religious conflict and encourage fringe groups to demand government cash to run their schools.

President George W. Bush has long favored laws that require states to provide vouchers, a position that earned him the allegiance of conservative Christian groups that have clamored for public education dollars.

“First family that comes and says ‘I want to send my daughter to St. Peter’s Roman Catholic School’ and you say ‘Great, wonderful school, here’s your voucher,’” Clinton said. “Next parent that comes and says, ‘I want to send my child to the school of the Church of the White Supremacist … ‘The parent says, ‘The way that I read Genesis, Cain was marked, therefore I believe in white supremacy. … You gave it to a Catholic parent, you gave it to a Jewish parent, under the Constitution, you can’t discriminate against me.’”

As an adoring, if somewhat puzzled, audience of Bronx activists looked on, Clinton added, “So what if the next parent comes and says, ‘I want to send my child to the School of the Jihad?’ … I won’t stand for it.”

The former first lady said that vouchers would also accentuate divisions, singling out government-financed Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland and similar arrangements in the Netherlands as examples of poorly functioning systems.

She spoke during a breakfast at the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp., where she denounced Bush administration cuts to community development programs, offered advice to minority and women business owners, and vowed to help bring more broadband access to the South Bronx.

Andrew Coulson, who works on education issues for the conservative Cato Institute, differed on the voucher issue, saying, “It’s misleading because under federal law no one would be permitted to open a school that advocates violence against the country.”

School Choice Advocate Raps Back

“[Sen. Hillary Rodham] Clinton … says government financing of sectarian groups would incite ethnic and religious conflict and encourage fringe groups to demand government cash to run their schools.”

By Clint Bolick

The school choice movement has grown accustomed to demagoguery on the issue, particularly from those who believe public education is a jobs program. But in my 17 years in the movement, I have never seen such inflammatory, reactionary, and patently inaccurate statements as those attributed to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY).”

“I’ve seen children and adults of every race and religion, especially black and Latino children, improve in school choice programs, and I’ve seen schools of the past with religious and racial strife turn around. I’ve seen public schools torn apart by racial strife, and I’ve seen schools of the desert turn into schools of the future.”

‘H for Hypocrisy’

Never was there greater testimony to the importance of school choice than Mrs. Clinton herself. When the president and Mrs. Clinton moved into the White House, they were offered something that no other resident of the nation’s capitol had: the choice of any public school for their daughter. They decided that sending their daughter to a defective school system was too great a sacrifice, and chose a private school instead.

That led Wisconsin Rep. Polly Williams (R), the sponsor of Milwaukee’s school choice program, to quip, “Bill and Hillary Clinton should not be the only people who live in public housing who get to send their kids to private schools.”

A decade later, D.C. has a plethora of choices thanks to public charter schools and a district-wide school choice program. Perhaps the Clintons would make a different choice today.

Sen. Clinton deserves a scarlet “H” for hypocrisy. I hope the many Democrats who have endorsed school choice—and others who recognize that our nation’s education crisis requires statesmanship, not irresponsible rhetoric—will condemn her comments.

Clint Bolick is president of the Alliance for School Choice, based in Phoenix, Arizona.
Editor's note: The following anecdote was sent to School Reform News by a reader in Illinois.

A junior high in town here hosted a music contest for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. I attended the contest because my daughter was in it.

In the room where my daughter performed, the teacher had posted up on colored paper that week's spelling words for the kids to memorize. One of the words was "murmur." It should have been "murmur." I was left to wonder whether the teacher believed the crime of killing someone is called "murdur."

I relish receiving the school newsletter each month, because it is filled with similar spelling and grammatical errors in the superintendent's message!

Meanwhile, my school district is trying for I believe the sixth time now to get voters to approve a tax rate increase. I will be voting no.

With time on his hands, Henry calculated the odds of the Cubs winning the World Series before he was rescued.

In March, The Heartland Institute released Emerging Issues 2006, the proceedings from its second annual Emerging Issues Forum. The program featured 11 speakers from across the country, addressing emerging public policy issues from the economy to welfare reform. Their focus was on the future: looking ahead at what issues are "emerging." What key public policy issues are we going to be debating next year, and the year after, and the year after?

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SAT Scores or State-Mandated Standards?

By Michael Strong

Editor’s note: This is the fourth installment in a seven-part series showing why charter schools do not have the freedom needed to create significant educational improvements through innovation.

The SAT has long been controversial. Although it was originally conceived as an “aptitude test” that measured raw ability, more recently it has been conceded that it is possible to increase one’s scores on the test. Because the best-known approaches to improving SAT scores have been expensive SAT-verbal prep, and because some minorities, including Native American, African-American, and Hispanic students, have average SAT scores lower than white and Asian students, the SAT has come to be regarded as an unfair and inequitarian exam.

“For several decades there has been a literature ... that claims the ability to learn how to learn will be more important in the twenty-first century than accumulating knowledge, because the rate of change is increasing so rapidly. ... Socratic Practice would appear to be a superb means of meeting this twenty-first century approach to education.”

This is ironic, given that the original purpose of the SAT was to open the elite colleges to talented working-class students.

Nonetheless, one strand of the support for national education standards was that they would allow a move away from the SAT, on the grounds that it is unfair to rank students against a test. We have heard that the purpose of the SAT was to open the doors of college to the many students who don’t know what they are talking about. How can we measure a test in which the student does not know what language she will be tested in—perhaps it will be Swahili, perhaps Mandarin, perhaps Swedish. All she knows is she will be given a passage to translate, a lexicon, and a grammar, and she is expected to make sense of the passage on her own.

This vision of education can be extended to science: Students might be given an article on cosmology, or nanotechnology, or microbiology, provided with adequate reference works, and be expected to summarize the article accurately. It also can be extended to software: Students might be expected to install a complex new software program and use it to perform specified functions within a specified period of time.

For several decades there has been a literature on “the New Economy” that claims the ability to learn how to learn will be more important in the twenty-first century than accumulating knowledge, because the rate of change is increasing so rapidly. Workers may change jobs and careers several times in a lifetime, and even within a given position they will be expected to learn new material constantly. Socratic Practice would appear to be a superb means of meeting this twenty-first century approach to education.

This interpretation of education, however, is profoundly different from the mainstream “content coverage” model on which the standards movement and NCLB are based.

NCLB Inflexible

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) forces conformity of measurement of results on charter schools nationwide. It also forces conformity of qualifications: One of the requirements of NCLB is that all teaching staff be “highly qualified,” which is defined as being professionally licensed in the subject areas in which they teach.

St. John’s College, from which Strong’s Socratic approach is explicitly derived, is usually described as a “Great Books College” because of its distinctive curriculum based on the classics of Western civilization. Less well-known is its deep commitment to Socratic education. Still less well-known is the fact that all faculty members are required to teach all subjects. An incoming faculty member with a Ph.D. in Greek will not be required to teach quantum physics or music theory the first year, but eventually he or she is expected to master the entire curriculum teaching it.

From the perspective of NCLB—or indeed most educators—this commitment to amateurism is the height of unprofessionalism. Who would want to learn quantum theory or French language and literature from someone who doesn’t know what he is talking about?

From another perspective, the advantage of such amateurism is that students are constantly exposed to adults who are still learning (often in real time, in the middle of class). If we believe that modeling is an important aspect of education, then we might consider it important for at least a portion of a student’s learning period to be under the tutelage of adults who are themselves actively learning alongside the student.

‘Learning to Learn’ Essential

From this perspective, the St. John’s approach to a superb means of teaching students to learn how to learn. Indeed, it has been suggested that the ideal St. John’s foreign language exam is one in which the student does not know what language she will be tested on—perhaps it will be Swahili, perhaps...
Software Program Helpful to Beginning Literacy Teachers

Substantial research suggests high-quality literacy instruction should include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies. Developed by Diane Snowball—a literacy expert and president of AUSSIE (Australian and United States Services in Education), Inc.—“Teaching Comprehension” is an interactive professional development course designed to provide teachers the necessary strategies specifically targeted toward improving students’ reading comprehension.

The course, available online at http://www.aussiepd.com/ai/index.html, can be taken by several teachers at once if the learning modules are projected onto a screen instead of being previewed individually.

Comprehension is broken into six modules: Prediction/Prior Knowledge, Questions and Questioning, Think Aloud, Text Structure & Features, Visualizing, and Summarizing. Having taught two years of literacy skills at the middle-school level and two years of reading to first-graders while working as a teacher in DuPage and Cook counties in Illinois, I am an advocate of explicitly teaching these skills and providing repeated opportunities to practice what is learned.

However, the software leaves something to be desired as far as user-friendliness is concerned. Until deactivated, a message repeatedly popped up to inform me that running active content can harm my computer. In order to run the software, I had to deactivate my antivirus program when moving to a new window—something I’ve never had to do with other software.

Each module has a written section that introduces what the module is about and provides instructional strategies that can be used with a whole class or small groups, or as individual exercises to teach that particular element of comprehension. For the teacher who has not had formal training in teaching reading, this can be an invaluable resource because it lists in one place useful teaching strategies designed to help students utilize specific text structures and features encountered in expository text.

Good for Starters
Another set of useful tools is the multimedia resources. Each module has several audio or video components to showcase teachers implementing teaching techniques. I have always found it helpful to watch another teacher implement a strategy, and this software provides that—each module has several audio or video components showing teachers using different techniques in various settings.

Some of the instructional approaches include students responding to a Directed Reading Thinking Activity, shared reading, think alouds, and visualization responses to text. There are accompanying audio streams of teachers discussing the particular teaching strategies seen on the videos.

For teachers who haven’t had any formal training in literacy education, “Teaching Comprehension” provides easy access to standard teaching practices designed to help students with reading comprehension. Though some of the content, such as 360-degree virtual classrooms, weren’t linked to any particular instructional strategy, and the antivirus issue is a concern, this software provides a good place to start learning how to teach literacy.

Nancy Salvato (/nancysalvato@basicproject.org) is president of The Basics Project, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational project whose mission is to promote the education of the American public on the basic elements of relevant political, legal, and social issues important to our country.

Teaching Comprehension
literacy software from Aussie Interactive 2005, $499

Downloadable Files
The best part of the program is its downloadable files. Each module includes a resource bank of lessons and activities that accompany the overview of the topic. These are subdivided into whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, individual practice, general comprehension activities, and assessment.

I found it confusing that what I consider to be phonics is covered as a resource in the Prediction/Prior Knowledge category. Prediction is about using prior knowledge and context clues to determine what might happen next. Yet, in the Prediction/Prior Knowledge resource bank, many of the downloadable files have to do with phonics, not prediction.

Teachers can download a whole-class resource sheet called “Seeing Patterns: Hearing Sounds.” On this reproducible resource are common spelling patterns and the sounds they represent. I can definitely see how this information is valuable when determining a particular spelling-sound relationship to sound out unfamiliar print. For example, one sampling of this list is the pattern sound “ch,” which takes a variety of sounds depending on where it falls in a word: chair, machine, school, yacht, choir, sandwich.

But I don’t consider this a comprehension strategy, yet that’s the module this resource appeared in.

The other sections had more relevant activities. For example, in Text Structure & Features, many of the activities are designed to help students utilize specific text structures and features encountered in expository text.
Creating a Voice for Choice

by Virginia Walden Ford

Editor’s note: In late October of last year, Virginia Walden Ford executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, the organizing force behind the two-year-old and at-capacity school voucher program in the District of Columbia, spoke at a luncheon hosted by The Heartland Institute about the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act, which was passed by Congress in 2003. Her comments are excerpted below—the fourth in a several-part series.

"[I]nitially it was a few really strong, energetic, excited parents who wanted something different for their children, and most of them who were involved in our effort had children in public schools that were failing."

One of the reasons we wrote the book [Voices, Choices, and Second Chances: How to Win the Battle to Bring Opportunity Scholarships to Your State, D.C. Parents for School Choice, 2005, $19.95] is because I felt a responsibility to get information out about how to organize parents—because it isn’t an easy thing to do, but with information it can be done.

So what we did, I think, is interesting: When we first wrote the book, people thought we’d tell our story, and it was going to be nice, and everybody would want to hear about it. But instead we did a real “how to” book. We outlined steps telling what to do, using our story anecdotally. I encourage you to use it in your efforts. It is also a tribute to the parents involved in our effort, because they were pivotal in getting this done.

A lot of times the grassroots are not looked at as having done the big part of it, but I believe that it is everybody together that gets it done. So while you were out getting legislation written and talking to whatever contacts you had, we decided that we would give the legislators the faces of families that would be the beneficiaries of scholarships or any kind of school choice. So we began to go to the Hill.

It doesn’t take a thousand people. There were days when there were 25 of us. But we were in white T-shirts that said “D.C. Parents for School Choice.” We were all over the Hill, so it always appeared there were lots of us. The media would say, “How many in your organization?” And I would say, “Oh, a few.” They would say, “Hundreds?” And I would go, “Yeah.” At some point it did get to be hundreds, but initially it was a few really strong, energetic, excited parents who wanted something different for their children, and most of them who were involved in our effort had children in public schools that were failing.
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