Ohio, Utah, Arizona Expand School Choice Offerings

Three states either created new school choice programs or expanded existing ones in late March—a trend suggesting the movement is gaining wider support among legislators.

In Ohio and Utah, lawmakers gave more students access to school choice. Ohio’s EdChoice program—which had given students attending schools rated for three consecutive years as being in “academic emergency” the option of transferring to better-performing schools of their choosing—now gives students in schools on “academic watch”—the second-lowest rating—the same option. Some 50,000 students are expected to participate, an increase of 30,000.

In Utah, the Carson Smith Scholarship Program for autistic students was widened to include more schools, and the legislature removed a requirement that private schools must “specialize” in serving special-needs populations in order to participate.

On March 29, Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D) allowed a corporate tax credit that will provide scholarships of up to $3,500 for children in low-income families in the Granite State to attend the schools of their choice.

Colorado voters this fall will determine the fate of a popular proposal designed to add funds to the state’s school classrooms. Organized education interest groups favoring the status quo face an uphill battle to persuade voters to reject the measure.

The initiative sponsored by First Class Education (FCE)—a grassroots group headquartered in Washington, DC—seeks to amend the Colorado State Constitution to require school districts to spend 65 percent of their operational budgets on classroom instruction. Supporters say more than $425 million could be redirected to Colorado classrooms to help students.
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<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>private school principals, teachers, tech coordinators</td>
<td>22,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public school board presidents</td>
<td>13,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct request subscribers</td>
<td>12,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state and municipal elected officials</td>
<td>8,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal officials</td>
<td>8,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charter school principals</td>
<td>3,604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>donors, allies, friends</td>
<td>3,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conference distribution</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education reporters</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>75,704</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information or media kit, please call Jim at 630/983-3825, email JimR@heartland.org
Spending Increases Don’t Improve Student Achievement: Report

By Lori Drummer

On February 25, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) released the 12th edition of its annual Report Card on American Education: A State-by-State Analysis, by Andrew T. LeFevre (who also contributes to School Reform News). The handbook assesses the academic achievement rates and public education investments of the 2003-04 school year and measures changes in these indicators over the past two decades.

Minnesota topped ALEC’s academic achievement rankings, while the District of Columbia ranked 51st. To calculate the rankings, LeFevre included indicators from the 2003 assessments of the SAT, ACT, and fourth- and eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in both reading and math.

The current Report Card varies from previous publications because, for the first time, the author compared educational inputs, such as education spending, teacher salaries, and pupil-teacher ratios, with educational outputs, such as standardized test scores and student achievement rankings, from the same year. The 2003-04 edition assesses both educational inputs and outputs from 2003, whereas the previous edition evaluated 2002 inputs and 2003 outputs.

Dollars Don’t Yield Success

As has been the case with previous editions, this version of the Report Card found no evident correlation between improved student achievement and increasing education spending or lowering pupil-teacher ratios. While education expenditures ballooned by 78 percent after inflation adjustments over 20 years, 73 percent of public school eighth-graders performed below proficiency in math, and 70 percent performed below proficiency in reading, according to the NAEP exam.

“Education policy debates in state capitals around the nation must concentrate on student learning above all else, and state legislators have the power to promote real reform,” said Georgia state Rep. Earl Ehrhart (R-Powder Springs), ALEC 2005 national chairman. “Parents are demanding solutions to these challenges and are looking to legislators to make changes to our public school system.

Only two of the 10 states that increased their per-pupil expenditures the most over the past two decades ranked in the top 10 in academic achievement...”

“If pumping more money into schools, providing higher teacher salaries, reducing student-teacher ratios, building more schools, and spending more federal dollars to bail out public schools have not led to student achievement in the past, how can they be expected to do so in the future?” LeFevre wrote. “Dug-up perpetuation of failed policies wastes public dollars; worse, it delays further the implementation of valuable new approaches.”

Within its more than 50 tables and figures, which display in various ways more than 100 measures of educational resources and achievement, the report also includes analyses of numerous factors affecting the public education system, including demographics, school choice, and charter school initiatives.

“ALEC has conducted this study for 12 years now, and for 12 years we’ve witnessed no categorical increase in student achievement,” LeFevre said in an interview for this article. “It is high time that education policies focus on student achievement and not on a dollar sign.”

Data Should Inform Policies

The data found in the Report Card are meant to provide in a single volume the most basic and customary measures of educational resources and achievement on a state-by-state basis. ALEC notes the publication is neither a policy manual nor an ideological document. Lawmakers and policy experts should use the compilation of educational data and historical perspectives on instructional spending and academic achievement rates as a point of reference for future policies.

“ALEC members agree that Americans demand a first-rate public school system, and we are dedicated to making high student achievement a reality,” Ehrhart said. “We must challenge ourselves to question the established thinking about public education and focus our policies on those [approaches] that deliver results.”

Lori Drummer (lrdrummer@alec.org) is education task force director at the American Legislative Exchange Council.
Hampshire

Continued from page 1

low-income families to attend the public or private school of their choice. All 14 members voting for the measure were Republicans, and eight of the nine negative votes were cast by Democrats. One senator was absent.

“The proposed 21st Century Scholars Fund is a hybrid between state-funded vouchers and scholarships supported through both corporate and individual tax credits.”

“I think it is important we look at all avenues for providing education,” said state Sen. Carl Johnson (R-Meredith). He proposed the scholarship fund as an amendment to a bill before the Senate that set guidelines for participation in the Healthy Kids Program, which provides health care services to children in low-income families. At press time, the House had not set a date to debate S.B. 131, though Johnson said it could happen any time.

Hybrid Program

The proposed 21st Century Scholars Fund is a hybrid between state-funded vouchers and scholarships supported through both corporate and individual tax credits. If the measure becomes law, the fund will begin with $1 million from the state’s coffers. During the second year, the state will appropriate another $1 million only after $500,000 is donated by the private sector.

Under the program, the state would give individuals a credit against what they owe in taxes on interest and dividends, equal to the amount of donations they make to the scholarship fund. Individuals would have to apply for the credit, and the limit on the total amount of credits to be granted by the state would be $100,000. Corporations would be able to receive credits against the Business Enterprise Tax in the amount of donations to the scholarship fund, with the total amount of credits limited to $400,000.

Individuals and corporations would be permitted to donate an unlimited amount, but would receive credits only for the amounts specified in the law.

General Fund

“In the past, when school choice was proposed, funding would have come from the education trust fund, but this time it has come from the general fund,” Johnson said.

Johnson, who has served for 12 years in the state Senate and previously served four years in the New Hampshire House, has also been a school board member for Interlakes School District for the past 23 years.

The 21st Century Scholars Fund is modeled after New Hampshire’s Healthy Kids program, which provides health insurance to low-income children. The Scholars Fund will provide scholarships of $3,500 for children in families whose income is at or below 200 percent of the poverty level. The fund also will provide scholarships of $2,500 for children in families with incomes between 201 and 250 percent of the poverty level.

The scholarships can be used at any public or qualified private school. Schools where tuition is less than the scholarship amount cannot provide a rebate to parents; instead, they must return the money to the state. Only students currently enrolled in public schools will be eligible for the scholarships. Once a student receives a scholarship, he or she will continue to do so as long as his or her family meets the income requirements.

“Choose wisely waiting for the bill to come over,” Johnson said.

Some of the senators who voted against the measure said it would violate New Hampshire’s state constitution, which contains in Part II, Article 83 a “Blaine Amendment” prohibiting public funds from going to private religious schools.

However, in an analysis published by the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy, a New Hampshire-based think tank, former state supreme court justice Charles G. Douglass III writes that a school choice program would be constitutional, so long as it is “religiously neutral,” “provide[s] no more than incidental benefits to a religious sect or religion in general,” and is “brought about as a result of the independent choices of parents who receive the public funds.”

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

INTERNET INFO


In Other Words

“Each day we get closer to sealing the reality of creating a permanent, irredeemable underclass in our nation. The real shock therapy we need nationwide—school choice and vouchers, where parents have broad freedom where to send their kids to school—is fought tooth and nail by self-interested teachers unions and organizations like, incredibly, the NAACP.”

Star Parker, President Coalition for Urban Renewal Albuquerque Tribune March 26, 2006
Kansas Education Chief Advocates Vouchers

By Robert Holland

Two qualities set Kansas Education Commissioner Bob Corkins apart from other states’ chief school officers.

One: He came to the job from outside the field of professional education.

Two: He is an advocate of vouchers and other forms of choice for students whose needs he said are not being met in the public school system.

A lawyer who has directed libertarian-leaning think tanks, Corkins won the commissioner’s job last October when a six-member conservative majority of the 10-member Kansas Board of Education decided a fresh perspective would be helpful in reforming public education.

“I believe it is most likely that we will be able to have significant changes only if we have someone from outside the system be able to establish the vision of ... what is possible,” said Steve Abrams, a member of the State Board majority that confirmed Corkins’ appointment.

“If we have someone from outside the system be able to establish the vision of ... what is possible.”

STEVE ABRAMS
KANSAS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Reaching Out

Non-educators have assumed the leadership of big-city school systems in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York, but Corkins, 45, is the first outsider to become a state commissioner.

His appointment drew loud criticism from the education community, major newspapers, and even the state’s governor. While some questioned his ability to run a large state bureaucracy, the most vehement opposition was leveled at his advocacy of vouchers and charter schools.

After his first six months on the job, Corkins has not backed down on his support for school choice, but he has reached out to skeptics and foes and has found a lot more support talking to staffers and local educators in more informal settings.

Making Changes

Last year, the new commissioner explained his vision for choice in terms of personalizing education and making schools flexible and adaptable. Recently, he asked small groups of educators what they would like to see happen in the next 10 years, and he heard similar objectives: personalized, flexible, adaptable schools. That doesn’t mean he has converted them to his view on vouchers, but he now sees the beginning of a shared language and vision.

“This is where I’ve been able to find some strong common ground,” Corkins said. He is particularly proud of a rare 10-0 state board of education vote approving his proposal for a longitudinal student-data analysis that will enable the state to track the achievement progress of individual students. All factions in the state agree the federal No Child Left Behind approach of judging schools according to the “adequate yearly progress” of clusters of students is woefully misguided.

The emphasis should be on the individual, Corkins said. NCLB, by contrast, compares subgroups of students that are not even the same clusters of children from year to year. Kansas’s new approach will enable educators to “monitor individual student growth year to year.” The U.S. Department of Education is about to evaluate such a “growth model” in several states. Corkins hopes the feds eventually will adopt it for NCLB, and he says Kansas will be in a position to hit the ground running with it.

Charters

Meanwhile, with the board’s support, Corkins is going full steam ahead with proposals in the state legislature to strengthen Kansas’ charter school law. One measure would give charter applicants the power to appeal a rejection by a local school board to the state board of education. A second would guarantee charter schools a fairer share of public funding.

While per-pupil spending in regular Kansas public schools averages more than $10,000, the state’s 26 charter schools are expected to make do on just $4,100 per student. Corkins wants to add “weighting factors” that will reward charter schools for the work they do with low-income and bilingual children, and ensure them at least $5,600 per student.

“We have had a charter school law for 10 years, as has Arizona, and yet we have just 26 charter schools while Arizona has hundreds,” said Corkins, adding that giving charter applicants a right to appeal local rejections could jump-start the movement.

“[Competition is] not the endgame. The endgame is improving student outcomes. School choice is a means to that end.”

BOB CORKINS
EDUCATION COMMISSIONER - KANSAS

Winning Support

Corkins’ communications director, David Awbrey—a former editorial page editor for The Wichita Eagle (and more recently the Burlington, Vermont, Free Press)—believes the unconventional commissioner is making progress in winning over those who doubted his capacity to lead.

“Interestingly,” Awbrey observed, “Bob’s initial lack of expertise with many educational issues has proved to be one of his strongest assets. It has allowed him to think differently and to chart a new direction for what had been a staid, change-resistant state agency.

“For example, one of Bob’s first acts was to introduce flex-time scheduling for department employees,” Awbrey said. “That policy was resisted by the previous administration, even though the department employs large numbers of women with children and [those with] other obligations who need some flexibility in their jobs. The response has been universally positive, and Bob has won the loyalty of many once-skeptical staff members for his willingness to listen to new ideas and to respond to employee concerns about workplace issues.”

Playing Politics

Many in the larger education community may never accept Corkins, Awbrey said, because “he is not part of their club” and remains devoted to fundamental, choice-based reform.

Ultimately, politics may determine whether Corkins will have a decent chance to overhaul the system. Four of the six board members who supported his appointment are up for re-election this fall, and opponents are lining up to make Corkins himself the key issue.

Robert Holland (rholl1176@aol.com) is an author and journalist who writes frequently about education.
By Frank J. Heller

In early March, the people of Swans Island, Maine, a town without a secondary school, voted to pay for their children’s education with local tax funds at either public or private secondary schools, including religious schools. The subsidies will be paid directly to parents and involve local funds, not state monies, thereby avoiding church-state issues, according to the proposal’s sponsors.

The 57-44 vote on the tiny island off the Maine coast—where the economy relies on lobstering and most children are ferried to school on the mainland—echoed a much larger national debate over public subsidies to religious schools. Some islanders feel it may also be the solution to a longstanding conundrum over the application of the First Amendment to Maine education law.

“The response was overwhelmingly for raising money for this,” said town clerk Gwen May after a lengthy public debate.

In Maine, a local school district that doesn’t operate comparable schools—a high school, for example—is allowed to “contract” with an approved public or private school (but not religious schools). Tuition is reimbursed according to a state-set formula. In towns without any schools, parents enroll their children in an approved school, and the school then informs the town clerk, who issues a voucher and reimburses the school for expenses according to the state formula.

Reversing History

Since 1873, Maine has run such a Town Tuitioning Program—essentially, universal school vouchers—because so many small towns don’t operate their own high schools, and in some cases even elementary schools. Most towns allow parents to choose their children’s schools, and then the town pays the per-pupil costs to the receiving districts. According to The History of Maine Education (1936), by Ada Chadbourne, sending payments to private religious schools was not prohibited.

In fact, Maine’s education system started out as almost exclusively religious. It wasn’t secularized until Thomas Jefferson consulted with the first state board of education in the 1800s and advised it to set up a taxation system to build “free” public schools. Over the past 100 years, the state’s roster of private academies dwindled down to a few dozen, operating largely at the secondary school level, which educated students at public expense under the tuition reimbursement policy.

The system became further restricted in 1980, when then-Attorney General Joseph Brennan (D) ruled local school districts were forbidden to pay tuition to religious high schools, applying the prevailing interpretation of the U.S. Constitution’s clause regarding the separation of church and state.

The ruling devastated a number of religious schools—even forcing a highly regarded Jesuit high school, John Bapst, to secularize in order to continue serving the community.

Upsetting Locals

Several Swans Island residents who had attended religious schools recalled the 1980 decision’s impact on their education and voted for the local subsidy. Jason Joyce, lobsterman and leader of the group that convinced the town to adopt the subsidy, called it a “return to the island’s roots”—an idea several islands off the coast of Maine are echoing as they withdraw from mainland-dominated school districts.

John Grace, a first selectman, supported the American Civil Liberties Union’s view of the separation of church and state as applied to school finance, but said he “could see the way the town was going to vote” on the issue and stepped aside to let the voters express their will. He said many townspeople who are now in their fifties and sixties and were educated under the old policy saw nothing wrong in restoring public payment of tuition for students at religious schools.

Over the past 15 years, various parents backed by libertarian and religious groups have taken the issue to court, using the U.S. Supreme Court’s shifting interpretation of the establishment clause to argue courts should allow the state to revert to its prior practice of directly funding approved religious schools.

“"In early March, the people of Swans Island, Maine, a town without a secondary school, voted to pay for their children’s education with local tax funds at either public or private secondary schools, including religious schools.””

Two key litigators have emerged to lead the challenges before the courts: Dick Komer, senior litigator for the Washington, DC-based Institute for Justice, and Stephen Whiting, a lawyer in Portland, Maine. The Institute for Justice currently has a school voucher case, Anderson v. Town of Durham, before the Maine Supreme Court. The Whiting firm represented the Eulit family in a federal case two years ago, arguing for restoration of state funding for religious schools on different grounds than were argued by the Institute for Justice.

Rehearing Facts

Whiting’s firm, representing the Anderson family and other plaintiffs, appealed the Anderson decision to the Maine Supreme Court, where oral arguments were presented in February

CONTINUED on right
2005. However, because of changes in the court, a rehearing was held in February 2006.

“The fact that the Maine Supreme Court asked us to reargue the case suggests that we made some headway since the original argument a year ago,” Komer said, adding he is “hopeful” of a favorable ruling.

But funding religious schools under the Town Tuitioning Program is not the main point, Whiting said. While the people of Swans Island were debating the issue, Whiting crafted a local warrant (a town ordinance that is put on the agenda at a town meeting for discussion and approval or disapproval), at the request of local lobsterman Joyce.

The warrant recognized recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings that public subsidies to parents avoid constitutional problems involved in paying schools directly. The warrant also avoided the Maine law’s prohibition of local education authorities from paying tuition to religious schools because the Family Subsidy Policy uses only local monies and goes directly to the parents to spend on the school of their choice.

Paying Families
“No money is going to be paid by the town to sectarian schools, so there is no way that your policy could be found to violate Title 20-A M.R.S.A. 2951 (this is the State statute governing the State’s subsidies for local education agencies),” Whiting wrote in a March 15 letter to Joyce.

“As stated in my letter of February 22, the Anderson v. Town of Durham case involves issues that are so completely different from what you are proposing to do with your non-discrimination family subsidy policy that there is no way the court’s decision in Anderson could possibly have any effect on your proposed policy, whichever way the court decides that case.

“In short, there is no legal reason why the town should have to discriminate against families like yours, and your proposed policy levels the playing field within the boundaries of the law” (emphasis in original).

Withstanding Challenges
Whiting said he was “cautiously optimistic” the plan could withstand the potential legal challenges it might face from civil liberties groups in the future, particularly since the provision has been shorn of previous church/state separation objections.

A spokesman for the Maine Civil Liberties Union said the group was withholding action until the Maine Supreme Court issues a ruling on Anderson in a few months.

“In the meantime, Joyce’s son will be attending Life Christian Academy in Ellsworth, Maine, with his tuition paid by his parents out of tax monies sent to them under a plan approved by a majority of Swans Islanders.

“It’s a tremendous help,” Joyce said. “[My son] likes the school, he gets a good education, he does well in his grades. I am very proud of the Town of Swans Island for taking a stand.”

Frank J. Heller (global3004@gwi.net) is a member of the Maine Policy Ronin Network in Brunswick.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Economy
The U.S. Economy: A Tale of Two Futures
Brian Wesbury, Claymore Securities Inc.

2. Education
School Choice: A Steady Pace Toward Success
Robert C. Enlow, Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation

3. Health Care
The Health Industry Is Under Attack
Richard Dolinar M.D., Endocrinologist

4. Race and Poverty
The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina
Lee Walker, The New Coalition for Economic and Social Change

5. Keynote Address
How Consumer-Directed Health Care Is Revolutionizing the Industry
Grace-Marie Turner, The Galen Institute

6. Environment
Four Emerging Issues to Watch
James M. Taylor, Environment & Climate News

7. Emissions Trading
Understanding Emissions Trading
Jim Johnston, The Heartland Institute

8. Eminent Domain
Life After Kelo
Paul Fisher, McGuireWoods LLP

9. Technology
Emerging Telecom Issues
Ray Gifford, Progress & Freedom Foundation

10. Welfare Reform
Why Welfare Reform Worked and How to Keep it Going
Gary MacDougall, author, Make a Difference

11. Tobacco Policy
How Smokeless Tobacco Can Save Lives
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tax credit program to become law without her signature, ending a year-long battle with legislators, during which she twice reneged on her promise to sign the measure into law.

“A lot of state [legislatures] would have said, ‘We have a governor who is philosophically opposed to school choice, so we can’t get anything done,’ but ours said, ‘No, this is the right thing to do.’”

VICKI MURRAY
INDEPENDENT EDUCATION RESEARCHER
SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA

“Our legislature just held the line,” said Vicki Murray, an independent education researcher in Scottsdale and former education policy director for the Goldwater Institute, a public policy think tank in Phoenix. “The governor gave her word last year that she would sign this, and she didn’t, but our legislators just wouldn’t back down. They knew there was a desperate need for more choices. Children need it, parents want it, and it’s good policy. A lot of state [legislatures] would have said, ‘We have a governor who is philosophically opposed to school choice, so we can’t get anything done,’ but ours said, ‘No, this is the right thing to do.’”

Serving Students
The Arizona tax credit program allows businesses to donate to nonprofit organizations that distribute vouchers for private schools to children who need them. Under the new law, the cap is set at $5 million a year, with vouchers worth up to $4,200 for K-8 students and $5,500 for high school, to serve low-income students—somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 students, Murray said. The law will expire in five years, requiring legislators to create and pass a new bill to keep the program alive after that.

“This is a great day for children who desperately need educational options,” Alliance for School Choice President Clint Bolick said in a March 30 statement. The Alliance for School Choice is a Phoenix-based nonpartisan organization that advocates for choice programs nationwide.

Arizona already has a personal tax credit program, which gives 21,000 students scholarships worth more than $28 million.

Gauging Interest
In Ohio, some state agencies expressed concern over the EdChoice program as it moved through the legislature. Jeannette Oxender, chief of staff to state schools superintendent Susan Tave Zelman, told the Associated Press on March 14 the state would “be a little cramped” for the administrative costs of enrolling thousands of newly eligible students if the bill passed. But by the time the full legislature approved the bill on March 30, additional funding had been found, Ohio Department of Education spokesman J. C. Benton said.

At press time the department was meeting with schools and families that want to participate when EdChoice Ohio officially launches this fall.

“EdChoice is a great way to bring choice to Ohio,” Oxender said. “It’s a way for parents to have more control over their child’s education, and it’s a way for schools to compete and improve.

According to the Alliance for School Choice, so far this year 13 legislative houses in seven states—Arizona, Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin—have passed school choice bills. Four states—Arizona, Ohio, Utah, and Wisconsin—have passed bills creating or expanding choice programs.

Karla Dial (dial@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.

INTERNET INFO
For more information on the EdChoice Scholarship Program, visit http://www.ode.state.oh.us, click “Hot Topics,” then select “EdChoice Scholarship Program.”

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Parents See Bigger Problems than Math and Science

By Neal McCluskey

Over the past year, several prominent education and business groups have warned American students must improve their mastery of math and science if they are to compete successfully in an increasingly globalized economy. In response to those warnings, President George W. Bush proposed in his January State of the Union address an American Competitiveness Initiative, an effort to encourage “children to take more math and science, and to make sure those courses are rigorous enough to compete with other nations.”

While raising math and science standards might be a high priority for the president, a February report from the survey organization Public Agenda suggests it is not nearly as important to the parents of public school students.

The report, titled Are Parents and Students Ready for More Math and Science? indicates parents are much more concerned about nonacademic problems. While 15 percent of parents surveyed by Public Agenda said the “most pressing problems facing the high schools” in their communities came from “low academic standards,” 73 percent fingered “social problems and kids who misbehave.”

Low-Income Parents Worried

Concerns about nonacademic issues were especially pronounced among low-income parents. The report notes, for instance, that in a 2002 Public Agenda survey 73 percent of low-income parents, compared to 46 percent of high-income parents, said they worried “a lot” about protecting their children from drugs and alcohol. Similarly, 65 percent of low-income parents worried a great deal about their children being physically harmed or kidnapped, while only 33 percent of high-income parents shared that concern.

“Our education system should be able to keep our children safe and help them reach high academic standards too, and if you look below the data, of course parents want both.”

MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION

Despite placing social and behavioral problems at the top of their list of concerns, parents did see a need to reform American math and science education. Seventy-one percent of parents said “updating high school classes to better match the skills employers want” would improve high school education in the United States, and 67 percent said “greatly increasing the number and quality of math and science courses students take in the high schools” would be helpful.

Still, when it came to their own schools, parents were relatively unconcerned about the quality of math and science instruction. When asked whether they thought their child’s school should be teaching “a lot more math and science,” 57 percent of parents said the instruction was fine as is, and only 37 percent called for increasing math and science learning.

In reaction to these findings, Jay Feldman, director of research at the Coalition of Essential Schools—an education reform group based in Oakland, California—said the poor math and science performances that concern Bush, and the discipline problems that worry parents, have the same roots: bored kids in impersonal schools.

“One of our main problems is large, comprehensive high schools,” Feldman said, where it is “really easy for kids to fall through the cracks.” Feldman said the key to fixing both problems is to let schools be flexible enough to “do interesting things with the curriculum” and make them small enough to “meet the needs of kids.”

Politics Plays Role

Michael J. Petrilli, vice president for research at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, DC, which has pushed hard to improve math and science standards across the country, agreed with Feldman that solutions to discipline and academic problems are not mutually exclusive.

Noting that “of course parents are going to be concerned, first and foremost, about the safety of their children,” Petrilli explained, “our education system should be able to keep our children safe and help them reach high academic standards too, and if you look below the data, of course parents want both.”

Petrilli suggested a combination of rigorous national standards and school choice would be a good way to solve both problems.

Public Agenda’s advice to policymakers was a little different from Feldman’s and Petrilli’s, focusing mainly on politics. The report said President Bush and other advocates of bolstering math and science standards will have to build a “consensus to act,” which will require doing a better job of making “American families understand the economic and educational challenges the country faces.”

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INTERNET INFO


Coalition of Essential Schools, http://www.essentialschools.org/


CONTINUED on right

Campus Murder, Lawsuit Spur Calls for School Choice in Texas

By Connie Sadowski

Most of the arguments made for allowing parents to send their children to the schools of their own choosing focus on underperforming schools and missed opportunities for a bright future. School choice is seldom discussed in literal life-and-death terms.

That changed on March 28, 2003, in Austin, Texas. That’s when 16-year-old Marcus McTear chased his former girlfriend, 15-year-old Orträra Mosley, through the halls of Reagan High School and stabbed her five times with an eight-inch kitchen knife. As horrified students watched, Mosley died in a teacher’s arms.

It wasn’t McTear’s first act of violence toward a girlfriend. That’s why Mosley’s mother, Carolyn, and Rae Ann Spence, one of McTear’s ex-girlfriends, filed a $23 million federal lawsuit against the Austin Independent School District (AISD) in November 2003, claiming that because officials already knew about McTear’s violent tendencies toward female students, the district was violating a sex-discrimination law in the U.S. Education Code. In February 2006, attorneys negotiated a settlement for $200,000. The district did not admit to any wrongdoing, but AISD attorney Kevin Cole said the settlement was “an attempt to bring some closure to a very painful and sorrowful occurrence for all involved.”

Meanwhile, McTear was tried as a minor in June 2003 for Mosley’s murder, convicted, and sentenced to a juvenile detention center. He could have been eligible for parole at 21. But in January 2006, the judge who presided over his trial ordered him transferred to an adult prison to serve the remainder of his sentence after officials at the juvenile detention center reported he has been overly controlling of three girlfriends over the past three years—even after counseling.

Schools Hiding Problems

In 2002, both McTear and Spence were suspended after a violent altercation on campus. McTear returned to school after his suspension. Spence’s mother, however, moved her family across town to get away from him.

Had McTear been transferred to another school for his acts of violence, Mosley’s murder may well have been avoided, said Dr. Sterling Lands, a pastor and
By Kate McGreevy

With adolescent literacy rates flattening across the nation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York is renewing its investment in a 2002 national initiative focused on increasing teachers’ abilities to teach literacy.

Last June, the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) received a $100,000 grant from Carnegie, to be used over two years, to provide Chicago teachers with tools and training to increase the literacy of high school students in specific subject areas. Timothy Shanahan, director of the UIC Center for Literacy and codirector of the project with his wife, Cynthia Shanahan, explained the literacy project’s purpose.

“The purpose of the grant is to develop better instructional techniques for developing student literacy at the high school level,” Tim Shanahan said. “It is part of a much larger set of national [Carnegie] initiatives aimed at increasing what we know and do about high school reading and writing.”

“Teacher education is infamously lacking in reading and writing preparedness …”

KATE WALSH
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON TEACHER QUALITY

Subject Literacy Is Focus

Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a national advocacy organization dedicated to reforming the teaching profession, acknowledged that formalizing a literacy focus for teacher preparation programs, as the Carnegie Corporation is doing, is a step in the right direction.

“Teacher education is infamously lacking in reading and writing preparedness, and to the extent that preparation programs can cultivate greater literacy [teaching skills] among teachers, [that] is really important,” Walsh said.

UIC’s literacy project focuses specifically on increasing student literacy within subject areas, a problem Timothy Shanahan said is hampering student achievement nationwide.

“We are using the two years of support from Carnegie to explore the possibility of developing more effective ways of helping students read in science, history, and mathematics,” Shanahan explained. “High school literacy levels in the U.S. are too low, and students are at great risk if they cannot read the types of materials that we are looking at.”

Could Benefit Many

To develop materials and a curriculum for teachers, the Shanahans have collected a working group of mathematicians, chemists, and historians to collaborate on the project.

“Our plan is to first develop instructional strategies based on how historians, mathematicians, and scientists actually read and use texts in their disciplines,” Shanahan said. “We will then teach these [strategies] to UIC teacher education candidates in those disciplines and evaluate the effectiveness of their use of these techniques in Chicago high schools.”

While Shanahan acknowledged a basic literacy problem among thousands of Chicago public school students and high school students nationwide, he said the techniques UIC will develop with the Carnegie grant could benefit many students.

“There are large numbers and proportions of students who read well enough [for us] to assume that they would benefit from these approaches, and we suspect that working more effectively with the high school texts will likely ‘pull up’ some of those kids who aren’t too far below the entry levels of high school,” Timothy Shanahan said.

Barriers May Remain

The fact that many students struggle with reading is only one aspect of the problem, Shanahan said. Another is that many teachers avoid using subject-specific texts with kids who read slightly below grade level.

“Our plan is to increase kids’ work with text—both to improve those more specialized skills and thought processes, but also to increase vocabulary and fluency and other more ‘basic’ aspects of reading,” Shanahan explained.

While Walsh did not dispute the value of projects that will enhance subject-level literacy for students, she cautioned that many students, particularly disadvantaged ones, lack basic literacy skills.

“How can you teach chemistry when kids can’t read at grade level? And is it the job of the chemistry teacher to remediate the reading skills of these students?” Walsh asked. “A teacher, all things being equal, is better off knowing the roots of illiteracy, but if you expect kids to take high school chemistry when they read at the fourth-grade level, you can’t expect much chemistry to be taught.”

Teachers Must Improve Skills

Shanahan believes that, over time, more rigorous literacy standards for teachers, which he calls “teacher literacy-teaching requirements,” will benefit students.

“I think most of our teachers are sufficiently literate, but too few know how to teach literacy,” Shanahan said. “Recently, Illinois increased its reading certification requirements for high school teachers, and universities are trying to meet those standards at this time. I think the recent changes and improvements will go a long way towards improving this for Illinois 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.

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“This murder was a travesty … and suggests that the AISD and many other government schools may not be providing sufficient protection to their students.”

MARC A. LEVIN
TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

community activist in the Reagan High neighborhood.

In an interview, Mosley’s mother said she had received no communication from the school and was not aware of McTear’s violent tendencies. In hindsight, while Mosley and her daughter were very close, she said she would have made a greater effort to really get to know her daughter’s friends. Now, she encourages parents to be more involved at the school.

Landa said schools must better communicate to parents any known problems, and “the ability to move a child should rest totally with the parent and not with the system,” he said. “Right now, the public school system prevents that.”

Restraining Offenders

AISD spokesperson Kathy Anthony declined comment on the Mosley case, citing confidentiality, but said it was the only student murder ever committed on campus in the district. According to the district’s Web site, the AISD Police Department—which serves 125 school facilities in a 230-mile radius—receives about 20,000 service calls annually.

But Marc A. Levin, director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said Mosley’s murder could have been prevented had the school had an open transfer policy including school choice.

“This murder was a travesty, along with many other shocking incidents of school violence,” Levin said, “and suggests that the AISD and many other government schools may not be providing sufficient protection to their students.”

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INTERNET INFO

For more information on the literacy efforts of the University of Illinois-Chicago, visit http://www.uic.edu/educ/college/centers/cl.htm.

For more on the National Council on Teacher Quality, visit http://www.nctq.org.


Renowned Performer, Pastor Sings Praises of Charter Schools

By Michael Coulter

Marvin Winans, a Grammy-winning performer as well as a pastor, never expected to be involved in operating a school or promoting alternative public schools. But he is and he loves doing it.

Winans is a member of the world-famous Winans family, which includes three generations of performers. He attained celebrity status during the 1980s when he was a gospel quartet, the Winans—which included three of his six brothers—won six Grammy Awards.

Winans' parents, David and Delores—professionally known as Mom and Pop Winans—have recorded several albums' worth of gospel music. His brother BeBe and sister CeCe are recording stars in their own right, with gospel and R&B hits. Sisters Angie and Debbie, the youngest members of the family, as well as some of Mom and Pop's grandchildren, also have recorded albums. The three generations of the family have collectively 31 Grammys.

It's no surprise the Winans are sometimes called the First Family of Gospel Music: They are the gospel equivalent of the rock and roll Jackson family.

"The school teaches more than performing arts: Students study all the appropriate college-prep courses, including reading, math, history, and science. Each year, they take the same state tests as all other Michigan students."

Starting a School

In addition to his music career, Marvin Winans founded a non-denominational Christian church in Detroit, called Perfecting Church, in 1989.

About 10 years ago, Perfecting Church was growing so rapidly the congregation bought a new building—one that previously had housed a private school. Winans never considered starting a school.

But an attorney friend, Lawrence Patrick, who knew Michigan had a passed a charter school law in December 1993, encouraged Winans to start a charter school.

In 1994, 13 charter schools sprouted up across Michigan—a number that multiplied through the end of the decade.

"I never felt the call to have a school," Winans said of his reaction when Patrick first broached the idea with him. "I was a preacher and singer, not an educator."

Designing a Program

Winans was not at all opposed to public schools—he himself was the product of Detroit Public Schools.

"Growing up in a family of 10, there was no money for parochial schools," Winans explained.

But he also knew Detroit Public Schools had developed many problems over the years. In fact, Winans had moved his wife and two children out of the city to give them access to better schools. He believed people still living in the city needed more options.

The more Winans thought about it, the more he became attracted to the idea of a charter school. As a public school, it couldn't charge tuition, but it could operate with a rigorous curriculum. And it could rent the facilities in Perfecting Church that previously had been used for the private school.

Operating the School

Winans and some supporters completed the application process to start a charter school, the Marvin L. Winans Academy of Performing Arts—which, as the name suggested, would have specific focuses on music and dance. In 1996, Saginaw Valley State University approved the application, and the school was born. Under Michigan law, colleges and universities, as well as local school districts, can authorize charter schools.

For the 1997-98 school year, Winans planned to have a maximum of 288 students in grades K-5, with two classes of 24 students in each grade. A private school operator who had advised Winans through the chartering process proposed including a $40,000 advertising budget, but Winans wasn't interested.

"I told him to take out the $40,000," Winans said, explaining Detroit residents were so desperate for good schools there was no need to advertise.

He was right: The school received more than 1,000 applications in its first few days.

Finding Success

"The applications came from all over the city and definitely not just from Perfecting Church members," Winans said.

Under Michigan law, charter schools can't give preferential treatment to any students when there are more applications than available seats. While he was pleased with the overwhelming response, Winans did have one worry: One of his nephews had applied, and he couldn't guarantee him a spot at the school. However, his nephew was later selected to attend the school through a neutral lottery—something Winans said was good for family relations.

Winans' nephew wasn't the only one who was pleased to get in.

"As names were pulled, people screamed," Winans explained. "They treated it like winning a contest."

Growing Up

The school teaches more than performing arts: Students study all the appropriate college-prep courses, including reading, math, history, and science.

Each year, they take the same state tests as all other Michigan students.

The performance training has paid off as well, as several graduates have attended the summer program at the Debbie Allen Dance Academy, considered one of the best of its kind in the country. Actress Phylicia Rashad—better known as Claire Huxtable from the long-running TV series "The Cosby Show"—gave the Winans Academy's first commencement speech, in 2005, and paid the tuition for students attending the dance academy. Allen is Rashad's sister.

Finding teachers who wanted to be at the school was extremely important to Winans.

"We wanted teachers who weren't just there to make a living," Winans explained. "We also expect that parents will take ownership in the school," said Winans.

Winning Awards

Since its inception, the school has grown significantly, adding an additional grade each year. Today, the school serves students from kindergarten to grade 12, now educating more than 800 students. But even as available seats have increased, Winans faces the same problem each year: more applications than the school can accommodate.

But that hasn't affected the school's performance. In 2005, the Winans Academy was one of three finalists, from more than 220 charter schools statewide, to receive the Michigan Association of Public School Academies School of Excellence Award.

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Milwaukee

Continued from page 1

mise with the state legislature to raise the cap on the total number of students eligible to receive vouchers from approximately 14,500 to 22,500 students. The bill included new accountability measures for schools educating voucher students, as well as increased funding for smaller class sizes in Wisconsin’s government schools.

In a March 10 statement, Doyle called the bill a “victory for schools, not just in Milwaukee, but all across the state.” The bill was passed largely along party lines in both the General Assembly and the Senate, with most Republicans voting for the bill and most Democrats voting against it. The Democrats who supported the bill mostly represented Milwaukee districts, where many low-income students use vouchers to attend private schools.

“This is a wonderful victory for Milwaukee families after three-and-a-half years of struggle,” said Susan Mitchell, executive director of School Choice Wisconsin, a grassroots organization that advocates giving parents and students choices in education, referring to the nearly three-and-a-half years she attended a private school. Sometimes it helps to point out the hypocrisy they deny others.”

“We the people have already been rationed, potentially forcing some students currently using vouchers to lose them (see “Milwaukee Begins to Ration School Choice,” School Reform News, February 2006). Other students could have been required to change schools.

State Rep. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa) estimated that as many as 4,000 students could have been displaced if rationing had been implemented. “It would have been chaos, not just for students with vouchers but also for students in Milwaukee’s public schools,” Vukmir said.

Vouchers Popular, Improve Education

Over the past two years, the legislature passed three bills raising the cap to ensure voucher students wouldn’t be forced to leave their schools. Doyle vetoed each of those bills, citing his concern that raising the cap would take money away from public schools. The legislature and Doyle were able to reach a compromise in late February by combining increased funding for public schools, an increase in the voucher cap, and new accreditation and testing requirements. (“Voucher Cap Is Lifted in Milwaukee,” School Reform News, March 2006.)

Officially known as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), vouchers are a popular education reform in Wisconsin. Statewide, 62 percent of residents support the program, according to a 2001 survey by Harris Interactive. Among African-Americans, support is even higher, with 75 percent supporting school choice.

Considerable research has shown the vouchers not only improve education for students who use them to attend private schools, but also improve achievement levels for students who remain in public schools.

Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard University professor of economics and leading researcher on the impact of school choice programs, found in a 2001 study that public schools in Milwaukee facing the greatest competition from vouchers improved student achievement more than schools facing less competition. A similar study by Hoxby in 2003, using more current data, also showed competition from vouchers improved student achievement in public schools.

Vukmir also disagreed with Johnson’s claim. “It’s taking money away for students the public schools are no longer teaching,” Vukmir said of the MPCP. “And, the voucher schools educate the same children as the Milwaukee public schools—at about half the cost.”

“The voucher program has caused dramatic improvement in the public schools. As a result of choice and competition, there are more opportunities for students.”

LEAH VUKMIR
STATE REPRESENTATIVE - WAUWATOSA, WISCONSIN

Findings Confirmed

Another researcher, Jay Greene of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, found in a 2005 study that the graduation rate for voucher students was 64 percent, compared to only 36 percent in Milwaukee’s public schools. Greene had found in 1996 that voucher students achieved results similar to those of public school students during their first two years in private schools, but after three years voucher students generally outperformed their public school counterparts.

Vukmir said she’s seen those results firsthand in Milwaukee. “The voucher program has caused dramatic improvement in the public schools,” Vukmir explained. “As a result of choice and competition, there are more opportunities for students.” The public schools have created charter schools, magnet schools, and specialty schools in response to the competition, Vukmir said.

Beneficial to Minorities

Gard also noted 70 percent of African-American students in Milwaukee don’t graduate, and vouchers represent an opportunity to reach out to those students and give them more options and choices.

“The defenders of the status quo will never be happy with reform,” Gard concluded.

In Other Words

“Ultimately, a sustained grass-roots campaign led by choice proponents—along with flagging poll numbers among Mr. Doyle’s pro-voucher black base in an election year—forced the Governor’s hand. A particularly effective television spot by the Alliance for Choices in Education featured a black father telling the camera, ‘If school choice is good enough for the Governor’s family, I ought to be able to have it, too.’ Governor Doyle’s son attended a private school. Sometimes it helps to point out the hypocrisy of public officials who exercise the very freedoms they deny others.”

Wall Street Journal
House Editorial
March 3, 2006
Colorado

Continued from page 1

without additional funding or a tax increase.

Between September 2005 and late March, FCE petitioners turned in more than 100,000 signatures supporting the measure. The Colorado Secretary of State has certified the question for the November 2006 ballot.

FCE also has introduced ballot initiatives in Arizona, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington. Similar proposals have been approved by legislative action in Georgia and Louisiana, and by executive order in Texas.

Questioning the Premise

FCE Executive Director Tim Mooney said the proposal gives school boards latitude within the 65 percent requirement. It also would allow a district that is legitimately unable to increase its classroom spending to apply for a waiver from the governor.

“We’re just setting the strike zone,” Mooney said. “A majority of money comes from the state, so this is a form of statewide accountability that preserves local control.”

The state teachers union, however, rejected the plan’s premise.

“It is a rigid, one-size-fits-all proposal,” said Deborah Fallin, spokeswoman for the 37,000-member Colorado Education Association (CEA). “It is being sold as putting more money into the classroom, but it really doesn’t. It is little more than an accounting procedure which takes away financial control from locally elected school boards.”

Debating the Effects

Other groups agreed.

“I don’t think anyone can make a serious policy argument that this is a good idea,” said Ken DeLay, executive director of the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB). “Sixty-five percent is just something they pulled out of a hat because a few places meet it and most don’t.”

FCE borrowed the “instructional expenditures” definition from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which includes salaries and benefits for teachers and teacher aides, textbooks, classroom supplies, field trips, athletic activities, and special education reimbursements. The Colorado proposal also counts toward the 65 percent goal money spent on school libraries and librarians.

Colorado Gov. Bill Owens (R) publicly supports the 65 percent ballot proposal. At a February 20 State Capitol ceremony, he became the 100,000th Coloradan to sign his name in support of First Class Education.

“It would ensure that students and teachers would be the first priority when it comes to funding, ... not administration,” Owens said. “I’m proud that Colorado is part of a national effort to improve classroom funding.”

Dinging Small Districts?

DeLay said the plan’s appeal of reducing bureaucratic overhead is directed at the wrong source.

“We don’t have administrators so they can sit in hot tubs and feather their nests,” DeLay said. “We put people on staff to write reports because that’s what we have to do for federal and state compliance.”

The FCE Web site chronicles school district waste and opportunities for savings to meet the 65 percent requirement. Mooney said some districts would try to cheat, though they would be “cheating against the will of the voters.”

DeLay said only large school districts would have the resources to adapt and use “creative accounting” to meet the constitutional spending formula.

“The smaller districts will get dinged,” DeLay said, adding that districts with older facilities that require more maintenance and districts pursuing creative reforms may be hampered by the constitutional mandate.

Sizing Up Differences

Mooney said FCE research found no correlation between a district’s size or setting (rural vs. urban) and the percentage of resources spent on classroom instruction.

DeLay dismissed the significance of the finding.

“How you come out (in the category) is dependent on a whole host of factors that have nothing to do with whether you’re doing a good job or not,” DeLay said.

Challenge Plan’s Popularity

A March 2005 poll by the Virginia-based survey and database company C.C. Advertising found nearly 86 percent of Colorado voters support FCE, and 75 percent are more likely to select a candidate who supports the proposal.

A nationwide Harris survey conducted in November 2005 showed 79 percent favor the FCE initiative, with greatest support among racial minorities, women, and those living in the Western United States.

In Colorado, foes of the proposed 65 percent spending mandate believe they can overcome its early popularity.

“It’s about educating people about the measure,” said Fallin. “We are confident that when school employees and the public understand what this proposal will and will not do for schools and students, they will reject it for what it is—a funding gimmick which will do nothing to improve student achievement.”

Mooney disagreed.

“Ask any teacher if $8,000 more in her classroom is a gimmick,” Mooney said. “They say, ‘I’ll take two, please.’”

Mooney conceded little evidence exists to demonstrate that a greater share of funds in the classroom would boost academic performance. However, he challenged the critics, who he said have little evidence to bolster their agenda.

“We’re hearing this from people who just want to spend more money on education,” Mooney said. “Our response is, ‘Can you say that a little louder?’”

Michael Merrifield
State Representative - Manitou Springs, Colorado

Offering Alternatives

State Rep. Michael Merrifield (D - Manitou Springs) has introduced H.B. 1283, an alternative to FCE that would require school districts to spend 75 percent of their operating budgets on “services that directly affect student achievement.”

The bill uses a broader definition than NCES’s, adding counselors, health services, food services, transportation, staff training and professional development, curriculum and assessment services, and building administrators salaries into the 75 percent requirement. The CEA publicly testified in support of H.B. 1283 before the House Education Committee on March 10.

Legislative staff reports showed 162 of 178 Colorado school districts already comply with the expansive 75 percent requirement. By comparison, FCE figures showed only four districts met the proposed 65 percent standard in 2002-03. NCES data indicate Colorado spent 57.3 percent in the classroom that year, ranking the state 48th in the nation.

Mooney said passage of Merrifield’s bill would not rule out the need for FCE. He said the separate 65 percent and 75 percent requirements could be compatible. At press time, the Colorado General Assembly was still considering H.B. 1283.

Ben DeGrou (ben@i21.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free market think tank in Golden, Colorado, and author of the recent publication, “Counting the Cash for K-12: The Facts about Per-Pupil Spending in Colorado,” available online at http://www.i21.org/articles/IB_2006_A_web.pdf.
This spring, many high school seniors will take a basic skills exam—either the SAT or ACT. Many younger students will face end-of-grade tests. These high-stakes testing periods can be a cause of anxiety for students ... but with a little preparation and test-taking know-how, that anxiety can be eased.

Read on for tips that will help parents prepare their students for this time! The advice comes from Kaplan’s SCORE! Educational Centers—a national chain of after-school learning centers for students from pre-kindergarten through 10th grade—and augmented by Teaching That Makes Sense President Steve Peha. Teaching That Makes Sense is a North Carolina-based company offering an array of services for school districts, teachers, parents, students, and communities.

Kaplan recommends: Reading all directions carefully at least twice, to ensure understanding.

Peha says: By all means, read the directions. But read them in a way that will improve your understanding. Test directions are usually written so that almost every part of every sentence contains vital information. So don’t just read the directions—read them sentence-by-sentence and part-by-part. That is, make sure you break longer sentences carefully into meaningful phrases.

How do you do that? Slow your normal reading rate by about 15 to 20 percent, pause a little longer than usual at the ends of sentences and paragraphs, and read with a hint of expression to encourage accurate phrasing.

Kaplan recommends: Underlining key words in directions.

Peha says: Instead of underlining key words, box the entire phrase in which they are contained. Sure, you can remember “compare,” “contrast,” and “define,” but problems on the test will be asking you to compare, contrast, and define certain things. Underlining just the key word and not the other important information associated with it could hamper your understanding and cause you to miss something.

Why use a box rather than underline? Because in complex instructions, your underlines can run together. With boxes, you can keep things separated.

What do you do in really complex instructions where your boxing makes the problem look like a diagram of a football play? List the instructions, part by part, on a separate sheet of scratch paper. It’s a drag, I know, but it will help your understanding and will give you a nifty checklist of things you need to do.

INTERNET INFO
Barriers to Innovation in Government-Run Schools

By Michael Strong

Although a century of failed public school reform (see Diane Ravitch's Left Back: A Hundred Years of Failed School Reform, pressure is increasing for education reforms to be "research-based." Although education reformers—of whom have pedagogically progressive instincts—don’t like to admit it, "direct instruction" is the most robustly validated pedagogical approach. In some versions of direct instruction, every aspect of the lesson is scripted: The teacher stands in front of the room and reads line-by-line through a manual, and students recite the correct answers in unison. This updated version of the very traditional recitation technique of teaching is easily replicated (almost anyone can do it), and the results are predictable: When students repeat answers over and over and over again, they tend to remember them.

This approach, although effective at preparing students to memorize material on tests, is unlikely to produce students who are exceptionally capable of learning how to learn.

Not surprisingly, critics of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and direct instruction complain such approaches destroy creativity and independent thought. However, after 100 years of failed school reform, public school accountability is here to stay.

English and history classes. Brock had both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree from St. John’s College in Santa Fe and had spent a year teaching in Alaska with Kevin Holthaus, from whom Strong had learned his practice. In a world in which one or two days of in-service training is the norm, with two week-long summer training sessions an unusual phenomenon, the MVHS humanities team had all had at least a full year’s training in a very sophisticated pedagogy.

Administrators Determine Quality

Strong is highly aware of the difficulties of quality control in applying his Socratic Practice approach. As a public school consultant, he saw it was impossible to ensure quality control by merely offering consulting services. In the business world, quality control is ensured by distinctive certifications, by franchise arrangements with inspections, or through outright ownership (restaurant and retail store chains).

Prior to Strong’s departure in 2004, MVHS was writing grant proposals to create a Socratic Practice training center that would provide the full-year training required to staff new schools with comparable pedagogical expertise. With MVHS’s controversial track record, for now Strong is unable to continue developing teacher training programs or new schools with adequate quality controls in place.

Philanthropic foundations and the government expect solid “research-based” results in education these days. Entrepreneurs, by contrast, are often individuals who don’t require external validation in order to believe in their visions. And in the marketplace, as long as they can find customers who value their products, they don’t need research.

In his early days, simply based on his visions of the future of the oil industry, John D. Rockefeller famously encouraged his people to buy oil regardless of what the data said. Politicians and bureaucrats (including those bureaucrats who work for private foundations) cannot afford to take such risks.

Ever since Milton Friedman wrote the first article advocating school choice in 1956, the primary argument for the policy has been that it will encourage innovation in education. By and large, the national experience with charter schools has been disappointing in this respect. Although there has been some innovation in charter schools, and although charter schools disproportionately serve at-risk students, the vast majority of charter schools are more notable for their conventionality than an innovative nature.

Create Markets

The first article advocating school choice in 1956, the primary argument for the policy has been that it will encourage innovation in education. By and large, the national experience with charter schools has been disappointing in this respect. Although there has been some innovation in charter schools, and although charter schools disproportionately serve at-risk students, the vast majority of charter schools are more notable for their conventionality than an innovative nature.

One of the arguments Friedman made was that school choice would support innovation by allowing parents and students who preferred one style of pedagogy over another to attend schools specializing in that pedagogy.

From this perspective, the bifurcation of opinion regarding MVHS is natural, good, and to be expected. Product differentiation and specialization occur in a market precisely because consumers have different tastes and preferences. Friedrich Hayek, whose views on “the creative powers of a free civilization” influenced Friedman’s understanding of the innovative powers of free markets, was known for his idea of “spontaneous order.” One aspect of that idea is that in a free market, entrepreneurs find ways of giving customers what they want more effectively than the government can.

Some of these small, specialized niches will grow, and their products will become increasingly sophisticated; indeed, this progression from small niche to dominant player in the marketplace is a fundamental dynamic of innovation. Thus a market that can allow for the possibility of an MVHS that strongly satisfies some consumers while appearing to be a poor product to others is precisely the kind of place that might lead to substantive innovations on a broader scale.

Michael Strong (michael@flowidealism.org) is CEO and chief visionary officer of FLOW, Inc., a group working to achieve peace, prosperity, happiness, and sustainability in 50 years.

Friedrich Hayek and (inset) Milton Friedman touted the innovation spurred by entrepreneurs.
Disaffected with Teaching? Think Bangalore

By Brian Carpenter

Last year, three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas L. Friedman of The New York Times published The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century. In this book, his fourth bestseller, Friedman meticulously chronicles the changing global economic structure coming into being through fiber-optic cable, work-flow software, and other technologies that have converged during the past decade. Friedman refers to these technologies as “flattening sources,” because they are increasingly allowing companies to outsource jobs to places as far away as Bangalore, India and Shanghai, China—which makes the world seem flatter.

The result, Friedman notes, is an economic revolution of such magnitude that the changes brought by the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution will pale in comparison.

“Although the school name and the names of the teachers are pseudonyms, The Dark Side of School Reform is written around actual interviews conducted in a real public high school.”

So what does Friedman’s flat world have to do with school reform? Friedman’s book cemented my concern, as an education reformer, that unless American public schools improve rapidly and stunningly, smart, tech-savvy India and China will become the economic superpowers. The lifestyle and choices to which Americans have long been accustomed are hanging in the balance.

Fictional School, Real Problems

It is against this backdrop of previously unimaginable, seismic economic change—with the most dire of implications for a country whose students consistently score at the bottom of the list on international tests—that I read The Dark Side of School Reform: Teaching in the Space between Reality and Utopia, by Jeffrey S. Brooks (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education) 2005, 199 pages, paperback, ISBN: 1578863058, $24.95 Available through Amazon.

Greater Challenges

While Brooks can be fairly credited with decent writing and for having turned his dissertation into a book—a few doctoral students accomplish—my recommendation is that you spend your $25 on Friedman’s book instead. While it probably isn’t fair to compare the writing of an assistant professor of education with that of a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Friedman is much more thought-provoking. In thinking abstractly about the broad economic changes discussed by Friedman, it becomes obvious that the challenges facing our schools are far graver than teachers feeling disaffected or alienated.

And if the teacher alienation problem is in fact widespread—a conclusion beyond the scope of Brooks’ work—then perhaps it’s time to open the profession to non-certified teachers. For example, why not allow professional mathemeticians and scientists to teach? And let’s implement reforms that force schools to compete for students. Under such a system, the best teachers would make more money, and the disaffected ones could move on to other endeavors.

In a flat world, talented people realize they have little time to indulge themselves in feeling disaffected. Instead, they’re thinking about how to compete with people who are just as smart as they are and who are willing to produce for less. Talented people welcome competition as an opportunity to distinguish themselves. These are the important conclusions at which Brooks fail to arrive.

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The Dark Side of School Reform: Teaching in the Space between Reality and Utopia

by Jeffrey S. Brooks (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education)


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CIRCULATION REPORT

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Our campaign [included] people from everywhere—all economic brackets, all races. People just cared about what happened to children. That’s what we focused on. We didn’t try to blast the public school system; we didn’t try to fight the union. We focused on what we wanted for our kids.

“If parents have a choice, children have a chance.” That was our motto. When the media interviewed us, that’s what we told them. And when they wanted to hear the dirt, we didn’t have any.

We believe when something happens in the District, it trickles down to the rest of the country. And we felt a big responsibility to make sure this worked. Because if it worked in D.C., maybe other people would look at it and say, “We need to try something different with our kids,” and it will work in other places. That was an added responsibility for our group, and we took that very, very seriously.

**Constant Presence**

We spent from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day on Capitol Hill for 10 months. Sometimes it would be 10 of us, sometimes it would be 20, sometimes it would be 50 of us, depending on what was going on. We participated in every hearing connected with the legislation. We went to every press conference that anybody called. We were there for their hearings, in our T-shirts. We literally wore T-shirts and jeans every day for a year.

We talked to the press and told our stories to anyone who’d listen. We walked around the halls of Capitol Hill and talked with staff people, congressmen when we could, and we made friends with security. We were everywhere. And we were with our children when they could be there; we did not take our children out of school. In summer and on holidays, children were with us, so our children are very politically savvy. They know how to work the Hill—even our little two- and three-year-olds.

That’s what made the difference. Congress started looking at us as the face of this legislation, not just a piece of paper. It started being something for these children and these families. I’m convinced the turning point of our legislation was the parents. We walked into congressional offices and made a difference.

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