D.C. Mayor Advocates School Restructuring

By Kate McGreevy

Andr´e Fenty, the newly elected mayor of the District of Columbia, is the latest city leader to propose a dramatic governance overhaul of Washington’s struggling public school system.

On January 4, just two days after taking the oath of office, Fenty unveiled the District of Columbia Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007. At press time, the city council was scheduled to vote on the measure in April.

Seeking Authority
Fenty needs a majority of the D.C. City Council to approve the plan. If successful, he will join the ranks of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, and a handful of others nationwide who have wrested governance powers from city boards of education.

“Schools have always been a big priority for Mayor Fenty,” said Carrie Brooks, Fenty’s spokeswoman. “As a member of the city council, he helped push through legislation for schools. He’s always been concerned with both poor performance and facility disrepair. Mayor Fenty knew that if he had the chance to serve as mayor, he wanted dramatic changes, and traveling around to other cities following similar models, he saw successes.”

Shifting Governance
Fenty, who as a councilman opposed the restructuring proposed by previous mayor Anthony Williams, would shift ultimate accountability to the mayor’s office.

Special-Needs Vouchers Fail in Committee of Va. Legislature

By Lori Drummer

The Virginia House Appropriations Committee defeated Senate Bill 1419, the Tuition Assistance Grants for Children with Disabilities Act, by a 13-7 vote on February 16.

For the third consecutive year, the Virginia General Assembly failed to pass legislation that would allow special-needs students to attend schools of their parents’ choice. The hard-fought battle continued until the close of the two-year legislative session, but the teach-
Only 70% of all students in public high school graduate. Of those, less than 50% are qualified to attend four year college.

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Lawmakers Push for More State, Local Flexibility Under NCLB

By Dan Lips

As Congressional committees opened hearings on reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in mid-March, conservative lawmakers on Capitol Hill unveiled a proposal to give states greater freedom and flexibility in how federal funds for education are used.

At a March 15 news conference, U.S. Sens. Jim DeMint (R-SC) and John Cornyn (R-TX) and Rep. Pete Hoekstra (R-MI) announced their introduction of the Academic Partnerships Lead Us to Success, or A PLUS, Acts.

“States should be given the flexibility to design educational programs that fit the local needs of individual districts, parents, and children,” Cornyn explained. “This bill will reduce the bureaucratic red tape that often stands in the way of results, accountability, and superior schools.”

DeMint suggested greater flexibility and state control are necessary to spur needed reforms.

“While No Child Left Behind measures and confirms the failures of public schools, it is not enough to improve them,” DeMint said.

Five-Year Contracts

The Cornyn-DeMint A PLUS legislation (S. 893) would give states the opportunity to establish a five-year performance agreement with the U.S. Department of Education. Under the contract, states would be free to consolidate funds from federal education programs and redirect that funding toward state-level initiatives.

In exchange for this freedom, states would maintain state-level testing and establish academic goals. States would have to meet those goals in order to continue the performance agreement at the end of the term.

The proposal marks a distinct shift from NCLB’s current accountability measures. States would have greater freedom to design and implement their own state tests, although they would still be required to test students annually, report information to parents and the public, and disaggregate data for student subgroups.

House Proposal

Hoekstra, lead sponsor of companion legislation in the House of Representatives (H.R. 1539), stated his bill aims to end the trend toward greater centralization in education.

“Congress has gone from overwhelmingly voting against national testing in 1998 to the largest intrusion into education since the Department of Education was created in 1979 in No Child Left Behind,” Hoekstra noted. “The federal government cannot continue to impose more testing, more costly mandates, and more penalties.”

The House version of the A PLUS plan would give states the opportunity to make a declaration of intent to reclaim autonomy of education policymaking authority. Under that declaration, the state would be free to use its share of federal funding on local initiatives with basic guidelines from Washington.

Capitol Hill Prospects

The joint news conference was held days after a bicaucal committee hearing that began the Congressional NCLB reauthorization process. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Rep. George Miller (D-CA) have stated they intend to continue the reauthorization process forward this year.

The Cornyn-DeMint A PLUS plan was introduced with five original sponsors in the Senate, including Sens. Mel Martinez (R-FL) and Sam Brownback (R-KS), who spoke at the Capitol Hill news conference. In the House, 52 Republicans are sponsoring the Hoekstra plan, including minority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Missouri).

With Democratic leaders and the Bush administration advocating renewal of NCLB, it is uncertain whether a fundamental reform approach will have any chance during the reauthorization process.

But Hoekstra is confident in the process, noting voters are being given the opportunity to change the political dynamics by speaking out in favor of restoring state and local control in education.

Dan Lips (dan.lips@heritage.org) is an education analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Virginia

Continued from page 1

tchers union and Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) were successful in stopping legislative momentum. “There are special-education students in Virginia who are not getting the education they deserve,” said Christian N. Braunlich, vice president of the Virginia-based Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy. “When the money follows the child, it benefits both public education students and those who choose to attend private schools.”

The bill, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Walter Stosch (R-Glen Allen), would have provided a tuition assistance grant for public school students to attend a private school if their parents are dissatisfied with their children’s educational progress. Participating private schools would have to be non-religious and licensed to teach students with disabilities. Fewer than 100 schools in Virginia currently meet these standards.

The scholarship amount was to be limited to the state’s share of the child’s public school education and could not exceed $10,000 per year.

**Arguing Money Issues**

The VSBA did not return calls seeking comment, but in a February 16 post on the Virginia Education Association teachers union Web site, a blogger wrote:

“Delegate Phillips and Joannou revealed the legal problems the bill would pose for public schools. Phillips was relentless. ... Delegate Landes pointed out that SB1419, despite Stosch’s assertions to the contrary, is a voucher bill. “The result is that we, with your help, appear to have kept Virginia voucher free for another year,” Braunlich called the claims against the bill “illogical and untrue.”

“They claim that this program bleeds public education funding dry, but considering Virginia’s school funding system, special-education scholarships actually help the public schools financially because only the state education funding will follow the child, and the local dollars remain with the local public schools,” Braunlich said.

**Retaining Funding**

While the maximum scholarship would have been capped at $10,000, the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy estimates the average grant would likely have been about $5,000. According to the Virginia Department of Education, the average cost of educating a student with disabilities is $16,000. A significant portion of the average per-pupil expenditure would stay with the public schools. An average of $4,500 of local funding per pupil and an average of $850 per pupil of the state retail sales and use tax distribution would remain in each school system. Additionally, more than 85 percent of federal funds would have remained with the local public school system, which averages $560 per pupil.

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“The VSBA wrongly claims that special education scholarships will not lead to a skyrocketing increase in due process hearings leading to lawsuits against school systems, but the evidence shows that in Florida’s McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities program, due process hearings have actually declined,” said Braunlich.

**Moving Forward**

Another educational option measure that made limited progress through the Virginia General Assembly was Del. Chris Saxman’s (R-Staunton) Public/ Private Investment Tax Credit. The bill passed through the House of Delegates for the third year in a row, but the Senate Finance Committee did not vote on the measure before the close of the session on February 24.

The measure would have created income tax credits for businesses and individual taxpayers making contributions to eligible public school foundations and scholarship foundations.

“For the third consecutive year, the Virginia General Assembly failed to pass legislation that would allow special-needs students to attend schools of their parents’ choice.”

For individual taxpayers, the annual credit was to be 100 percent of the contribution, but could not exceed $800 for individual taxpayers and $1,200 for married couples. The amount of the annual credit for business entities would have been 90 percent of the contribution, with no limit on the dollar amount.

The bill had a $20 million cap on total tax credits awarded annually, with $10 million allocated for contributions made to public school foundations and $10 million allocated for contributions to foundations that award scholarship grants to students to attend private schools of their choice.

The public school foundations accepting donations under the program would have been required to disburse 90 percent of their contributions for qualified educational expenses through scholarships.

**Encouraged by Progress**

“We should be encouraged by progress made this year on two very important school choice bills,” said Anna Varghese Marcucio, director of state projects at the...
Vouchers for At-Risk Students Proposed in Texas

By Connie Sadowski

On March 9, Texas state Sen. Kyle Janek (R-Houston) introduced Senate Bill 1506, which would allow the State Comptroller’s office to give students vouchers to “escape poor-performing, inadequate, or unsafe schools.”

The bill stipulates that no more than 5 percent of the students in each district may receive a voucher. Qualifying districts would include the Austin, Dallas, Edgewood, Fort Worth, Harlandale, Houston, North Forest, San Antonio, and South San Antonio independent school districts. Eligible students would have to be victims of bullying, at risk for dropping out, taking special-education courses, or have limited English proficiency.

To qualify, a student would have to live in a county with more than 750,000 people, and his or her current school district must have at least 90 percent economically disadvantaged students. Also, only current public school or first-time school attendees from low-income families would be eligible.

The receiving private schools would not be an agent of the government, the bill text continues, and schools would have autonomy to “allow maximum freedom” to provide for the educational needs of students “without governmental control or influence.”

“Texas schools are not serving Texas students,” Janek explained. “Are we supposed to just abandon the students who are in failing schools now while we work on long-term fixes?”

“Texas state Sen. Kyle Janek introduced Senate Bill 1506, which would allow the State Comptroller’s office to give students vouchers to ‘escape poor-performing, inadequate, or unsafe schools.’”

Steadfast Opposition

Janek believes the bill will “make public schools happy” because 10 percent of the per-student funding would stay with the public school the child left. Many public school lobbyists are not educating their members on the actual merits of vouchers, he said.

The Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT), representing more than 56,000 teachers and support personnel, steadfastly opposes any voucher program. In a March 3 e-mail, members were directed to contact legislators to oppose vouchers because “resources should be spent on improving educational opportunity in our public schools for all students, not serving a select few in private settings.” The TFT alert urged members to oppose SB 1000, a school choice bill for students with autism, but did not provide a Web link or an outline of the text of the bill for interested members to read. Instead, it urged the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to pursue federal grants for autism training for public school teachers.

The Texas Freedom Network, a left-leaning think tank, claims on its Web site, “fly-by-night schools would open looking only to make a profit” and “the state would be powerless to prevent unaccredited unqualified schools from taking taxpayer funds.”

Quality Measures

But according to SB 1506, each qualifying school would have to be accredited by an approved accrediting association. Additionally, each school would be required to administer a nationally norm-referenced test; voucher students would have to be tracked; and an evaluation and impact study of the program would be required—paid for by privately funded grants.

In a March 16 alert to members, Peggy Venable, Texas director of the national free-market group Americans for Prosperity, challenged education lobbyists to more adequately inform and poll their members about vouchers.

Venable says vouchers will help public schools, but believes legislators have “long been harased by the educrat lobby to avoid meaningful discussion of vouchers.”

It is time for legislators to show some leadership and put the schoolchildren of Texas first,” Venable said, “not the self-serving education union lobby.”

Tripled Spending, More Dropouts

Texas lawmakers have “tripled per-student spending, increased teacher salaries, and decreased class sizes,” said Jamie Story, policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market, Austin-based think tank. “Those reforms have led to little, if any, improvement in test scores, and they certainly have not helped [improve] the alarmingly low graduation rates of today.”

“True graduation rates in Texas are around 67 percent,” Story continued. “High school dropouts cost taxpayers money.”

A modest school choice program that increases private school enrollment by less than 5 percent could save the state “$55 million each year in increased tax revenue and decreased Medicaid and incarceration costs,” Story said.

The Texas Freedom Network did not return calls for comment.

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the referendum is not enough to stop vouchers from being issued, but it may weaken the law’s chances of withstand-
ing a constitutional challenge.

At press time, the lieutenant govern-
or’s office was working to verify the sig-
natures by April 30. Gov. Jon Huntsman
Jr. (R) has said he will hold a special
election in June to bring the referendum
to voters, provided the signatures are
valid. Otherwise, the program is sched-
uled to take effect this fall.

Protecting Status Quo
“We’re disappointed that [school choice
opponents] have gone to this length
to block the program from going into
effect this year,” said Elisa Peterson,
executive director of Parents for Choice
in Education (PCE), a Utah-based advocacy
organization.

However, “this program is a crack in
the dyke in the teachers union’s mono-
polistic control of the system,” Peterson
said, “so it’s not surprising that they go
to this length to stop it.”

Because Utah already has a voucher
law in place, awarding scholarships to
disabled students, limited school choice
will be available in the state regardless
of the petition effort’s success.

However, any provisions in the univer-
sal voucher law that are not also in
the disabled students voucher program could
be vulnerable in court. For example, the
universal voucher would be available
to students who attend private sectar-
ian schools, while the disabled students
voucher is not.

Utahns for Public Schools spokesperson
Marilyn Kofford said the group wants a
referendum because of the drastic impact
they say the universal voucher program
could have on the public school system.

“The bill passed in the House by one
vote,” Kofford said. “We don’t think that
is an overwhelming show of support for
the voucher program. So we feel that
every person should have the chance
to vote on this, since it would create such
a big change in the way our school system
works.”

“In early March, opponents
of Utah’s new universal
voucher law began working
on a referendum to repeal it.”

The universal voucher program, the
Parent Choice in Education Act, would
provide every Utah public school student
with a voucher for private school educa-
tion ranging from $500 to $3,000, depend-
ing on household income. Low-income
students already attending private school
also would be eligible.

Challenging Wrong Law
Clark Neily, senior attorney for the
institute for Justice, an Arlington,
Virginia-based public interest law
firm, said the referendum effort may not work
as the law’s opponents would like. The
voucher measure may have passed the
legislature with a referendum-proof
majority.

“They have a huge problem because
they have challenged the wrong law,”
Neily said.

“The voucher program was original-
lly in House Bill 148, which squeaked
through the legislature,” Neily explained.

“Provisions, like additional oversight for
schools, were added. Most of the provi-
sions of the bill were rewritten into House
Bill 174, which was then voted on by the
legislature and passed with 72 percent
of the House vote and 79 percent of the
Senate.”

“This is significant because the statute
opponents are depending on for the refer-
endum exempted bills that have passed
by more than two-thirds of the legislature,”
Neily explained. “They challenged House
Bill 148, not 174, which is immune from
a referendum. There really isn’t much left
of House Bill 148 in 174 because most of
the provisions were amended and super-
seded in the latter bill. My gut feeling is
that ultimately the teacher unions are
going to lose this one.”

Forcing Delay
Peterson said the petition drive is like-
ly to succeed in forcing a referendum
because school choice opponents have
found strategic ways to get signatures for
the petition.

“They’ve enlisted all the teachers and
the Parent Teacher Association,” Peterson
said. “There are a lot of interesting argu-
ments and false claims being made about
the program to convince people to help
gather signatures and sign the petition.
Some include statements like ‘The legis-
lature was pressured to vote for this [by
PCE] even though they didn’t want to.’
Legislators laughed at this and said, ‘You
want to talk about pressure, then talk
about the teachers union pressuring us
not to support this.’

Kofford said voucher opponents were
specifically told not to bully or pressure
anyone into signing the referendum
petition.

Claiming Tax Hikes
Another false claim, Peterson said, is
that the program will raise taxes to make
up for money being drained from public
schools.

“This program is a crack in
the dyke in the teachers
union’s monopolistic control
of the system, so it’s not
surprising that they go to this
length to stop it.”

Utah State Attorney
General Mark Shurtleff
said the anti-voucher ref-
endum would not be
enough to stop vouchers
from being issued.

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Missouri House Rejects Two School Choice Measures

By Aricka Flowers

In March, the Missouri House of Representatives rejected a school choice bill that would have created tax credits for individuals and businesses. The vote was 96-62.

House Bill 498, sponsored by Rep. Ed Robb (R-Columbia) would have launched the Milton Friedman “Put Parents in Charge” Education Program, giving academically struggling or low-income students scholarships to private schools or public schools outside their home districts.

A similar bill, House Bill 808 sponsored by Speaker Pro Tem Carl Bearden (R-St. Charles), also was defeated 96-62 on March 7.

HB 808 would have established the Betty L. Thompson Scholarship. Under the program, tax cuts would have been given to any taxpayer contributing to a scholarship-granting organization, which would provide vouchers worth an average $5,000 to students until it reached a cap of $40 million per year.

Scant Chance

Brian McGrath, director of programs and state relations at the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, an Indianapolis-based school choice organization, said he hadn’t expected HB 498 to pass, even though school choice advocates were more comfortable with tax credits than with other forms of choice, such as vouchers.

“I thought it was unlikely that HB 498 would go anywhere” McGrath explained. “That type of bill basically lets you direct your tax dollars to educational reform. It gets businesses involved and appeals to people who oppose vouchers because it puts a layer between the government and the funding.

“It’s a good attempt, but I still prefer vouchers,” McGrath continued. “They are easier to do and don’t involve dealing with tax codes. Plus, it’s more of an efficient way for everyone to get a piece of the education pie.”

Too Much

According to a March 2006 study conducted by the Friedman Foundation, Missouri high school dropouts take a toll on taxpayers’ pocketbooks. Dropouts from the class of 2005 will cost the state $71 million every year of their lives in Medicaid, incarceration, and lost tax revenue.

McGrath said people in rural areas of the state need to realize they are just as affected by failing public schools as the students who attend them.

“In rural Missouri you may not be concerned about what is going on in the inner city, but you should be,” McGrath said. “You are paying not only for the dropouts, but are also putting tax dollars into a poor system.”

INTERNET INFO


“The tax credit plan is hardly a choice for parents because all they can do is apply. The private foundations decide who gets the money.”

MAE DUGGAN

PRESIDENT

CITIZENS FOR EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM

Too Little

Though HB 498 would have allowed some parents to send their child to any school they desire, some school choice advocates say it wouldn’t have been enough.

“It is a very limited choice because it depends on how many people donate private money,” explained Mae Duggan, president of Citizens for Educational Freedom (CEF), a Missouri-based school choice organization.

“It is also limited to poor children who receive the scholarship from private foundations,” Duggan continued. “Vouchers are a much broader choice. The tax credit plan is hardly a choice for parents because all they can do is apply. The private foundations decide who gets the money.”

But vouchers would be difficult to achieve in Missouri because of current laws and the political climate, said McGrath. Missouri’s constitution contains a Blaine amendment, which forbids using state funds at “sectarian” schools.

“The teachers association is also playing a big role in impeding school choice measures,” McGrath added. “The Kansas City and St. Louis school districts are horrible, but the people who work in them are protecting their jobs. The people in rural Missouri have a superintendent that is leaning on them to stay out of it because it may mean that some of the kids would come to their schools and they worry about preserving their superior school system.”

New Strategy

Dugan said CEF is devising a promotional strategy for school choice in Missouri. Although legislation like HB 498 would lead to some degree of choice, she believes a better solution would be to repeal the state’s Blaine amendment.

“The best way toward really having school choice is to have a basic-education student tuition plan,” Dugan said. “I think that rather than all these gimmicks, the basic education of reading, writing, and arithmetic should be provided with the help of a basic grant that would be constructed according to the school. Religion could be added by parental choice, in the case of Catholic schools. Parents would be able to negotiate with schools to create a plan that works well for them.”

“The St. Louis public school system is spending $11,000 per child each year, the kids don’t get educated, and the schools are physically dangerous,” Duggan added. “I think parents would be glad to get $500 or $1,000 and arrange for any extra help they can get. Many times, parents are able to work with the schools which provide additional help to low-income children.”

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Chicago.
Colorado Divided Over Systemic Education Reforms

By Ben DeGrow

Democratic Party leaders in Colorado are proposing an overhaul of the state’s education system, but the national report that stirred the discussion has evoked significant skepticism.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff (D-Denver) wants to reshape the educational system in Colorado as he looks to formulate a plan that focuses the state’s energy on common reform objectives.

Immediately upon the December 2006 release of the national report Tough Choices or Tough Times by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), Romanoff touted the report as “a blueprint for change that Colorado should embrace to create a highly skilled twenty-first century workforce.”

Centralizing Reform

The systematic changes Tough Choices urges for American schools include improving and narrowing test standards, issuing mandatory high school board exams, trimming teacher pensions to free money with which to recruit and reward high-quality instructors, giving management of schools to independent contractors, increasing contributions to early childhood education, and allotting funds directly to schools based on students’ learning needs.

“It’s a highly centralized approach to school reform, rather than a market-oriented, decentralized approach that resembles Germany’s state-centered model for education. It indoctrinates children in the philosophy that public schools steer them toward careers and jobs that are determined to be important by government planners,” he said.

Bob Schaffer, vice chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education, agrees with the report’s diagnosis but believes the proposed remedy is entirely wrong.

“It seeks a highly centralized approach to school reform, rather than a market-oriented, decentralized approach that appeals to consumers,” Schaffer said.

Romanoff does not insist the report’s specific proposals are the necessary prescription for Colorado, but he believes it provides a concrete starting point to bridge the ideological divide between school choice reformers and establishment advocates who plead for more funding.

“I think this proposal offers us a chance to break that deadlock,” said Romanoff.

Seizing Momentum

Gov. Bill Ritter (D) has taken no public stance on the Tough Choices report. But Sen. Nancy Spence (R-Centennial), the ranking minority member of the Senate Education Committee, believes he wants to push the education reform discussion in another direction.

“I think Governor Ritter is interested in establishing his own mark on education, and it’s not going to be [by] accepting a report from Washington,” Spence said.

NCEE operates out of Washington, DC under the direction of former Clinton appointee and influential education standards advocate Marc Tucker.

The creation of a “P-20 Council” is a keystone of Ritter’s education agenda, outlined in his “Colorado Promise” campaign document. The council’s goal will be to bring K-12 and higher education stakeholders together to help ensure the system’s graduates have “the skills needed to enter a modern workforce.”

“Democratic Party leaders in Colorado are proposing an overhaul of the state’s education system, but the national report that stirred the discussion has evoked significant skepticism.”

Romanoff admitted the constitutional issue is “an especially serious concern” but shouldn’t derail reform efforts.

Challenging Local Control

If Tough Choices is to be the vehicle for change in Colorado, it could encounter a major legal obstacle.

Spence believes the report’s proposals to diminish local school boards’ oversight and to make all teachers state employees would “be in violation of the Colorado Constitution.” Article IX, Section 15 gives local school boards “control of instruction in the public schools of their districts.”

“The state is still small enough that you can conduct a conversation,” Romanoff said.

Finding the Right Place

Spence expressed her skepticism about the report’s future in the Rocky Mountain West. “There’s not any reason to think that anyone from the East Coast can make decisions about our state. Tough Choices is out there, but it doesn’t have solutions for Colorado,” she said.

Nevertheless, Romanoff believes Colorado’s highly educated citizens make it the right setting to debate the report’s themes and proposals, and that Colorado is a more realistic venue than a state such as California.

“There’s a lot of energy in the state around new ideas for education,” said Matt Gianneschi, Ritter’s senior policy analyst. “The idea for a P-20 Council is to capitalize on the momentum of recent years of how to engage students to achieve the most in our education system.”

Pushing Buttons

Still, much focus remains on the Tough Choices blueprint for reform.

“A hot button for early discussions has been the report’s call to use state board examinations to help determine whether high school sophomores should move on to a four-year university, community college, or trade school.”

Schaffer said the report’s proposals resemble Germany’s state-centered model for education. “It indoctrinates children in the philosophy that public schools steer them toward careers and jobs that are determined to be important by government planners,” he said.

Others share that skepticism.

“We ought to be measuring performance, not just seat time,” Romanoff said.

Measuring Performance

Ritter says tough students could take the board exam as many times as necessary.

“‘I think this proposal offers us a chance to break that deadlock,’” said Romanoff.

Romanoff says the focus should be on finding out what students have learned, not simply letting them pass on to the next grade level because of their age.

“We ought to be measuring performance, not just seat time,” Romanoff said.

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Tough Choices or Tough Times, National Center on Education Reform and the Economy, http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=20597

By Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
U.S. K-12 Schools Fail to Prepare Students: Report
By Mary Susan Littlepage

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Enterprise Institute, and Center for American Progress jointly released a report at the end of February showing the poor state of public education nationwide.

“We are hopeful that the report will serve as a wakeup call” about the state of the education system, said Karen Elzey, senior director at the Institute for a Competitive Workforce. The institute is an arm of the Washington, DC-based U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which works to ensure businesses have access to an educated, skilled workforce. “Hopefully it will lead to increased student achievement and more young people will be better prepared for both postsecondary school and the workforce.”


Performance Data Lacking
Student achievement is low, even as education spending increases, the report says. The study found America’s school systems could benefit greatly by partnering with the business community to focus on business concepts such as accountability, efficiency, flexibility, innovation, and a focus on achievement.

According to the report, “the lack of reliable and available data on state performance is alarming and created serious challenges in evaluating results on a state-by-state basis. The data must be compiled and monitored if we are to succeed in improving student performance nationwide. No responsible publicly or privately held firm could operate successfully with such a lack of data.”

Excuses Refuted
Other major findings include:
• Return on investment varies greatly state by state. Utah and North Carolina seem to spend their education dollars more wisely than other states.
• Some states with a high percentage of low-income and minority students score much better on achievement tests than other states with similar demographics. High-achieving states with large percentages of normally low-scoring groups include Florida, Kansas, Texas, and Virginia.
• Forward-looking states, such as Arizona and Colorado, are nurturing innovation by encouraging charter school legislation and online schooling.

Positive Feedback
The report’s authors write, “the goal must be that each and every student completes high school equipped for college or for a skilled, rewarding position in the workforce.” The groups involved with creating the report have received “very positive feedback” from people in government, Elzey said, adding that the business community particularly wants to help implement improvements in education for kindergarten through 12th grade.

Determining Effectiveness
Don Soifer, executive vice president of the Lexington Institute, a free-market think tank in Arlington, Virginia, called “Leaders and Laggards” “an important snapshot” of the country’s education system and “a good, thoughtful report.”

“Return on investment is a healthy way to start the conversation” of evaluating school systems, Soifer said.

Soifer said it is important to track progress state by state. Although the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is looking at federal policy findings, Soifer said more scrutiny of state education policies helps determine whether or not they are misguided; policymakers need to look at whether their student achievement standards are too high or too low.

“This report is an important tool to help facilitate that,” Soifer said.

Following Up
The report concludes that restructuring American education will require “raising standards for all students and changing how teachers are hired and compensated,” as well as rewarding principals who manage schools effectively. Soifer said states should try to attract the best possible teachers and consider including mid-level professionals as possible high school teachers if they have real-world subject matter expertise, even if they lack teaching certificates.

Mary Susan Littlepage (mslp@mylittlepages.com) writes from Chicago.

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Local Wisc. School Superintendent Wants Charter School for His District

By Daschell M. Phillips

When Ken Bates became superintendent of the Green Lake School District in central Wisconsin last July, he inherited a huge problem—a financially struggling school system with little state aid and steadily declining enrollment.

Fortunately, Bates also had an idea for a solution: Add at least one charter school to the district.

“Charter schools are flexible, and they would have freedom from state regulations,” Bates said. “It would also give staff the opportunity to think creatively” about curriculum design.

The Green Lake school board was scheduled to begin formal discussions about implementing charter schools in April. A final proposal will be completed this summer, and the charter may start in the 2008 school year. Other details have yet to be determined.

Good Option

The charter school, which may include grades 7-12, will have an environment that Bates said, “We want to use the lake as a classroom and give the students hands-on experience,” Bates said.

Senn Brown, executive secretary of the Wisconsin Charter School Association, a statewide charter school advocacy group in Madison, said charter schools are proving to be great alternatives for parents and children, as well as a good way to increase enrollment and funding in school districts.

“The interaction between charter and state schools allows children to take part in an open-enrollment charter school policy,” Brown said. “Charter programs attract families from neighboring districts and the funding follows the child to whichever school they attend.”

Subsidizing Parents

“We have private, independent and religious, church-affiliated schools. Those institutions and schools can find ways to make themselves as affordable as possible,” added Wright, who has been a foster parent since 1994. “But it’s not the business of the state of Arizona to enhance their enrollment.”

Critics of the new programs, which were passed in the 2006 legislative session and signed into law by Gov. Janet Napolitano (D), say the programs violate the state constitution’s Blaine amendment, which holds, “No tax shall be laid or appropriation of public money made in aid of any church, or private or sectarian school, or any public service corporation.”

But supporters insist the state is not directing funds to religious or sectarian schools, because parents and students, not the schools, receive the money and are the beneficiaries of these programs.

“The state supreme court has already decided that the Blaine amendment is designed to ensure the state operates in a neutral fashion,” said Tim Keller, executive director of the Arizona chapter of the Institute for Justice (IJ), which represents parents who want to use the state-funded scholarships for their children.

In the new voucher programs, Keller noted, “not a dollar goes to private schools absent the choice of parents to enroll students.”

Offering Hope

Keller pointed to client Andrea Weck, whose five-year-old daughter Lexie has cerebral palsy, autism, and mild retardation. After two years in an early childhood program at her neighborhood public school, Lexie hadn’t made the progress her parents or teachers expected. Weck enrolled Lexie in Chrysalis Academy, a private school in Tempe that specializes in educating children with autism and related disorders.

Weck reports marked strides in Lexie’s academic and social skills. Lexie received a scholarship for the 2006-07 academic year at Chrysalis through the new voucher program for disabled children.

If the trial court overturns the law, Lexie’s family will be unable to afford her private education.

“One of the most aggravating aspects of this lawsuit is that nine other children are at Chrysalis on public funds,” Keller said. “But the difference is that bureaucrats had a hand in the placements [through individualized education plans or similar programs]. Because my client exercised parental choice, [the plaintiffs in the lawsuit] want to take that away from her.”

Families like the Wecks are keeping a close eye on the case, in part because the plaintiffs asked the court for a temporary injunction, which would bar the state from distributing the scholarships for disabled children. The court will hear oral arguments on June 4. IJ attorneys don’t expect the judge to rule on the injunction before then.

The program for foster children is slated to begin in the 2007-08 school year.

Attacking Tax Credits

A few weeks after the ACLU and other plaintiffs filed suit against the voucher programs, a Maricopa County Superior Court judge dismissed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Arizona’s corporate tax credit program.

The legislation allows dollar-for-dollar tax credits up to $10 million this year for corporations that donate to groups providing grants for private school tuition to children who meet basic criteria. The $10 million cap will increase by 20 percent each year.

In her written opinion, Judge Janet Barton said the program is “legally indistinguishable” from the individual tax credit program upheld by the Arizona Supreme Court in the 1999 Kotterman v. Killian case, which determined tax credits are not public money and therefore not subject to the state’s Blaine amendment.

Furthermore, the judge ruled, because parents—not the state—determine where the funds go, the program is constitutional. The ACLU and the Arizona School Boards Association filed the suit against the corporate tax credit program in September.

Arizona Voucher Foes Try Again

By Hilary Masell Oswald

In another round of legal battles over Arizona’s newest school choice legislation, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and several other organizations and individuals filed a lawsuit in trial court on February 20, alleging the two new voucher programs illegally divert public funding to private and religious schools.

Each program—one for foster children, the other for disabled children—provides $2.5 million in state-funded scholarships annually for students to attend the schools of their families’ choosing, public or private.

The suit came just a month after the Arizona Supreme Court declined to hear a special-action lawsuit against the programs, filed in November by many of the same challengers.

“Voucher[s] are bad policy, bad education policy, bad economic policy,” said John Wright, president of the Arizona Education Association (AEA), a union representing educators and other public school employees. The AEA is one of the plaintiffs in the new suit.

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Hilary Masell Oswald (hilary_oswald@comcast.net) writes from Illinois.
Mayor
Continued from page 1

office under the plan.

The main features of Fenty's proposal include:
• establishing an independent school construction authority that would manage building improvements, financing, and consolidation;
• shifting the elected school board's functions to mirror a state board of education, requiring it to focus on issues such as academic achievement and teacher policy;
• granting the D.C. Council line-item veto authority over the school budget, which would be proposed by the mayor; and
• shifting oversight of D.C.'s substantial charter school community from two authorizers, one being the Board of Education, to one authorizer, the D.C. Public Charter School Board.

Brooks said student achievement is Fenty's bottom line concern, noting D.C. often occupies the lowest rung of the test score ladder nationwide.

Targeting Achievement
According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 67 percent of D.C. fourth-graders scored below basic levels in reading and 55 percent below basic in math. Eighth-grade NAEP scores showed similar trends.

"In other cities [where mayors have taken control], there have been improvements in test scores, and that is what it's all about," Brooks said. "We are at the bottom of the testing world—the worst in the country."

The D.C. Board of Education, composed of five elected members and four mayoral appointees, responded to Fenty's proposal with a counter-initiative on January 29.

The Emergency Student Achievement Act of 2007 calls for creation of a procurement authority to oversee contracts, flexibility with teachers unions, a different budget process, more funding for special education, and a District of Columbia Department of Education that would function much like a state department of education.

Opposing Measure
Carol Schwartz (R), an at-large councilmember, has been vocal about her opposition to the mayor's plan, saying D.C. finally has a capable superintendent and a fresh board of education.

"I do not believe that the mayor's proposed plan is the answer. For starters, it is largely based on the New York model, which was set up to address a set of problems, including multiple school boards, which we do not have," Schwartz said. "Also, I am concerned that we would be turning over an entire school system to our new mayor before he has shown us that he can improve the broken systems currently under his jurisdiction."

Brooks said Fenty believes the feedback he received while campaigning door-to-door is mandate enough to move forward.

"He feels strongly that he has a mandate from the people. The top two things people said to him were fix the schools and create better jobs, and of course, these initiatives are interrelated," Brooks said.

Gauging Public Opinion
While Fenty appears to have the necessary support from the D.C. Council, Brooks noted it is not being taken for granted. Fenty is meeting with the council regularly, and public hearings were held throughout February by the council to elicit public opinion.

Critics and allies alike will keep a close eye on Fenty's progress. All agree the political risk appears formidable.

"When Mayor Bloomberg came down a few weeks ago when we first took office a member of his team said, 'The worst is that things stay the same, which is pretty bad,'" Brooks said. "But most likely, things will improve. Mayor Fenty is staking his entire term on this issue. And it's pass or fail."

By Kate McGreevy

Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's (D) State of the City address in March provided hope that he may soon expand support for several types of schools in addition to government-run schools.

"Education in the city of Detroit cannot continue to be looked at as the Detroit Public Schools only," Kilpatrick said in his March 13 address. "Our children attend charter schools. Our children attend private schools. Our children attend parochial schools. Our children attend inner-ring suburban schools. There is even an emerging homeschool base growing in our city."

After a first term scarred by Kilpatrick and Gov. Jennifer Granholm's (D) joint rejection of a $200 million philanthropic gift targeting charter schools, skeptics did not expect Kilpatrick to consider broad reform efforts in the Motor City.

But Harrison Blackmond, president and chief executive officer of the Detroit chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, said Kilpatrick has always been open to supporting various educational options. He said the mayor sends his own children to charter and private schools.

"He has consistently supported educational options and other reforms as a way to provide quality education for Detroit children," Blackmond said. "A former Detroit Public School teacher himself, the mayor, while a state legislator, was instrumental in establishing the so-called Detroit reform board of education in 1999."

Mass Exodus
While it is unclear whether Kilpatrick will attempt to take control of the public schools—as New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and others have done—he followed his State of the City address with a visit to the University Preparatory Academy charter school on March 26.

"There are others who want to open up [charter] schools," Kilpatrick told the Detroit Free Press during his visit. "I'm also talking to some of the private schools to open up satellite places in Detroit."

Kilpatrick may be responding to the steady departure of students from traditional public schools in Detroit to city and suburban charter, private, and parochial options.

Nearly 51,000 students, or roughly one-third of the city's schoolchildren, are currently enrolled in charter schools or public schools in neighboring suburban districts, according to a January 25 Detroit News report. Last fall alone, 5,000 students left Detroit's public schools for other options—a trend Blackmond said Kilpatrick is keenly aware of.

"Middle- and working-class residents who have school-age children and who want them to attend good schools cannot afford to continue to send their children to failing schools, or private or parochial schools," Blackmond explained. "These families represent a significant tax base for the city and everyone that leaves takes not only the state foundation grant for the schools, but also income and property taxes for the city."

Expanded Role
With New York City and Chicago showing promising returns from increased mayoral control of public schools, and the District of Columbia considering joining them, a small ripple effect could be generating across the country.

Martin Chavez, Albuquerque's first-term mayor, has been actively pursuing the support he would need in the New Mexico legislature for increasing his control of the city's schools, though so far without success.

In Hartford, Connecticut and Los Angeles, mayors are finding creative ways around resistance to their control.

Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez appointed himself to the city's school board, and Villaraigosa is backing school board candidates who will support his plans.

By Kate McGreevy

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California

Continued from page 1

Standards tests, graduation rates, coursework, and school finance system.

Although many people suspect the state’s public education system is not performing well, the reality is far worse than they imagine, according to the report. The state scored six Fs, five Ds, four Cs, one B, and just one A.

“This is not a report card that any student would want to bring home to his or her parents, and it’s not a report card that I am proud to deliver to the California taxpayer,” said Lance T. Izumi, PRI’s director of education studies.

PRI’s 2007 California Education Report Card: Index of Leading Education Indicators is the fourth edition of a report the group first issued in 1997.

“Although many people suspect [California’s] public education system is not performing well, the reality is far worse than they imagine. ... The state scored six Fs, five Ds, four Cs, one B, and just one A.”

Grades Are In

According to the report, increased funding has accompanied poor student performance:

- School Accountability System = F. It will take decades for many low-performing schools to raise performance to proficient levels on the state’s Academic Performance Index (API), and most low-performing schools are not subject to any accountability whatsoever.
- California Standards Test = F. Only about four in 10 students in grades two through 11 scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts and math in 2006.
- Finance System = F. Inflation-adjusted funding per pupil has increased 27 percent over the past decade, but too much money is being wasted on state programs that have yet to show success. Also, the state continues to create new education programs, most of which have no accountability mechanisms to prove their worth.
- Dropout and Graduation Rates = D-. About three in 10 California high school students entering ninth grade fail to graduate four years later, and more than four in 10 African-American and Hispanic students fail to graduate.
- Course Difficulty = D. Fewer students in California are taking difficult math and science courses compared to the national average and to other large states such as Texas. A large majority of students are not taking university preparatory courses.
- English Language Learners = D+. California has no methodologically sound way of comparing year-to-year student progress on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), the state’s main instrument for determining the fluency of English Language Learners (ELLs). Also, because of perverse financial incentives, many school districts don’t reclassify ELLs as Fluent when they meet CELDT proficiency standards. Significant numbers of ELL students are not reclassified for 10 years.
- Standards = A. California has one of the best sets of academic content standards in the nation. The problem is they are inconsistently implemented in the classroom.

Teachers Want More Money

The California Teachers Association (CTA), the state’s largest teachers union, says the state’s public schools are doing just fine.

“California public schools have been making progress. Reading and math scores are up,” CTA President Barbara Kerr said in a radio ad broadcast this spring. “But further progress will be tough without more resources.”

Izumi disagrees.

“Spending on public education has gone up dramatically, but the way that tax dollars are spent has not changed much over the years,” Izumi said. “And on some programs, California Department of Education officials still have no idea where the money goes or what it does.”

More Money No Solution

The PRI report card is intended to help fill that void. It “provides us a meaningful examination of today’s education system and dares us to tackle the difficult questions people are afraid to ask,” said state Assemblyman Martin Garrick (R-San Diego), vice chairman of the Assembly Education Committee.

Policymakers and newspaper editors alike are beginning to realize education reform involves more than just spending more money.

According to a March 6 editorial in the Orange County Register, “when aspirations and striving still earn F’s and D’s after years of increased funding and ‘reforms,’ we believe the solution lies elsewhere. ... We suspect parents allowed to spend vouchers for their children’s education won’t settle for schools earning D’s and F’s. They’re likely to shop for schools where their vouchers buy a better education. That’s missing in California’s D- and F-heavy public schools.”

Izumi agreed.

“California has one of the best sets of academic content standards in the nation. The problem is they are inconsistently implemented in the classroom.”

Vicki Murray, Ph.D. (vmurray@pacificresearchinstitute.org) is a senior fellow in education studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

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Teacher Credentials Are Certifiably Inane

By Brian Kisida and Brent Riffel

Tucked away in the Scarecrow. At the end of his journey, the great and powerful Wizard of Oz gave him a piece of cake, and he miraculously showed off his newly bestowed intelligence by rattling off the Pythagorean Theorem. He had gone in search of a brain, but was ultimately helped by academic credentials.

The simple interpretation: Credentials matter. But how does that theory hold up outside of Oz?

Research tells us teacher certification and other formal credentials matter very little in the quest to gather the most qualified people in the field. Yet formal requirements are often the yardstick by which administrators measure potential prospects.

Lacking Measures

The debate over the effect of teacher credentials strikes at a larger issue in education policy. Policymakers care about certification and other inputs, such as funding formulas, because they have a measure over control that they put into the education system. Of course, what is sorely lacking is control over outcomes. Hence schools have traditionally relied on measuring inputs such as certification, because they have failed to develop a rigorous means of assessing job performance in the classroom.

Following the same trend, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates all teachers be “highly qualified and effective,” a categorization that includes teachers who have undergone certification procedures and demonstrate competence in their subject area by, for example, taking additional coursework or obtaining a master’s degree.

Mounting Evidence

In the academic world, however, a consensus is mounting. Almost every evaluation indicates advanced degrees and certification requirements are poor indicators of effective teachers. Within the past 18 months, some of the most rigorous research in the field has been added to the growing body of similar findings. A report from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in 2005 by Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain, Daniel M. O’Brien, and Steven G. Rivkin found advanced degrees had little effect on student test scores in a large Texas school district over a five-year period.

The researchers paid special attention to the effects of certification, prior experience, and master’s degrees—especially important characteristics because they are linked to teacher compensation. They found the only factor that seems to have any measurable effect on student performance is prior teaching experience, and this effect disappears after controlling for the first year of teaching.

Identifying Ability

Another study, conducted by Thomas J. Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger and released in 2006, looked at New York City teachers. The analysts compared reading and math test scores achieved by students with uncertified, alternatively certified, and traditionally certified teachers over a six-year period. Altogether, they examined more than 50,000 new teachers, with a healthy portion of each of the aforementioned categories represented because of New York City’s need to recruit from all available sources.

The authors found differences existed across categories. For example, students of certified teachers scored slightly higher in reading than students of non-certified teachers, while no difference was found in math scores.

The differences across teacher categories, however, were negligible when compared with differences within categories. Within-group differences were estimated as being almost 10 times greater than across-group differences.

In other words, the variation between effective and ineffective teachers, certified or not, is far greater than the difference between certified and uncertified teachers.

The researchers conclude, “teachers vary considerably in the extent to which they promote student learning, but whether a teacher is certified or not is largely irrelevant to predicting their effectiveness.” Thus, while there is no question among researchers that students learn more effectively from good teachers than from bad ones, figuring out how to measure what indicates a good teacher is still a sticky, politically charged debate in the education community.

“Research tells us teacher certification and other formal credentials matter very little in the quest to gather the most qualified people in the field.”

Rethinking Quality

The question of credentials’ relevance was echoed in a current proposal advocating on-the-job evaluations over an increased emphasis on certification.

According to a 2006 Brookings Institution analysis, “There are effective certified teachers and there are ineffective certified teachers; similarly, there are effective uncertified teachers and ineffective uncertified teachers.”

The authors point out uniform pay scales that are not tied to performance tend to promote an unequal distribution of better teachers towards wealthier districts, which pose less of a teaching challenge.

“Even the best teachers at … poor schools are typically paid no more, and sometimes less, than teachers at wealthier schools,” the authors noted. A better method, they argue, would be to emphasize rewards for teachers based on classroom performance and teaching in high-poverty schools.

No Guarantee

Truth be told, the story of the Scarecrow and his newfound “intelligence” was a lot like the research findings on academic credentials. Although he sounds extremely smart when he says it, the Scarecrow actually gets the Pythagorean Theorem wrong after the Wizard gives him his diploma.

Similarly, in light of the growing body of research, perhaps we should rethink what we require of teachers, since certification and advanced degrees are no guarantee of quality.

Brian Kisida (bkisida@uark.edu) is a research associate for the School Choice Demonstration Project, and Brent E. Riffel (briffel@uark.edu) is deputy director of the Office for Education Policy, both at the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform.

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School Reform Must Foster Competition

Public schools can’t do it alone

By Robert Holland

If nothing else, the U.S. Department of Education proved earlier this year it can collect and report telling statistics about the condition of K-12 schooling.

What’s seriously at question is the government’s effectiveness in acting on such data to reform education.

“[T]he U.S. Department of Education proved earlier this year it can collect and report telling statistics about the condition of K-12 schooling.”

Contradictory Findings

The Department of Education released two reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that were eye-opening when placed side by side.

One report found from studying transcripts that high school graduates in 2005 earned more credits, got higher grades, and took more challenging courses than did their counterparts 15 years ago.

Unfortunately, the second report showed reading scores of high school seniors in 2005 had declined significantly since the early 1990s. Only 35 percent were proficient readers, down five points from 1992.

As for math, NAEP launched a new test in 2005, the results of which could not be compared fairly to previous years. However, it was scarcely encouraging that only 23 percent scored at the proficient level on the new math test.

The juxtaposition of these results—ever-higher grades for ever-less performance—helps explain why U.S. students lead the world in self-esteem while lagging in actual achievement.

Lagging Achievement

The juxtaposition of these results—ever-higher grades for ever-less performance—helps explain why U.S. students lead the world in self-esteem while lagging in actual achievement.

A Brookings Institution study last fall found U.S. eighth-graders were six times likelier to express confidence in their math skills than were Korean eighth-graders, but Koreans’ math scores were far higher.

The lack of academic improvement over the past 15 years raises serious questions about the federal role in education reform as Congress begins considering reauthorization of the five-year-old No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Some Washington insiders are calling for imposing tighter NCLB controls on high schools, or even setting national standards.

That is shortsighted because federal involvement in K-12 schooling has been expanding steadily since passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) 42 years ago (NCLB is merely the latest version of ESEA), and the return on the billions already spent has been scant.

Different Approach

To be sure, some tinkering with NCLB could be useful. An Aspen Institute commissioned mission is advocating assessing teachers according to the academic gains they help their students achieve, rather than their amassing of education credentials.

Unfortunately, teacher unions already are lining up to derail that sensible “value-added” proposal.

Therein lies the problem for any reform that relies on the cooperation of a change-averse public school establishment.

Rather than placing all bets on compliance with NCLB, Washington policy-makers ought to adopt incentives that would enable parents to find good private schools for their children and thereby exert competitive pressures on public schools to improve.

To be most effective, school choice should be for all, not just for selected categories of need.

Good Start

A good starting point is Utah’s universal voucher program, signed into law February 12 by Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. (R).

Under the program, virtually all Utah families will be eligible for a means-tested voucher worth between $500 and $3,000 per child to use at a qualifying private school. That will help empower parents as consumers of education no longer at the mercy of an education establishment.

Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman long championed the universal voucher as a means of sparking in education the competition that has driven innovations in many sectors of American life.

The Utah law is imperfect as a catalyst because of a “mitigation” provision that pays public school districts for up to five years for any students they lose to voucherers. However, it is one significant step toward choice for all.

State-Level Choice

Research by Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby found competition motivated Milwaukee public schools to improve, even though vouchers there are available only to low-income families. A choice system such as Utah’s that empowers middle-income families as well could have even more dramatic impact.

With its adoption in 2002, NCLB gave parents the options of private tutoring or public school choice when their children were stuck in failing schools. However, school bureaucrats have dragged their feet in implementation, which is likely to be the fate of any worthy reform tacked onto NCLB.

Washington shouldn’t try to impose Utah-style choice nationally, but it could do this: Allow states to opt out of NCLB and adopt genuine reforms such as universal choice. Under such a plan, as long as a state could show academic results, it would not lose federal aid.

The feds could then concentrate on issuing a Nation’s Report Card, something they recently have done very well.

Robert Holland (holland@heartland.org) is a senior fellow for education policy with The Heartland Institute.
School Choice by the Numbers

Review by Michael Coulter

It may be a cliché in book reviews to call a book “an important contribution,” but Getting Choice Right certainly is one. Editors Julian Betts and Tom Loveless have compiled a set of essays that present, as much as possible, the empirical reality of school choice, and suggest practical policies for developing a market in education.

The book includes a chapter on the economic argument for school choice, but most of the volume examines data about how choice has actually worked.

Though not an easy read—the chapters include discussions of studies and academic articles—it’s worth the effort. Despite its academic nature, the book keeps the social science jargon to a minimum.

Betts’ essay examines how education theoretically works as a market, albeit an imperfect one, having numerous suppliers offering generally similar products. Betts argues even imperfect competition yields broad benefits, and better benefits could be had if policymakers would encourage greater competition.

Empirical Data

In another essay, Frederick Hess and Loveless examine the scholarly literature and available data about the performance of students in choice programs. The data, they argue, show some improvements, but it is not always consistent.

School choice, they observe, is more like a new arrangement of hospitals than a new medication.

One of the arguments made against school choice is the concern that students who don’t use it will be left behind. Several essays in the book consider that question, recognizing that some choice arrangements could harm existing schools and that others will not respond to competition. The essays offer policy recommendations to prevent that from happening where school choice is available.

Racial Neutrality

Two chapters discuss the impact of school choice on racial integration. Brian Gill (RAND) briefly touches on the empirical evidence collected so far, which he says is little, then proposes how data might best be collected and analyzed to understand the impact of choice on integration.

Karen Ross (University of Michigan) offers a lengthy, data-filled chapter on the racial impact of charter schools in Michigan, finding they have essentially the same racial mixture as in neighboring public schools. Choice, she observes, has not increased “white flight” from existing public schools.

Political Values

The final two chapters consider the relationship between political values and school choice. Patrick Wolfe (Georgetown University) considers the impact school choice has on students’ civic values. Wolfe argues the modest evidence to date suggests students in private schools have at least as much and sometimes more racial tolerance, political knowledge, social capital, and voluntarism as public school students.

“Editors Julian Betts and Tom Loveless have compiled a set of essays that present, as much as possible, the empirical reality of school choice, and suggest practical policies for developing a market in education.”

The thoughtful essays in this book are helpful for those considering school choice, and the many references to other studies are a virtue. Although this is not the final word on school choice, it’s arguably the most-informed single volume on the subject.

The book is the second volume by the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, a project of the Washington, DC-based Brookings Institution.

Michael Coulter (mlcoulter@gcc.edu) writes from Pennsylvania.
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School Choice on Audio

Audio recordings from the 2006 Educational Choice Speaker Series are now available online.

The luncheon series is hosted by the Illinois School Choice Initiative (ISCI), a project of The Heartland Institute. The mission of the initiative is to enable all parents in Illinois to choose quality schools for their children. For more information, please contact Michael Van Winkle, The Heartland Institute's legislative specialist for education policy, at 312/377-4000; email mvanwinkle@heartland.org.

Since January, the ISCI has hosted a monthly luncheon at the Metropolitan Club of Chicago, where business and civic leaders and school choice supporters have heard from some of the movement’s most important leaders, including Robert Enlow of the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, Rebeca Nieves-Huffman of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, and Lawrence Patrick III of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

The audio recordings can be listened to online or downloaded to an iPod or MP3 player by subscribing to the Educational Choice Speaker Series Podcast. Visit The Heartland Institute’s online audio center at http://www.fromtheheartland.org/live/audio.html and scroll down to the ISCI Educational Choice Speaker series.

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