Florida Lawmakers Applaud Donors to “Step Up for Students” Program

By Jillian Metz

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist greeted Marquita Forsett and her twin boys, Micah and Justice Chisuano, at the “Building Futures, Bridging Gaps” Rally on December 10 at Miami Union Academy.

Charter Schools Undermined in Delaware

By Ben DeGrow

Delaware state government and union officials have undermined one charter school’s efforts to secure alternative financing for construction costs and nearly stopped another’s.

Choice supporters cling to the hope that the state legislature may finally start appropriating capital construction funds.

Vouchers Help Ga. Kids with Special Needs

By Ben DeGrow

Despite a late start, Georgia’s publicly funded scholarship program for special-needs children is making quick progress, with almost a thousand students already benefiting from full scholarships.

U.S. Students’ Achievement Is Mediocre in International Study

By Neal McCluskey

According to a new report comparing academic achievement for the 50 U.S. states with international scores, students in even the highest-achieving states are mediocre when compared with the rest of the developed world.

No international academic assessment produces scores for each of the 50 states, making direct comparisons between states and foreign countries using a single test impossible. But a report from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) shows that students in even the highest-achieving states are mediocre when compared with the rest of the world.

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

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Make a Difference
Congress Considers Measure Giving Choice to Foster Kids

By Dan Lips

Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) has introduced in Congress the School Choice for Foster Kids Act, a measure that would amend an existing federal program to allow states to offer K-12 tuition scholarships to children in foster care.

Bachmann, who has served as a foster parent to 23 children, discussed how her personal experience motivated her to offer the legislation this past December.

“Rep. Michele Bachmann has introduced in Congress the School Choice for Foster Kids Act, a measure that would amend an existing federal program to allow states to offer K-12 tuition scholarships to children in foster care.”

“In my own family, several of our foster children were forced to change schools simply because we lived in a different school district than their previous foster parents,” Bachmann explained. “My bill helps foster children avoid this displacement and gives foster parents the opportunity to choose a school that best suits their child’s needs.”

Extending Opportunities

Through the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program, the federal government provides funding to states to support programs that aim to help youths transition from foster care to independence. For example, $60 million is made available to states annually to provide education and job training vouchers to older youths in foster care.

Bachmann’s legislation would amend the program to allow states to offer tuition scholarships to younger children as well, since younger foster children also face challenges in school.

“It would allow foster parents to send a child to his or her original school, or to choose a school that can undertake the unique challenges their foster child may face,” Bachmann explained. “Instead of separating foster children from trusted friends and teachers, we should give them the opportunity to stay at a school if it is fulfilling their needs.”

Proven Reform

House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) applauded the legislation.

“A quality education is a passport out of poverty for millions of American children, and all students should be able to attend schools that best serve their unique needs,” Boehner said. “I applaud Congresswoman Bachmann for introducing legislation to ensure our nation’s foster children have that chance. Government’s role should be to tear down obstacles between at-risk children and opportunities to learn and grow in the classroom.”

Bachmann’s legislation follows similar reforms at the state level. In 2006 Arizona enacted a tuition scholarship program for foster children with the support of Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat. Darcy Olsen, president of the Goldwater Institute, a free-market think tank in Phoenix, discussed the bipartisan support the initiative earned in Arizona.

“Government’s role should be to tear down obstacles between at-risk children and opportunities to learn and grow in the classroom.”

JOHN BOEHNER

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE - OHIO

“When it comes to foster care children, Arizona legislators set aside partisan battles to put the kids’ interests first,” Olsen said. “Today, 131 children in Arizona who faced so many challenges in their young lives now attend the best schools in the state that put their needs first.”

Stable Education

The Arizona program, enacted in 2006, has inspired other states to offer similar scholarship options. The American Legislative Exchange Council adopted model legislation for a foster child scholarship program in early 2007, and legislators in Florida, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas considered similar bills.

If Bachmann’s legislation is enacted, states also would have the option of using existing federal funding to offer K-12 scholarships to foster children.

Bachmann hopes her bill will earn the same bipartisan support in Congress as Arizona’s did.

“I was pleased to introduce the School Choice for Foster Kids Act with coauthor Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN),” Bachmann said. “Our bill is about helping foster children gain access to quality stable educations earlier in life. I hope this Congress will serve these children and move our bill forward.”

Dan Lips (dan.lips@heritage.org) is an education analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Illinois Residents Want School Choice: Poll

By Aricka Flowers

When it comes to education, the people of Illinois want options, according to a survey of 1,500 people statewide.

Released in December, the survey was a joint effort of the Indiana-based Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, the Illinois Policy Institute, School Choice Illinois, and six other organizations. The survey results appear on page 5.

The survey, which posed questions about K-12 education, tax credit scholarships, and school vouchers, was conducted by Strategic Vision, LLC, an Atlanta-based public relations firm that specializes in polling.

More than half of the respondents rated the current public school system as either “fair” or “poor.” That bleak opinion was most prevalent among Chicago residents.

“Most interesting is, if given a choice, most taxpayers indicate they would choose to have their children educated in a setting other than a public school—four out of five, in fact,” said Collin Hitt, director of education policy and reform at the Illinois Policy Institute. “Considering the current system has about 85 percent of schoolchildren enrolled in public schools, there’s a huge disconnect between what people want and what they have to take.”

“When it comes to education, the people of Illinois want options, according to a survey of 1,500 people statewide.”

School Funding Is Adequate

Even though people in Illinois are dissatisfied with regular public schools, they don’t think funding is the problem. Sixty-three percent of respondents said the current level of funding for public schools is “about right” or “too high.”

Support among survey respondents for the vehicles that would give them the most of both—school vouchers and tax credit scholarships—was also strong.

More than half of survey respondents would support a corporate tax credit scholarship program, with 9 percent of respondents saying they would “strongly support” such a proposal in Illinois and 45 percent saying they would “somewhat favor” such an idea.

Sixty-two percent of survey respondents said they had heard about vouchers in K-12 education, and more than half favored the voucher approach.

Twelve percent said they would “strongly support” vouchers in Illinois, while 39 percent said they were “somewhat favorable” to the approach. Thirty-five percent were “somewhat unfavorable,” and 14 percent rated themselves “strongly unfavorable” to it.

Choice Information Needed

“We see this all over. There’s a disconnect between the people who want choice and the programs necessary to give them choice,” Hitt said. “The role of think tanks and parent organizations is to close that gap. We see it with charter schools, tax credits, and vouchers. The more people know about tax policy, the more they favor choice.

“There are more people who want choice than there are people who understand what the policies for school choice need to be,” Hitt continued. “Advocates really need to step up their educational efforts to inform parents about what school choice programs are.”

The poll was conducted from November 9 to November 11, 2007 and carried a sampling error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Illinois.

Achievement

Continued from page 1

gets around the problem by comparing different tests.

Through “statistical linking,” AIR puts states’ eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) science and mathematics scores on a common scale with the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

The findings in AIR’s “Chance Favors the Prepared Mind: Mathematics and Science Indicators for Comparing States and Nations,” released in November, are at best a mixed bag for the United States.

Math and Science

The “good news,” according to the report, is that “most states are performing as well as or better than most foreign countries.”

And the bad news?

“The highest-achieving states ... are significantly below the highest-achieving countries.”

Nationally, the United States had a significantly smaller percentage of students score “proficient” in mathematics on the combined scale than did six, primarily Asian, countries, including Japan and Singapore.

Approximately the same percentage of students hit proficiency in math as in eight European or English-speaking nations, including Australia, Hungary, and the Netherlands, while American students performed significantly better in math than those in 31 nations from all over the globe, including Botswana, Chile, and England.

In science, five Asian countries, plus England, Estonia, and Hungary, had significantly larger percentages of students score at proficient levels than the United States.

Ten primarily European and English-speaking countries performed similarly to the United States, and 25 countries performed significantly worse than the United States.

Poor States, Countries

State results showed considerable variation. Massachusetts, which typically finishes near the top of state rankings, came in sixth among the 46 ranked countries and territories—including the United States overall—in mathematics, with 51 percent of its students hitting proficiency. It placed seventh in science with 41 percent of students scoring proficient.

On the opposite end, Mississippi finished in the bottom half in both math and science, with only 14 percent of its students proficient in each subject, placing it among nations such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Jordan.

“When we look at how well our students are doing, from an international point of view, we’re not doing that well,” said Gary W. Phillips, the report’s author and former acting commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics.

Phillips was especially concerned about U.S. students’ struggles with science and mathematics because “most of the major problems we face are math and science problems,” he said.

Changing the System

Dan Lips, an education analyst at The Heritage Foundation, a Washington, DC think tank, wasn’t surprised by the study’s results.

“When this report includes some new findings in international comparisons, it generally confirms what we already knew—that many students in other countries are outperforming American students,” Lips said.

Lips said the study’s findings are a strong sign that states need to change how they deliver education.

“In truth, the key to improving American students’ competitiveness is to increase competition in our education system by allowing widespread school choice and encouraging innovation,” Lips said.

Neal McCluskey (nmccluskey@cato.org) is associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom in Washington, DC.

INTERNET INFO

Illinois School Choice Poll Results

Who is most responsible for the situation of Illinois’ public school system?

State government: 24 percent
Unions: 22 percent
Teachers: 18 percent
School boards: 15 percent
Parents: 11 percent
Undecided/other: 10 percent

If it was your decision and you could select any type of school, what type would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?

Private school: 39 percent
Charter school: 23 percent
Regular public school: 19 percent
Homeschooling: 17 percent
Virtual school: 2 percent

If a private school offered the best education possible for a particular child, how would you favor allowing parents the option of using public funds to send their children to a private school?

Somewhat favor: 39 percent
Strongly favor: 17 percent
Somewhat disfavor: 15 percent
Strongly disfavor: 29 percent
Undecided: 39 percent

Some people believe that school vouchers should only be available to low-income families, to families with special-education children, or to families with children in failing public schools. Do you agree or disagree with that statement?

Somewhat agree: 45 percent
Somewhat disagree: 36 percent
Strongly disagree: 16 percent
Agree: 45 percent
Undecided: 34 percent

Some people believe school vouchers should only be available to low-income families, to families with special-education children, or to families with children in failing public schools. Do you agree or disagree with that statement?

Somewhat agree: 33 percent
Somewhat disagree: 24 percent
Strongly disagree: 22 percent
Agree: 33 percent
Undecided: 29 percent

One argument in favor of a school voucher system is that it will motivate principals, superintendents, and school boards to be more responsive to requests made by parents. Would you agree or disagree with that statement?

Agree: 38 percent
Undecided: 37 percent
Disagree: 25 percent

One argument in favor of a school voucher system is that public schools and private schools will compete with each other to attract students and engage families. Would you agree or disagree with this?

Agree: 36 percent
Undecided: 34 percent
Disagree: 30 percent

What appeals to you most about school vouchers?

Private schools offer a better education and curriculum: 32 percent
Parents choose the best school for their child: 20 percent
Private schools are safer than public schools: 17 percent
Vouchers increase accountability because schools have to compete with each other: 14 percent
Parents will get more involved in the education of their child: 13 percent
Other: 4 percent

What causes you the most concern about school vouchers?

Vouchers take money away from public schools: 39 percent
Vouchers damage public education in poor areas: 21 percent
Vouchers only benefit the wealthy: 16 percent
Vouchers are not proven to work: 12 percent
Vouchers will add more regulations to private schools: 9 percent
Other: 3 percent

Thinking ahead to the next election, when a candidate for governor, state senator, or representative supports school vouchers, would that make you more likely to vote for them, less likely to vote for them, or make no difference whatsoever in your selection?

No difference: 44 percent
More likely: 25 percent
Less likely: 20 percent
Undecided: 11 percent

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Delaware
Continued from page 1

funds to public charter schools in 2008. The Delaware Military Academy (DMA), a four-year secondary charter school in Wilmington, twice was denied in its attempt to receive conduit bond financing during a one-month period in 2007. Such financing provides tax-free bonds through government bodies. Applicants are required to have a strong bond rating, and investors assume responsibility for all financial liability.

“When it’s processed, the government as the middleman gets a fee for processing, so it’s a moneymaker for them,” said Rob Clemens, executive director of Delaware Charter Schools Network, an organization providing support and advocacy for the state’s 17 charter schools. One month after the state denied DMA’s request, another charter school, Providence Creek Academy, secured conduit bond financing from Kent County over DSEA’s opposition.

It is not known how many states allow charter schools to use conduit bond financing for construction.

Union Roadblock
Opened in 2003, DMA projected it would save more than $100,000 a year in building costs through conduit bond financing. The school now is raising funds to help offset the loss by selling commemorative bricks that will line the campus walkway.

“That’s money that could be used for more teachers, more textbooks,” Clemens said. “It’s money being used on buildings that could better be used elsewhere.”

“Delaware state government and union officials have undermined one charter school’s efforts to secure alternative financing for construction costs and nearly stopped another’s.”

In late August 2007, Delaware’s Council on Development Finance, an advisory government committee, sanctioned DMA’s financing request by an 8-1 vote. But in an unprecedented move, the director of the Delaware Economic Development Office, at the urging of Gov. Ruth Ann Minner (D), ignored the committee’s advice and turned down DMA’s request. Barbara Grogg, president of the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA), which represents public school employees statewide, testified before the council on August 27. She said DSEA opposed the request “based solely on the fact that this action represents a major change in the state’s educational policy” that she said should be addressed by the legislature. She acknowledged it was perfectly legal for charter schools to receive conduit bond financing.

DSEA declined a request for further comment for this article.

More Pushback
Besides the teachers union, some state lawmakers also have acted in opposition. Clemens said state legislative leaders from both parties intervened in August 2007 to stop New Castle County officials from introducing a measure to support DMA’s financing bid.

A memorandum from House Majority Leader Robert Gilligan (D-Sherwood Park) and House Minority Whip Helene Keeley (D-Wilmington South) commended the county’s decision “for the restraint it demonstrated from entering further into the area of public school construction finance, an area that historically has been the domain of state government.”

Breathing Room
Greg Meece, director of Newark Charter School, disagrees with the memorandum’s contention.

“Just because it’s a state responsibility doesn’t mean that a school should not continue to explore other avenues to increase its financing,” Meece said.

Newark’s request for conduit bond financing was approved by New Castle County in 2006, enabling the school to refinance debt on its original facility and to construct a new elementary school building.

Newark was able to hire two new instructors, including a needed coordinator of special-education services, as a result of the savings.

“That breathing room was provided by a lower interest rate for our mortgage,” said Meece.

Finding Funds
Since Delaware approved public charter school legislation in 1995, the only dollars the legislature has provided for construction needs have been included in the general operating funds. Other public schools receive additional facilities funding.

A 2006 bill that would have provided Delaware charter schools roughly half the capital funding given to other public schools never reached a vote on the House floor.

State Sen. David Sokola (D-Newark), chairman of the Senate Education Committee and a co-sponsor of the 2006 bill, sees no better prospects for enhancing state financing of charter school construction in the 2008 session, but he remains optimistic.

“I hope we can get things worked out,” Sokola said.

Clemens shares that view.

“I believe that the legislature is going to look closely at these issues this session,” Clemens said, “and I’m hopeful that we can work well with the legislature and DSEA to move things forward.”

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Nevada Parents Want More Charter Schools, State Ed Board Denies Them

By Steven Miller

Have you ever wondered why government seems so utterly, repeatedly failure-prone when it comes to meeting children’s educational needs? If so, the Nevada Board of Education, in late November, provided you with the perfect object lesson.

Going into its November 30 meeting, the board faced a challenge. Several members believed, noted Las Vegas Review-Journal capital reporter Sean Whaley, that the state Education Department was “being overwhelmed” by all the applications coming in to create charter schools.

The reason for the applications, observed the Reno Gazette-Journal in a subsequent editorial, is that “increasing numbers of families are seeking an educational experience for their children that is different from what is available in the traditional school system.”

The editorial continued, “Many desire more control over schooling, they are unwilling to trust the public system with their children’s special needs, and they are causing the numbers of charter schools to balloon.”

“Only in the bizarro world of government is it thought reasonable to meet the clearly expressed desire of the public with a complete stiff-arm.”

Stopping Reform

So, faced with the clear, massively expressed call by Nevada parents for more charter schools in the Silver State, how did members of the Board choose to respond?

By halting all processing of new charter school applications until further notice. Only in the bizarro world of government is it thought reasonable to meet the clearly expressed desire of the public with a complete stiff-arm.

Faced with a similar challenge, any business enterprise would try to bend heaven and earth to meet customers’ needs. Even arch-rivalers, if necessary, will be called in.

But of course, people in business live in a different reality, one where the expressed needs and desires of customers are recognized as real opportunities—chances for both patrons and businesses to make their lives better.

In the realm of government monopoly, on the other hand, the needs and desires of people are merely burdens, state-mandated responsibilities legally imposed upon government functionaries. Effortlessly, such a regime breeds surly recalcitrance. Quickly the operational rule becomes: “You will take what we give you—or else.”

Thus, the state of Silver State schools.

Hurting Children

Collectively, Nevada’s state Board of Education types resemble nothing so much as the workhouse trustees in Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist. Remember when orphan Oliver, desperate with hunger, comes up to the kitchen master and the copper pot of porridge? With bowl and spoon in hand, writes Dickens, Oliver begs for merely humane treatment:

“Please, sir, I want some more.”

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder; the boys with fear.

“What!” said the master at length, in a faint voice.

“Please, sir,” replied Oliver, “I want some more.”

The master aimed a blow at Oliver’s head with the ladle; pinned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle. The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,”

“Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!”

“‘He did, sir,’ replied Bumble.

“‘For more?’ said Mr. Limbkins. ‘Come off!’

“‘For more!’ said Mr. Limbkins. ‘Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?’

Andy Matthews, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, on the Nevada school board’s decision to stop approving charter school applications. Las Vegas Review-Journal, December 17, 2007

In Other Words

“I am very upset. I think they arbitrarily made a decision that did not take into account the legislation that we have passed and have been working on for several years. I think in this case they have overstepped their bounds.”

Nevada state Sen. Maurice Washington (R-Sparks), on the State Board of Education’s November 30 decision to stop approving charter school applications. Las Vegas Review-Journal, December 17, 2007

“This is a troubling move on the part of the board. Charter schools are an important and effective part of our education system because of the freedom and accountability they bring to a system badly lacking in both. This is a vote to deny Nevada’s children the opportunity for a better education.”

Andy Matthews, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, on the Nevada school board’s decision to stop approving charter school applications. Las Vegas Review-Journal, December 17, 2007

Defending Incompetence

Like Mr. Bumble and the workhouse board, members of Nevada’s state Board of Education see themselves as defending good order against the unenlightened hordes. Parents, they are sure, fail to appreciate the magnitude of the problems with which worthies such as they have agreed, oh-so-charitably, to wrestle.

In actuality, however, it is the board’s worthies who reveal themselves as swaddled in illusion. Uncritically, they have accepted the priorities of the very interests that, controlling the state’s highly politicized education apparatus for over a generation, have stymied all reform.

Facilitating Collusion

With Nevada’s public schools in the nation’s performance cellar, it is absurd of the board to freeze the processing of new charters—a powerful and cost-effective route to higher student achievement, as abundant research has shown.

Similarly, given southern Nevada’s rapid growth, it is harebrained of the board to block people actually eager to raise money to open brand new schools.

Public K-12 education, notes Eva Moskowitz, the New York City Council’s former education chair, “is a monopolistic structure in which management and labor have colluded for the better part of four decades to protect the interests of adults over those of children.”

Nevada’s state Board should stop facilitating this collusion.

Steven Miller (sm@npri.org) is policy director at the Nevada Policy Research Institute, a free-market think tank in Las Vegas.
Georgia

Continued from page 1

school choice and many parents calling for expansion.

In addition, a series of late 2007 town hall meetings designed to inform parents about the scholarships and answer their concerns has been hailed as a success.

The scholarship bill passed the Georgia House 90-84 on April 20 and was signed into law by Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) on May 17. According to Georgia Department of Education spokesperson Dana Tofig, 117 private schools had applied to be part of the program and were cleared to receive scholarship students between the signing of the bill and the end of June.

“We’re really impressed by the success of the program,” said state Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn), who sponsored the bill in the House. “Georgia has just embraced it quickly.”

Like Florida

More than 5,000 Georgia families applied, and about 900 special-education students currently are using scholarships to attend a private school. That’s not far off the mark set by Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program, on which the Georgia program is carefully modeled. In its first year (2000-01) the Florida program had 970 recipients.

To qualify for the scholarships, Georgia students must have an active individual education plan and have been enrolled in public school during the 2006-07 school year.

At an average of $6,000, scholarship amounts are determined by the severity of a student’s disability. The most generous scholarship is about $12,000, said David Pusey, policy analyst for the Georgia Family Council. There is no cap on the number of scholarships.

“Georgia’s publicly funded scholarship program for special-needs children is making quick progress, with almost a thousand students already benefiting from full school choice ...”

Quick Turnaround

Pusey credited Jeff Gagne, the Georgia Department of Education’s federal liaison, for the quick technical work needed to make scholarships widely available to students for the 2007-08 school year after the law’s passage in May.

“The turnaround on this thing was unbelievably fast,” Pusey said. “The DOE has done a superhuman job.”

Teaming up with Gagne to answer questions at four town hall meetings statewide, Casas observed the response as largely positive.

“We’re hearing from parents all around the state that they’re happy they finally have a choice,” Casas said. “This has just really ignited the flame of school reform and of school choice.”

Patience Needed

The biggest criticism brought forward by town hall participants is that the publicly funded scholarships are limited for use only by current public school students.

“It actually has created some anger among private school parents,” Pusey said, noting how narrowly the bill passed the legislature. “There’s not much we can do to really promote that. Right now, the political will isn’t there.”

Casas also said not restricting scholarship access to public school students would have made it more difficult to locate adequate funding sources in time to implement the program for the current school year. While acknowledging political realities, he said he hopes the program can be expanded.

“If we tried to do it in one big swoop, this law wouldn’t have passed at all,” said Casas. “We’re asking [private school parents] for patience.”

Greater Expectations

Private schools can apply to receive scholarship students for the following school year between January and June 2008. The Department of Education anticipates greater demand for scholarships and expanded space to accommodate them.

“We expect there to be more schools with slots available, and more parental interest,” Tofig said.

Pusey also expects greater school involvement in 2008. Some of the schools that have been hesitant to join fear the encroachment of state government. But Pusey thinks more private schools are seeing those fears as unfounded.

“They don’t want the state in their business, and the state doesn’t want to be in their business,” Pusey said.

Expanding Freedom

For his part, Casas believes expanding aid to special-education students is a logical and straightforward approach.

“It’s a no-brainer,” Casas said. “This is the way to go to help a population that needs immediate help and is most highly at risk.”

Casas says corporate tax credits for private school scholarships may be coming soon to Georgia, to help expand educational options for families regardless of special needs.

He also urges other states to seek the benefits of adopting special-needs scholarship programs similar to the one Georgia approved and implemented in 2007.

“It allows the state to measure the impact and popularity of school choice, it allows parents to look at choice in a different way that helps education, and it’s an answer to our educational woes,” Casas said.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Web Site Helps Colorado Parents Choose Schools

By Jillian Melchior

Colorado parents can find a vast array of information to help them choose their children’s schools on a new Web site by the Independence Institute, a Colorado think tank. To make it useful to a diverse population, the site is available in both English and Spanish.

Under Colorado’s open-enrollment law, students can attend any school in the state with space available as long as parents can provide transportation. With 178 school districts, plus myriad charter schools and private schools, finding the perfect one can be a mind-boggling experience, said Pam Benigno, the Institute’s education center director.

“Colorado parents can find a vast array of information to help them choose their children’s schools on a new Web site by the Independence Institute ...”

The new Web site empowers parents by showing them their children’s educational options, including comprehensive information that took a year for the Institute to compile.

“We want all parents to embrace school choice, which should result in all children receiving a better education,” Benigno said.

Different Criteria

The site, formally launched in early December, is designed as simply as possible, Benigno said. Parents can search all schools within a radius they specify. They can also look for schools among 47 different categories—such as liberal arts schools or Montessori schools. Each category is accompanied by a definition, and the site includes a glossary of useful words and terms of speech.

“It’s important that parents understand the language that’s used under education,” Benigno said. Colorado politicians have taken notice. State Sen. Nancy Spence (R-Centennial) said the Web site is a good tool for parents seeking the best education for their children.

“Parents know what’s best for their children and can access valuable information about geographic choices and academic choices that they have by using the School Choice for Kids Web site,” Spence said.

Helping Hispanic Parents

The entire Web site is available in Spanish, too, tailored for Colorado’s growing Hispanic community, Benigno explained.

“This is a huge asset to Spanish-speaking families that don’t understand our open-enrollment law and the choices that are available to them,” Benigno said.

The Web site allows parents to search for schools based on academic rigor. Benigno said many schools claim to have excellent programs, so the Independence Institute created the term “above the ACT average.” All high school juniors statewide are required to take the ACT, and the Web site rates schools based on their collective results. Elementary and middle schools have similarly telling academic ratings.

In addition, parents can investigate private school or home-school options for their children on the site. After making their choice, they can use the site’s handy checklist of questions to ask the school or district before their child enrolls, such as information about immunization requirements.

“Parents can search all schools within a radius they specify. They can also look for schools among 47 different categories—such as liberal arts schools or Montessori schools.”

Promoting Choice

To promote the site, the Institute printed 200,000 colorful bookmarks, one side in English, one side in Spanish, and distributed them at churches, bookstores, and community centers statewide.

The site has received much attention from Denver’s Spanish-language media, thanks to a public unveiling at a Hispanic Community Center in the Denver archdiocese last fall, Benigno said.

The Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), a Washington, DC-based organization dedicated to reforming Latino education by empowering families with parental choice, has embraced the site and is using it to train parents.

“It’s a wonderful tool for parents,” Benigno said, “but it’s also a wonderful tool for people doing community outreach and for parent training classes, because the information is here for them.”

Providing a Model

Benigno said she considers the Web site a trailblazing tool to help parents make the best educational choices they can for their children.

“I would encourage other think tanks and other organizations that have the expertise about school choice policy to compile this information” for their states, Benigno said.

Jillian Melchior (jmelchior@hillsdale.edu) writes from Michigan.

INTERNET INFO

School Choice for Kids: http://www.schoolchoiceforkids.org

Energize Your School Choice Campaign!

Let’s Put Parents Back in Charge!

Let’s Put Parents Back in Charge! — a groundbreaking bilingual (English/Spanish) tool for the school choice movement — is available free of charge (in quantities of 50 to 500) to grassroots school choice efforts, charter schools, parent groups, elected officials, and others.

State legislatures across the country are considering vouchers, tuition tax credits, and other measures that would give parents more control over their children’s educational futures. But before they’ll act, they need to hear from informed, motivated constituents.

To energize your school choice effort with Let’s Put Parents Back in Charge! contact us at 312/377-4000, email think@heartland.org.

Individual copies can be ordered for $5.95 in The Heartland Institute’s online store at http://www.heartland.org.
VanDamme Academy Shows Value of Choice

By Jillian Melchior

The VanDamme Academy, a K-8 school in Laguna Hills, California, has an unusual way of giving students a better foundation of knowledge.

Founder Lisa VanDamme said the students learn incrementally, not moving forward in concepts until they’ve mastered the one at hand. Moreover, teachers encourage them to make connections within and between the subjects, and between school and life.

“We’re teaching in a very deliberate, planned, incremental order that provides for real understanding on the part of the child. They’re starting on the small, simple steps and building on it, so at each new stage, they thoroughly grasp the material,” VanDamme said.

“[We’re] teaching in a very deliberate, planned, incremental order that provides for real understanding on the part of the child. They’re starting on the small, simple steps and building on it, so at each new stage, they thoroughly grasp the material.”

LISA VAN Damme (right)
FOUNDER
VANDAMME ACADEMY

“Most importantly, he said, the VanDamme Academy has taught her how to think. “She’s going to leave there with the ability to say, ‘These are my values, independent of my family or my friends,’” Wisehart explained. “She’ll want different things in life than I want, and she’ll know how to go out and get them because she’ll know how to think.”

Jillian Melchior (jmelchior@hillsdale.edu) writes from Michigan.

INTERNET INFO
VanDamme Academy: http://www.vandammeacademy.com/
Lisa VanDamme’s weekly newsletter: http://pedagogicallycorrect.com/

New York City Beefs Up Efforts to Get Poor Teachers Out of Class

By Ryan Bedford

New York City is devoting more resources to efforts aimed at getting incompetent teachers out of the classroom, with New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein introducing the Teacher Performance Unit, a group dedicated to pushing through the long process for teacher removal.

“The disciplinary system for tenured teachers is so time-consuming and burdensome that what is already a stressful task becomes so onerous that relatively few principals are willing to tackle it,” Klein told The New York Times for a November 15 story. “As a result, in a typical year only about one-hundredth of 1 percent of tenured teachers are removed for ineffective performance,” Klein noted.

Only 10 to 15 tenured teachers a year are forced to leave the school system entirely because of incompetence. But as of late 2007, more than 700 had been removed from classrooms and required to report to “rubber rooms” where they are separated from students but continue to receive full pay.

Forward Progress
The Teacher Performance Unit, established in November 2007, aims to speed up the teacher removal process.

The unit consists of five lawyers who, as Democrats for Education Reform put it in a November 16 post on its Web site, “engage in due process up the wazoo. They will eat due process for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They will wake up at night, just dreaming about due process. They will scream ‘due process!!!’ in the throes of passion. Because that is what the union has demanded through collective bargaining.”

‘Sufficient’ Support
Klein also has hired a team of five consultants to work with principals to improve the performance of struggling teachers.

Klein told The New York Times the Teacher Performance Unit “repre-
School Choice Could Help Lower Latino Dropout Rate

By Aricka Flowers

Latino students are leading the pack when it comes to dropping out of high school, according to a study by the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA), and two leading researchers say school choice could help solve the problem.

Using statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau, authors Madison Jones and Renee Bou-Waked found in their study, released in mid-November, that many public schools are not equipped to handle immigrant students’ special needs.

**Inflated Rates**

They also learned many non-native-born Latinos dropped out of schools in other countries and thus should not be included in the dropout statistics.

“What we found confirmed what we thought in terms of Hispanics having the highest dropout rate,” said Jones, an NCPA intern who is currently working on her doctoral degree in political science at the University of North Texas. “But we were surprised to see how inflated the dropout rates were because they included Hispanic immigrants who were not educated in the U.S. for part or all of their academic careers.

“Using data from the census, we evaluated the dropout rate for all the different races. But we realized that the census doesn’t ask about whether the person was educated in the U.S. or if they got their GED,” Jones continued. “That’s a problem, especially when you’re trying to determine why certain populations of students are dropping out.”

**Language Barrier**

With a dropout rate of more than 22 percent, Latino students are leaving high school at twice the rate of African-Americans and three times that of whites, according to NCES statistics cited in the study. The authors say part of the problem lies in the language barrier.

“Living in Dallas, we always hear about the problem of school districts struggling with the huge number of Hispanic students dropping out,” Jones explained. “We wanted to determine if there was a reason why they were more susceptible. “I think we can safely assume that language barriers are a big factor,” Jones continued. “If you’re in a class but can’t read the homework or comprehend the teachers and students, then it’s hard to concentrate on learning the material.”

A closer look at NCES statistics revealed more than 36 percent of Hispanics born outside of the United States were high school dropouts. About 13 percent of first-generation Hispanics were dropouts, with the figure reaching just over 11 percent for second-generation Hispanics.

**New Destinations**

Some researchers, including Richard Fry, a senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Research Center in Washington, DC, say the Latino population is migrating to less-traditional settlement areas such as Atlanta, Dallas, Portland, and Fayetteville, North Carolina. With that geographic change comes a change in the type of Hispanic student the school system has to educate, he says.

“One major reason why the dropout rates in new settlement areas tend to be higher is because not all Latino youth are the same,” Fry explained. “Areas like Dallas, which have not traditionally educated Hispanic students, are dealing with youth that are more likely to be born outside of the U.S.

“This is different from what places like Chicago or Houston have to encounter, because even though these places have experience in educating Hispanic youth, they were not typically born abroad,” Fry continued. “We know that foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanic youth have different dropout rates, with the former having the highest.”

**School Choice**

Jones and Bou-Waked suggest school choice is one way to address the Hispanic high school dropout rate.

“That’s where charter schools come in,” Bou-Waked said in an interview for this story. “Schools that have English as a Second Language or Latino populations can cater to struggling students better than a school with a smaller Latin population. If parents are given the option to choose where to send their kids to school, they can pick a school that addresses their child’s particular needs.

“If they need a school that helps their child learn English, they can choose that,” Bou-Waked continued. “The best part is they don’t have to deal with the English language barrier in the process. This way, the student will be less likely to drop out of high school.”

Citing data from the Center for Education Reform, a charter school advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland, the authors noted Latino students are more likely to be proficient in math and reading if they attend a charter school.

A closer look at test schools in Texas revealed charter school students in grades six through nine did better on state reading and math tests than their public school counterparts.

But the new report isn’t about only school choice, Jones said—even those who oppose charter schools can benefit from the analysis.

“Even if you are against school choice, there’s value in finding that the statistics are a bit skewed when it comes to the Latino dropout rate,” Jones said.

“Some of the students that are counted were not educated in American schools. If we can determine who really makes up the Latino dropout population, maybe we can better learn to serve them in the education system,” Jones noted.

Aricka Flowers (aflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Illinois.

“New York City is devoting more resources to efforts aimed at getting incompetent teachers out of the classroom ...”

Ryan Bedford (effwa@effwa.org) is a legal research assistant and labor policy analyst for the Labor Policy Center at the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a free-market think tank in Olympia, Washington.

“Pantsuits and Candlelight Vigils,” by Madison Jones and Renee Bou-Waked, National Center for Policy Analysis, November 12, 2007: http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artId=22599

CONTINUED from left

sents a significant infusion of resources that will ensure we have the capacity to seek the removal of all ineffective tenured teachers who, in spite of receiving the time and support sufficient to allow them to substantially improve, won’t or can’t do it.” The program is slated to cost $1 million a year.

The teachers union objects to the project. Randi Weingarten, president of the New York United Federation of Teachers, labeled the team a “teacher gotcha unit” and “disgusting.”

Her comments suggest teachers are the union’s priority, even at the expense of students.

“We’ve always been concerned that the first thing that would happen after somebody put out progress reports would be principals would go after teachers,” Weingarten told The New York Times.

[INTERNET INFO]

“School Choice and Hispanic Dropouts,” by Madison Jones and Renee Bou-Waked, National Center for Policy Analysis, November 12, 2007: http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artId=22599

“Pantsuits and Candlelight Vigils,” by Madison Jones and Renee Bou-Waked, National Center for Policy Analysis, November 12, 2007: http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artId=22599
Candidates’ Advisor Choices Reveal Policy Intentions

By Brent Riffel and Brian Kisida

With the 2008 presidential campaign in full swing, the leading candidates of both major parties have outlined vastly differing education policy proposals. Most of the Democratic candidates have assailed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), though some have voiced support for it. On the Republican side, only former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has been a strong advocate for renewing the act.

While campaign speeches and ads might give some clues about which direction the leading candidates might take K-12 education in the future, a look at who’s advising them can prove more instructive.

Voucher Proponents

The composition of Rudy Giuliani’s education policy team suggests he might push for more school vouchers. The Hoover Institution’s Terry Moe, a longtime proponent of vouchers, and former U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige sit on Giuliani’s advisory board. Paige has consistently criticized what he calls teachers unions’ “death grip” on public education.

During his tenure as mayor of New York City, Giuliani advocated mayoral control of the schools and favored allowing for-profit school management companies to take over failing public schools. The chairman of one such firm, Benno Schmidt of Edison Schools, advises Giuliani.

Clinton Holdovers

Democratic presidential frontrunner Sen. Hillary Clinton relies on holdovers from former President Bill Clinton’s education policy advisory team. That, along with her own well-documented advocacy of scaling back much of NCLB, provides a clear sense of her K-12 policy direction.

Clinton’s domestic policy advisor, Catherine Brown, has championed Teach for America and helped craft the senator’s universal pre-K proposal, which has been the centerpiece of her education policy campaign platform.

Contrasting Strategies

Several education advisors to Republican challenger Romney worked with him while he was governor of Massachusetts. His top education policy advisor, Paul E. Peterson, is a professor of government at Harvard University, director of its Program on Education Policy and Governance, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and managing editor of the education reform magazine Education Next.

Another Romney advisor is Robert Costrell, the endowed chair in education accountability at the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform. Costrell played a key role in developing Romney’s 2005 education reform initiative.

Democratic hopeful Sen. Barack Obama (IL) surprised many by openly advocating teacher pay for performance, which teachers unions strongly oppose, when he spoke before the American Education Association in 2007.

Obama’s choice of Linda Darling-Hammond as a key, if unofficial, education policy advisor has drawn little notice, but this too suggests Obama might not take the typical approach espoused by Democratic candidates. Darling-Hammond, a Stanford professor of education, has been a vocal critic of Teach for America, arguing it largely has failed to train young teachers adequately. She also has criticized NCLB for not sending more supplies, facilities, and other resources to public school districts.

Remember the Advisors

Notable among the education policy advisors to former Sen. John Edwards (D-NC) is Heather McGhee, a progressive economic policy analyst at Demos, a New York-based liberal social policy think tank. Edwards also listens to longtime advisor James Kvaal, who elaborated on Edwards’s plan to “radically overhaul” NCLB in an online interview last October.

Most of the other presidential candidates have, for various reasons, chosen not to rely on high-profile education policy advisors. While Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (R) have both been major players in the 2008 campaign, neither has developed large cadres of policy advisors, primarily due to budget constraints. Both have relied on staffers instead of education policy “stars.”

While governor of Arkansas, Huckabee reluctantly imposed school consolidation and oversaw steady progress in student achievement. Though he has suggested NCLB might be revised to incorporate a greater emphasis on, for example, arts education, Huckabee largely believes in the standards and accountability movement.

McCain, in a none-too-subtle jab at Giuliani, has praised New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s education policies, and in particular those of New York City Education Commissioner Joel Klein, both of whom, McCain argues, offer more “choice and competition.” McCain draws much of his education advice from F. Philip Handy, former chairman of the Florida State Board of Education and state chairman of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush’s (R) gubernatorial campaigns.

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

“Parents must be a key part of the restructuring equation. That won’t occur by happenstance. The burden is on schools to take extraordinary efforts to engage parents and accommodate their schedules. That is particularly true in low-income communities, where parents have less-flexible work schedules and where school is, for many, a bad memory.”

Edwin C. Darden, director of education policy at Appleseed, a network of public-interest justice centers, writing in the December 19, 2007 edition of The Baltimore Sun, on what some Maryland school districts are doing to help parents become more engaged in education reform when their children’s schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks specified under the No Child Left Behind Act.

INTERNET INFO


GOP Presidential Candidates Clash over Education Freedom

By Robert Holland

The president of the United States is the ultimate policy leader, but in most of the 2007 caucus and primary campaigning, education (let alone choice) barely got a mention from the candidates.

However, a month before the Iowa caucuses, contention began on the Republican side that could presage a deeper discussion.

“(I)n most of the 2007 caucus and primary campaigning, education (let alone choice) barely got a mention from the candidates. However, a month before the Iowa caucuses, contention began on the Republican side that could presage a deeper discussion.”

Attacking Huckabee

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (R) was in the center of the fray.

Former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson (R-TN) got things started with a December 12 news release carried by Standard Newswire targeting Huckabee, who had surged to the front in polls preceding the Iowa caucuses. “Huckabee on Education: No to Vouchers, Let Government Fix It” was the unflattering headline.

Thompson’s camp cited news stories indicating Huckabee had argued against a pro-voucher recommendation of his own school reform commission in 1998. After the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2002 decision upholding vouchers, Huckabee allegedly had doubted “how practical they are.”

The release also cited a 2005 Washington Times story quoting Huckabee calling the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) the federal government’s greatest education reform effort.

Reducing Government

On his Web site, Thompson argues the federal role under NCLB is “too intrusive and too bureaucratic, and has become part of the problem.” He says he favors “empowering the parents by promoting voucher programs, charter schools, and other innovations that enhance education excellence through competition and choice.”

On December 11, some conservative eyebrows arched when NEA-New Hampshire, the state affiliate of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union, made Huckabee the first Republican it had ever endorsed in the GOP primary. It endorsed Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side.

A December 12 article in the Concord Monitor said the state union president had paid little attention to Huckabee’s stance on NCLB but praised his “opposition to school vouchers and his commitment to arts and music education.”

Supporting Vouchers

Noting that, Mike Petrilli, vice president for programs and policy at the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, wrote a December 13 article, “Why Teachers Like Mike” for National Review Online (NRO). He promptly received a December 17 “correction” from the Huckabee camp.

“Governor Mike Huckabee is a supporter of school vouchers, and has always been a supporter of school vouchers; he supported them as far back as his first run for public office, as a U.S. Senate candidate, in 1992,” said aide Joe Carter, who claimed the confusion stemmed from the governor’s expression of concern on a talk radio show about how some of the details of voucher funding would be worked out.

Given that clarification, Petrilli wondered in an NRO author’s note, “Will the teachers’ union rescind its support now that his position is clearer?”

In the December 17 online Communique of his Education Intelligence Agency, veteran teacher-union observer Mike Antonucci made the point that all this in no way amounted to an NEA endorsement of Huckabee. “Because no other GOP candidate agreed to see them, NEA-NH had only two choices: endorse Huckabee or endorse no one. If they failed to endorse Huckabee, why would any future GOP candidate ever visit?” Antonucci asked.

Homeschooling Kids

While Huckabee’s support of vouchers may be debatable, he is considered to be an advocate of parents’ rights to home-school their children. In Iowa, Christian homeschool families helped propel him to frontrunner status in some polls preceding the caucuses.

Over the long term, what is important is not political skirmishes like these, but the larger battle for educational freedom and whether the 2008 presidential race will advance that cause.

Among the other leading GOP candidates, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has put forward the most specific new ideas for education—setting up a pilot voucher program for children of active-duty military personnel.

Improving Quality

Mitt Romney, who strongly supported charter schools and merit pay programs for teachers as governor of Massachusetts, pledges on his Web site to continue embracing choice. He states, “competition and choice in educational opportunities—whether it comes from private schools, charter schools, or homeschooling—makes traditional public schools better and improves the quality of education for all of America’s kids.”

U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) doesn’t feature education as an issue on his Web site, but he has consistently voted for voucher programs. As a candidate for the GOP nomination in 2000, he proposed stripping $5.4 billion from sugar, gas, and ethanol subsidies and putting the funds into a voucher program benefiting families in low-income districts.

None of the Democratic front-runners has endorsed vouchers, which are anathema to their teachers union supporters. New York Sen. Hillary Clinton has plugged charter schools at NEA conventions in the past. Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has supported increased scholarships for college attendance, but not for K-12 education.

As education expert Herb Walberg has observed, the Supreme Court in 1925 (Pierce v. Society of Sisters) upheld parents’ rights to choose private or public schools for their children, and in 2002 (Zellman v. Simmons-Harris) sustained their right to do so with the help of school choice programs.

The question now is whether policymakers from the White House to governors’ mansions to the tiniest school office will help parents get what is rightfully theirs.

Robert Holland (holland@heartland.org) is a senior fellow for education policy at The Heartland Institute.

American Vision for Education

In his masterfully concise volume, School Choice: The Findings (Cato Institute, 2007), Herbert J. Walberg makes the case that wise public policy would see to it that all families had free choice among private or public schools with no financial penalty. After reviewing the relevant research, he found vouchers and charter schools serve students and parents better than a government monopoly.

Walberg concludes with this statement:

“It is ironic that Americans who regard themselves as free—perhaps as having the freest country in the world—have so little choice when it comes to their children’s education. It is tragic that policy leaders, including governors, legislators, and school boards, have done so little to remedy that situation.”

— Robert Holland
Wolf Makes His Mark in Public Policy World with School Choice

By Dave Aeikens

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Patrick Wolf knew he had arrived in the world of education policy when in 2000 he stepped outside his Washington, home, grabbed his newspaper, and found splashed on the front page the report that he worked on.

“It was a pivotal point for me. I wasn’t just some scholar cloistered in my tower trying to think great thoughts. The work I was doing was recognized and was influencing the positions people were taking,” Wolf said. “That was the watershed in my career.”

That career has turned the 1983 Cathedral High School [of St. Cloud, Minnesota] graduate into one of the country’s leading experts in school choice.

He is a professor and the 21st Century Chair in School Choice and Education Reform at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. It’s a role he has had since July 2006, when he joined the country’s first independent department of school reform in a college.

Wolf is also the principal investigator of a school choice program in Washington, DC, studying the country’s only federally funded voucher program. Wolf’s next report to Congress is due in May.

Wolf, a proponent of what he calls targeted voucher programs, has testified before a congressional subcommittee and several state legislatures on the merits of school choice programs and vouchers. He has studies that show vouchers targeted to students with special needs increase parent satisfaction and academic achievement of students who use them.

Those who know him are hardly surprised at Wolf’s professional success. He has long showed an aptitude for learning and government.

Family Influence

His mother, Sally Watson, is a former teacher at Sts. Peter, Paul and Michael School in St. Cloud. She divides her time between St. Cloud and a home in Florida. Wolf has three sisters who live in Minnesota, Michigan, and Tennessee. His father, Richard Wolf, died in 2001.

Wolf said he saw firsthand through his family’s success with education that people who received a good education could realize their dreams.

Wolf left St. Cloud with a diploma from Cathedral for what was then the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul. He majored in political science and philosophy.

He moved on to graduate school at Harvard from 1988-95, earning a master’s and doctorate with plans to teach public policy and government at a university.

He got two job offers after finishing his education at Harvard—one at Columbia University in New York and one at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb. He took the job at Columbia and stayed from 1994-98.

Wolf moved to Georgetown in Washington, DC and began to do more work in school choice. He developed a class in educational accountability and reform. In January 1999, he got a call from a team member of Paul Peterson, a leading researcher in school choice at Harvard.

Peterson had a research project on a Washington, DC voucher program. He wanted Wolf’s help.

What the study showed was that black students who were taking advantage of the scholarship were increasing in achievement. Hispanic and white students did not show a lot of improvement, Wolf said.

The report was released at the height of the hot presidential race in 2000 in which school choice had become an issue. The coverage and attention that Wolf received propelled him into the ranks of leading experts on the subject of school choice.

“It was very exciting. It also brought a lot of responsibility,” Wolf said.

“I can only assume as he continues his research he will become even more prominent. He is already the leading figure of his generation,” Peterson said.

Studying Government


When Wolf was in seventh grade, Brandl invited him to the Capitol for the last day of the legislative session. Wolf had lunch with the speaker of the House and got a seat on the House floor.

“I think it whetted his appetite for more involvement for government. That became his nature when he went on to college and graduate school—the study of government,” Brandl said.

Wolf served as an intern for Brandl while in college.

Shortly after the internship, he worked at the Minnesota Foundation For Better Hearing and Speech and came up with an idea to put a surcharge on phone lines to pay for a system that would allow deaf people to use the telephone.


“In 1987, most deaf people could not communicate with many other people over telephone lines. It was a very important experience in my life,” Wolf said.

It was also not bad for a 22-year-old. Working on behalf of that legislation gave Wolf another opportunity. The state agency charged with implementing the plan called and asked for his help.

He wound up as the acting program administrator.

“I accepted because it paid more than delivering pizza,” said Wolf, who had planned to work at a pizza parlor while he prepared for graduate school.

The next year, he went on to Harvard, where he met and became a student of Paul Peterson.

“He’s always been interested in effective public services. How can we make government more effective? He came to Harvard to study that particular question,” Peterson said.

Voucher Debate

The merits of school choice and vouchers have been debated for decades. Milwaukee started the first voucher program in 1991. Florida has the only statewide program for students with learning disabilities. About 100,000 of the 50 million students in kindergarten through grade 12 in the United States attend school through vouchers. That’s 0.02 percent.

Minnesota has had open enrollment, which allows students to choose whatever public school they want, since 1987. It is also one of a handful of states that provides tax credits for parents who want to supplement their child’s education.

Minnesota also started the first charter school program in 1992. Two million students in the United States are in charter schools.

The public has been reluctant to embrace vouchers because Americans cling to the ideal of neighborhood public schools, they want public education to work and the dream of public education to be fulfilled, Wolf said.

“Some people view school vouchers as surrendering on the dream,” Wolf said. “The public is very resistant to it for that reason, because we are giving up on the school dream.”

In November, voters in Utah rejected a voucher proposal.

Wolf said the research shows that voucher plans can work well for black students.

“A highly disadvantaged student in a crime- and gang-ridden neighborhood, attending schools that aren’t trying very hard for that, that is not a precursor for success,” Wolf said.

After living in the upper Midwest and East all his life, Wolf moved to Arkansas in July 2006.

He said Fayetteville has the feeling of familiarity. It’s a town of 60,000 to 70,000 people, with a major state university in the middle of farm country.

“This kind of felt like St. Cloud. I just felt like I was coming home. I am 800 miles south of home. It feels like St. Cloud,” Wolf said.

Dave Aeikens (daeikens@stcloudtimes.com) is a staff writer at the St. Cloud Times, where an earlier version of this article appeared on December 30. Reprinted with permission.
national corporations serves more than 20,000 children statewide, 45 percent of whom are African-American.

New Century
Crist commended the corporations that have made the program a success and whose donations have empowered thousands of disadvantaged parents to find the schools that best suit their children’s educational needs.

“[Florida] dignitaries ... came together on December 10 to thank corporate sponsors for their donations to fund K-12 scholarships for low-income families at the ‘Building Futures, Bridging Gaps’ rally at Miami Union Academy.”

“These scholarships are an example of how we can adapt public education to a new century,” Crist said. “Step Up For Students is one way that we are diversifying our approach to public education and school choice initiatives. Giving parents the ability to choose the education that best meets their child’s learning needs means that all students are given access to the world-class education Florida has to offer.”

Step Up For Students presented Meek with an appreciation banner as a thank-you gift for supporting education options.

The Carrie Meek Foundation partners with Step Up For Students in distributing K-12 scholarships to economically disadvantaged students in north Miami-Dade County.

“It is such an honor to be here today in the presence of all of these young, talented students who aspire to do great things with their lives,” Meek said. “The Carrie Meek Foundation believes in providing a quality education for all of Florida’s children, regardless of their socioeconomic status.”

Success Story
The festivities included a personal story from Melody Cherfils, a Miami Union Academy graduate and former Step Up For Students Scholarship recipient.

Before receiving the scholarship, Cherfils said, she had less than a 1.0 grade point average and was considering dropping out of her assigned public school.

Miami Union Academy successfully graduates 98 percent of its students, and 90 percent go to college. Cherfils graduated in 2006 and now attends Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama.

“The generous donors have given me a second chance at an excellent education and more importantly, a future,” Cherfils said.

“Due to my academic struggles, I never imagined graduating high school, let alone pursuing college. The scholarship allowed me to find a school that met my educational needs and helped me realize my full potential,” Cherfils said.

Donors Old and New
Some donors, including Wachovia, have been a part of the corporate scholarship program since its inception. Wachovia has donated $12.5 million over the past six years.

“Florida’s children deserve a quality education, and Wachovia is pleased to contribute to a program that helps children succeed,” said Jorge Gonzalez, the company’s regional president for Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Broward Counties. During the event, executives from CVS Caremark and Waste Management, Inc. announced their companies have signed on as Step Up For Students’ newest corporate donors.

“As a corporate custodian, it is our responsibility to address the needs of our communities, including the education of our youth,” said Jeff Sabin, Waste Management, Inc.’s government affairs manager. “Waste Management has a strong commitment to making a positive difference in our environment and our communities.”

Ongoing Support
Brisé—who served as the rally’s master of ceremonies—is vice president of the state legislature’s Black Caucus, where he continuously pledges his support for the scholarship program in order to represent his constituents’ best interests.

In Other Words
“Using the FCAT to grade schools is the most successful education reform in Florida history. Once the laughingstock of state school systems, Florida now is a trendsetter in closing the achievement gap between white and minority students.

“The basic difference between the previous approach to education and Jeb Bush’s FCAT-based accountability system amounts to this:

“The former was based on the assumption that a lot of kids—primarily low-income minorities—couldn’t cut it, so they were shuffled through the system and given meaningless diplomas. The latter is based on the assumption these kids can succeed if the schools try harder.”

Mike Thomas, in a December 23 Orlando Sentinel commentary, responding to a story about an opinion poll showing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test is unpopular and may soon be changed or dropped.
New Jersey Preschool Vouchers Show Value of Public-Private Choice

By Tom Moran

To the Rev. Reginald Jackson, head of the Black Ministers’ Council, the remarkable success of New Jersey’s private preschools holds an obvious lesson.

We need more school choice. We need to break the monopoly of the public school system. We need to build on this success by at least experimenting with vouchers in the K-12 system.

“These preschools, 70 percent of which are privately owned, are providing a good foundation for these children,” Jackson says. “The only way we’re going to know if it would make a difference in the later grades is by giving it a chance.”

That is not going to happen in New Jersey because here even talk of vouchers causes the teachers unions and the education establishment to break out in hives.

Hoarding Kids

A voucher system would allow parents to pick whatever school they want, public or private. And the unions don’t want anybody to mess with their cozy monopoly, which works so well for all the adults involved.

Already, some educators in the suburbs are taking up battle stations. As the governor moves to expand preschool offerings to their districts, they are promising to keep the private preschools out of the loop.

“We would prefer to do it ourselves,” says Somerville Superintendent Carol Leary. “They will start out here as 3-year-olds and hopefully go right through high school.”

It’s a pity, because the preschool program today is probably the most successful story of the last decade in this beleaguered state—because it includes private schools and the competition they bring.

Stumbling Forward

The program relies on a healthy mix of public and private preschools that all receive public money—even those that are religiously inspired. About 45,000 children attend the schools, most of them in the poor urban districts known as Abbots.

The results are in. The first wave of these kids has reached grammar school, and they are showing markedly higher scores on their reading and math tests. Fewer are landing in expensive special education programs. And teachers say these students tend to be better behaved.

How did this happen in a state that has taken such a hard line on school vouchers and has only grudgingly allowed charter schools?

It was an accident. The state Supreme Court in 1999 decreed that preschools would be established in the Abbott districts, and the public schools didn’t have the space or the teachers to do the job. They made room for private schools because the court put a gun to their head. Even the teachers unions went along.

Changing Positions

“Initially I was dead-set against it, too,” says Tom Dunn, the former superintendent of Elizabeth who now lobbies for school administrators. “But I was proven wrong.”

As a convert, Dunn knows how public educators can turn this into a turf war, how someone like Leary could insist on banning private schools when she conceals she has no room in her own schools to do the job.

“There’s a feeling that I’m going to be responsible for this, so I want control, and I don’t want to be blamed for something that goes wrong,” Dunn says. “I can understand that initial reaction. But this works. And I plan to work with the superintendents to embrace this.”

Educating Children

Maybe some districts will bite. Maybe they’ll realize that the important point is whether the preschool is teaching children effectively, not whether it is public or private.

In the Abbott preschools, the state was perfectly impartial. It insisted on small class sizes, qualified teachers, and a proven curriculum. And it sent in teaching coaches, and enough money to make it work. That supervision is far more aggressive than is typical in pure voucher systems, so this is really a kind of hybrid.

But the preschools in these districts are both public and private. And because parents make the final choice about where to enroll their kids, the schools must compete for business.

Stonewalling Progress

So here we are. We have a success story, and the question is whether we have the wisdom to repeat it.

Meanwhile, Jackson says he will keep tilting at his windmill, pushing for a voucher system in the upper grades. He knows he won’t get it anytime soon. But for him, this is at its core a human rights issue.

It is simply wrong, Jackson says, to force poor children into public school monopolies when everyone knows many of these schools are failing, and even dangerous. He often asks a simple and telling question of those who disagree: “If you were in one of these urban districts, would you send your children there?”

Jackson is not quitting on the public schools. He sits on the board in Orange. And he is chairman of the board at Essex County Community College, where he says more than 80 percent of those graduating from the public schools need remedial classes.

“I’ve been in Jersey for 30 years and ever since I’ve been here they’ve talked about reforming the public schools, and they haven’t,” Jackson says. “That is my major frustration.”

And it will remain so, in all likelihood. Because New Jersey’s political establishment is not about to yield on this one—no matter what magic is being brewed in those Abbott preschools.

Tom Moran (tmoran@starledger.com) is a staff writer for The Star-Ledger newspaper in New Jersey, where an earlier version of this article originally appeared on December 14. Reprinted with permission.

In Other Words

“I have visited three schools now ... and met with parents with tears running down their faces and so glad that their child is doing better. The only negative calls I get are parents that already pulled their child out [of public school] and are disappointed they didn’t qualify for the scholarship.”

Georgia state Senate President Pro Tem Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) on the state’s new voucher program for special-needs students. Though only 15 percent of the 5,700 families who sought vouchers for their children after the program was created in spring 2007 were able to get them, legislators believe more will be helped in the program’s second year. The state Department of Education will begin accepting applications for the 2008-09 school year in late April. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 17, 2007
Extended School Day and Year Are Under Review Across the Country

By Richard G. Neal

Poor academic achievement of American K-12 students in comparison to other industrialized nations has led state departments of education, local school districts, and various groups supporting public schools to take a close look at extending the school day and/or the school year in order to boost student achievement.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which has revealed woeful student achievement inadequacies nationwide, particularly in urban school districts, is contributing to this trend. On average, U.S. students go to school 6.5 hours a day, 180 days a year—fewer than in many other industrialized countries, according to Education Sector, a Washington DC-based think tank. In Germany, for example, some schools in year-round programs can run up to 240 instructional days per year. Students in Japan are required to go to school 240 days per year, and students in Singapore attend year-round schools for 280 days per year.

Status Quo Support

It is true the average U.S. school year has increased over the long haul. According to the 1872 report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education, the school year in various states ranged from five months and 15 days in Virginia to eight months and 12.5 days in Connecticut. But have the increases over the decades been enough?

According to the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL), a public school advocacy group launched in October 2007, the answer is no. NCTL claims “an extended school day and school year will ensure that all children receive a rigorous and well-rounded education.”

NCTL works with both the Center for American Progress and Strong American Schools, which advocate for government schools. Other groups pressing to retain the status quo, including the National Education Association, Public Education Network, and National Association of Secondary School Principals, have given NCTL statements of support.

An important contention of these groups is that the current U.S. school year allows students to forget over the summer break much of what was learned during the previous school year. They also maintain the 180-day school year was designed for an agrarian calendar so children could provide help on farms during the growing and harvesting seasons. With that need long gone, NCTL and its supporters claim it’s time to lengthen the school year in order to meet today’s domestic needs and competition from abroad.

“[S]tate departments of education, local school districts, and various groups supporting public schools [are taking] a close look at extending the school day and/or the school year in order to boost student achievement.”

Expensive Idea

Not everybody agrees extending the school day and/or year is the best way—or even a good way—to improve education.

When considering such extensions, the first unavoidable factor to confront is cost. Every hour and every day added to the school calendar incur a significant expense above and beyond existing budgets.

For example, according to a study by the Education Commission of the States, one additional day of school in California (2005-06) would cost $292,825,000. For one more day in New York, the cost would be $211,967,000, while an extra day in North Dakota would cost $4,356,000. Before jumping to the conclusion that extending school time is a good idea, states need to decide if such a strategy is the best use of funds.

In addition, extending the school year and/or day may be good for some students, but not necessarily for others. According to a 1989 study by University of Georgia education professor Kenneth Tanner, the number of dropouts, especially among Hispanics and African-Americans, increased when the school year was lengthened.

Better Structure

While it is true European nations average 195 days of school and East Asian countries 208 days a year, their superior educational achievement compared to the United States may not be due to time in school. According to researcher Jorn-Steften Pischke of the London School of Economics, the difference may be that education is stressed heavily in these societies—a virtue that is unfortunately missing in many American urban school districts.

A study by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning suggests spending more time in class may not be the best way to improve achievement. It recommends reformers “reinvent schools around learning, not time.” Elena Silva, a senior policy analyst at Education Sector, generally agrees.

“Research reveals a complicated relationship between time and learning and suggests that improving the quality of instructional time is at least as important as increasing the quantity of time in school,” Silva noted in a January 2007 study.

An October 2007 report by the John Locke Foundation’s Terry Stoops offers additional evidence that simply adding hours to the school calendar does not increase academic performance.

Individual Differences

The drive for extending the school year and/or school day appears to be just another one-size-fits-all strategy of the education establishment to entrench itself further. Although increasing time in the classroom might be good for some students, it will not help others. It may even hurt some.

Every child has different learning patterns, and until parents are free to choose what is best educationally for their children, the vast learning potential of America’s children will continue to be stifled.

Richard G. Neal (rneal1@triad.rr.com) writes from North Carolina.

INTERNET INFO

National Center on Time & Learning: http://www.timeandlearning.org

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