Wisconsin’s Virtual Schools Could Close this Summer

At governor’s insistence, enrollment cap could cripple online programs

By Wendy Cloyd

The Wisconsin State Senate has voted to limit the number of students allowed to enroll in the state’s 18 virtual charter schools, after Gov. Jim Doyle (D) promised to veto any virtual schools legislation that did not include such an amendment. Lawmakers drafted legislation to save virtual academies after a December 2007 court decision determined the online schools violate state law because parents are heavily involved with their children’s work. At press time, the bill was pending in the Republican-controlled Assembly after its late February passage in the Senate.

Without the updates to state law, virtual schools would have been forced to shut down completely this July. Experts say the inclusion of an enrollment cap would have allowed the schools to either close or convert to traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Open Enrollment Under Scrutiny in Ore. District

By Wendy Cloyd

Eugene, Oregon’s 4J school district is considering retooling its decades-old open-enrollment policy because schools there are becoming socioeconomically segregated.

Georgia Legislature Considers New Help for Charter Schools

By Michael Coulter

Georgia charter schools—which are public schools of choice—must be approved by a local school board or the Georgia Board of Education, but that might change if a bill passed by the state House of Representatives on January 31 becomes law. State representatives passed House Bill 881 by a margin of 119 to 48 two days after the House Education Committee passed it by a margin of 22-4, with support from both Republicans and Democrats. The Senate voted 34-11 to approve the bill on February 7.

More than 1,100 students, parents, and educators rallied in Madison, Wisconsin on January 16 to defend the state’s virtual schools. At governor’s insistence, enrollment cap could cripple online programs

Mo. Parents Lobby Hard for Tax Credit Plan

By Ben DeGrow

After failing short in previous legislative attempts to enact private tuition tax credits in Missouri, reformers are cautiously optimistic about the prospects of a proposal for a program targeted to special-needs students. Under Senate Bill 993, financial contributions made to organizations that support special-needs students.

WISCONSIN p. 4

INSIDE SRN

5 Choice in Milwaukee Under Siege
8 Schwarzenegger Vows Reform
9 Autistic Kids Get Minn. Charter
14 Tuition Price Controls Proposed
15 Teachers Paid More than Enough
16 Curriculum Standards vs. Choice
19 School Choice Is a Human Right
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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President Proposes Expanding DC School Voucher Program

By Dan Lips

President George W. Bush’s 2009 budget request for the federal government, released in February, includes a proposal to boost federal funding for the Washington, DC school system by $32 million, including a $5 million hike for the DC Opportunity Scholarship program—the citywide voucher program for low-income students.

The proposed budget increase for schools in the nation’s capital signaled the Bush administration’s commitment to extending the DC School Choice Incentive Act program. Signed into law in 2003, the federal legislation authorized the creation of a new $13 million school voucher program for low-income students living in the District of Columbia.

The program also included an additional $13 million funding grant each for the traditional public schools budget and the charter schools budget.

The DC Opportunity Scholarship program, which currently helps more than 1,900 disadvantaged students attend private schools, faces an uncertain future on Capitol Hill.

Leading congressional Democrats, including DC Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, oppose the program and recommend its discontinuation. The program is due for reauthorization this year.

“President George W. Bush’s 2009 budget request for the federal government... includes a proposal to boost federal funding for the Washington, DC school system by $32 million, including a $5 million hike for the DC Opportunity Scholarship program...”

Working Well

John Schilling, chief of staff and director of national projects for the DC-based Alliance for School Choice, applauded the Bush administration’s proposed budget for DC schools.

“Boosting the funding levels for DC Public Schools, public charter schools, and the Opportunity Scholarship Program will help all three sectors and aid these reform efforts,” Schilling said. “The increased funding is especially important for the scholarship program.

“This is a program that is working phenomenally well for nearly 2,000 very low-income children and enjoys overwhelming parental satisfaction,” Schilling noted, “yet [it] receives significantly less funding than DCPS or charter schools.”

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, said the budget proposal is a mixed blessing. Coulson called the modest funding increase for the District’s school voucher program a “great thing,” since it will “bring the option of independent schooling within reach of more low-income families.”

Funding Imbalance

But Coulson lamented the funding increases for the traditional public school system.

“The budget for the District’s public schools will also be rising substantially, and that will put the voucher schools at an even greater financial disadvantage than is currently the case,” Coulson noted, pointing out the current scholarship amount of $7,500 for private school tuition was well below per-pupil spending in the District’s public schools.

“That huge funding discrimination against the independent voucher schools, coupled with the program’s very small size, will continue to limit its impact. And as long as its impact is limited, it will remain politically vulnerable,” Coulson continued.

“When the time comes for Congress to consider reauthorizing this program, they will be facing an army of committed parents fighting to ensure that their children have the same educational opportunity as their higher-income peers.”

JOHN SCHILLING
DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL PROJECTS
ALLIANCE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

Continuing Education

Schilling expects the Bush administration to press hard to ensure the Opportunity Scholarship program is maintained.

“The administration has made it clear that they fully support the program and will fight hard for it,” Schilling said, noting Bush specifically mentioned it in his State of the Union address in January. Schilling is optimistic others will join Bush in supporting the voucher program’s continuation, noting, “Mayor [Adrian] Fenty and Chancellor [Michelle] Rhee have both expressed their support for the three-sector federal funding initiative, which includes continuation of the scholarship program.

“This is a program started by local leaders and parents, a program that has proven to be successful, and one where demand outpaces supply by nearly four to one,” Schilling continued.

“When the time comes for Congress to consider reauthorizing this program,” Schilling predicted, “they will be facing an army of committed parents fighting to ensure that their children have the same educational opportunity as their higher-income peers.”

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

Continued from page 1

ment cap might save schools for a time, but the long-term consequences could be dire.

Long Fight
On December 5, 2007, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals determined the Northern Ozaukee School District’s operation of the Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA) violated statutes dealing with charter schools, open enrollment, and teacher licensing. Legislators immediately sought to fix state law developed long before lawmakers even imagined the possibility of a public school based on the Internet.

Susan Patrick, president of the North American Council for Online Learning, said Wisconsin teachers’ unions have been seeking to shut down cyber charter schools for several years. Unions, she said, weren’t happy to see state funds go to online academies instead of to traditional, four-walled schools.

After two failed attempts to shut WIVA down through the courts, a third appeal was successful.

Setting Precedent
Virtual schools such as WIVA are different from homeschool programs. Online academies allow students to work on the same state-approved curriculum as their public school peers—but the work is done from home instead of in a traditional bricks-and-mortar school.

Such virtual schools hire licensed teachers to oversee student work and progress, follow state guidelines, and comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

But unions in Wisconsin claimed that because the student’s home becomes the classroom, a licensed teacher must be physically present. Since parents are not licensed, virtual schools shouldn’t be considered for public education funding, they say.

“They looked at the way the statute is worded on what is a teacher and applied it in an absurd way—giving it the ‘four walls’ test,” Patrick said. “It is a prime example of how policy issues around online learning are really important. Legislators need to be ahead of the curve and make sure laws are up to date to avoid such challenges.”

Calling for Caps
Wisconsin legislators immediately went to work to update the law, creating compromise language to address the court decision in order to save WIVA and several other virtual academies statewide. But Doyle said in mid-February he would not sign the compromise unless it put strict limits on the number of students allowed to attend classes online.

According to a February 19 Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel story, Doyle told lawmakers he wants the cap in order to study whether the rapid growth of online schools is negatively affecting traditional classrooms. The cap would limit enrollment to those already in the program—approximately 3,500 students statewide.

“I want to make sure that students who are currently attending a virtual charter school or who have enrolled during the current open enrollment period can continue to attend that school without interruption while we study those issues,” Doyle said.

Davis said, “We tried to make it match traditional schools, mirroring the number of hours in school, the ability to have teacher contact—all of that. We were happy to put those things in because virtual schools were already doing it. Unfortunately, Doyle said he won’t sign it unless we put a cap on enrollment.”

Excluding Poor Kids
That is something Davis is not willing to do, because a cap would cripple schools such as WIVA. Moreover, it would limit options for students who just can’t succeed in a traditional school setting, he said.

“For one of the first times in our state history we are going to be denying people access to public education,” Davis said.

Parents like having the choice of online learning—and if public funding of virtual schools becomes limited, the demand for them will be so great that private organizations will step in to run them. But that will make the cost go up, Davis said.

“Then only wealthy families will be able to afford the option,” Davis said. “[Doyle] is cutting off low-income families.”

Expanding Options
Patrick agreed, saying virtual schools give parents an effective and necessary option to meet the educational needs of their kids.

“WIVA has a higher rate of success than [a traditional] public school—they have an innovative model,” Patrick said. “If the legislation doesn’t go through, it will be an issue for all the virtual schools in Wisconsin.”

While the Wisconsin court decision will not affect the 17 other states with virtual academies, it could prompt unions in those states to scour their own states’ laws to come up with similar challenges—creating confusion about what defines online learning.

Davis said if Doyle doesn’t sign the compromise into law, the legislature could attempt a veto override, but he’s not sure there is enough support.

“If that doesn’t work, it will essentially go back to the court,” Davis said. “The Wisconsin Supreme Court could decide to take it up and overturn it.”

Unless that happens, the state’s virtual academies are in danger of losing funding as of July 2008, compromising students’ educational choice—which Davis said would be a tragedy.

Wendy Cloyd (wendy_cloyd@hotmail.com) writes from Alaska.

INTERNET INFO


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Milwaukee Legislator Aims to Dismantle Choice

By Mike Ford

Wisconsin state Rep. Fred Kessler (D-Milwaukee) recently caused an uproar with a proposal to drastically reduce the scope of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the nation’s oldest and largest school voucher program for low-income students.

In a January 7 letter to fellow representatives, Kessler offered proposals he said would reduce enrollment in the choice program by “nearly 40 percent.” Kessler would, among other things, cut per-pupil payments to schools enrolling voucher students. Currently those payments are $6,501 or the amount it costs the school to educate the student, whichever is less. Kessler proposes to reduce the payments to the amount schools actually charge tuition-paying students, failing to take into account that tuition at most parochial schools is subsidized by congregations.

The head of the Milwaukee legislative caucus, state Rep. Jason Fields (D-Milwaukee), took issue with Kessler’s plan. “The idea of segregation, the idea of separate but equal, and being told that you can only go to a particular school because of your race, is exactly why we now have school choice,” said Fields. “I find it quite troubling that there are those among us who ignore history and ignore this truth by choosing to enact policies that take away a person’s freedom to choose.”

Redundant Requirements

Kessler’s proposal also contains a number of provisions that duplicate requirements already imposed on schools and families that participate in the MPCP. For example, all teachers in MPCP schools are required to have college degrees, and the schools are required to admit special-needs students. Parents are already required to show proof of income eligibility before their children are allowed to participate.

Under current law, all MPCP schools must obtain accreditation, a process that requires degreed teachers. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has always required MPCP schools to obtain and keep documents proving the income eligibility of participating families. And DPI clearly states in its MPCP “Frequently Asked Questions” document, “A private school may not discriminate against a child with special educational needs in the admission process for the Choice program.”

According to a January 21, 2008 entry in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel’s SchoolZone Education Blog, Kessler withdrew his proposal after being made aware many of his proposed changes were in fact already law. “If somebody had said to me, ‘That’s already the case,’ I would have backed off,” Kessler told the paper.

School Choice Wisconsin President Susan Mitchell expressed disappointment with Kessler’s lack of awareness.

“One thing I found out very quickly is charter schools are an antsy little group, a little nervous, and given the history in Indiana, I understand that. Take heart: In Indianapolis, you’re safe. No question.”

Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard, in a February address to charter school leaders, saying he supports charter schools, plans to continue creating new ones as warranted, and will lobby the state to protect the movement already under way. Indianapolis is the only city nationwide that gives its mayor the power to authorize charter schools. Indianapolis Star, February 22, 2008

The willingness of some Milwaukee legislators to work to kill a program that benefits almost 20,000 of their own constituents, coupled with their unwillingness to learn the most basic facts about it, is disturbing,” Mitchell said.

Ongoing Threat

Kessler is the latest in a long line of school choice opponents to claim reducing MPCP enrollment would result in more funding for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). In his January 7 letter Kessler wrote, “Any money saved by the state due to a drop in [MPCP] enrollment should be returned to MPS.” According to a January 14 memo from the nonpartisan Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, eliminating the MPCP would cost the state of Wisconsin up to $89.4 million. “Countless reports from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau establish unequivocally that state costs for a student in MPS substantially exceed those for a student in the MPCP,” Mitchell said.

When Kessler’s proposal appears to be dead, the future of the MPCP remains threatened despite a steady stream of positive results, including a recent report from the University of Minnesota showing MPCP has a higher graduation rate than MPS. (See page 7.)"The success of school choice in Milwaukee has made the program here a key target of opponents who don’t want the positive news to spread,” Mitchell said.

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

INTERNET INFO


“Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee” by Dr. John Robert Warren, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, January 2008: http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=22908


“Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee” by Dr. John Robert Warren, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, January 2008: http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=22908
Missouri
Continued from page 1

provide private scholarships to students with defined physical or mental impairments would reduce an individual’s state tax liability by 80 percent on contributions up to $1 million.

To be eligible under the proposal, scholarship organizations would have to demonstrate financial accountability and guarantee students can carry the scholarship between different programs. Qualifying schools would have to meet basic safety and health standards, could not discriminate on the basis of race or religion, and would have to provide regular reports to parents on student progress.

Cautious Optimism
Dave Roland, policy analyst for the Show-Me Institute, a think tank in St. Louis, said the state’s last four or five legislative sessions saw unsuccessful tuition tax credit proposals targeted at poor students in large, urban districts. He believes SB 993 has a better chance to pass but says school choice champion Gov. Matt Blunt’s (R) late January announcement not to seek reelection and other factors might complicate the process.

“It’s hard to tell what will happen,” Roland said. “I’d like to think there’s enough momentum to push it through, but past experience says caution is advised.”

State Sen. Jason Crowell (R-Cape Girardeau), who is sponsoring SB 993, expressed more confidence.

“I believe that focusing on special-needs children is an important duty of legislators,” Crowell said. “I believe [the bill] will be supported by a majority of legislators.”

Compelling Testimony
On February 13, more than 150 people, including many parents of special-needs children, showed up to testify before a Missouri Senate committee in favor of SB 993.

“I hope that because of hearings like this, more people will begin to take notice of what’s happening to the children falling through the cracks of the school system,” said Shari Kaminsky, a mother of two autistic children from Kirkwood who testified before the committee.

Kaminsky’s older son has done well in the special public school district, a government entity organized to deliver educational services to special-needs students. But she removed her younger son when she observed the system was not serving his needs. Since enrolling him last autumn at the private program Giant Steps, she has witnessed marked progress in his verbal and social skills.

But the Kirkwood mother said Giant Steps faces declining enrollment as special school districts have stopped establishing new contracts with private providers.

“Unless there is some degree of choice here, it means there will be no Giant Steps,” Kaminsky said. “I should be able to convince the school system that my son should be able to be here, but they’re not going to do it on their own.”

Crowell characterized much of the testimony as “very heart-breaking and very emotional,” citing stories of relocations and broken marriages that resulted from parents’ sacrifices made to educate their special-needs children.

On February 20, the committee approved SB 993 and sent it to the full Senate for consideration.

Equal Opportunity
Crowell says his bill’s primary purpose is to equalize opportunities for families, regardless of their income.

“The main goal is to put those special-needs children born to middle-class and poorer families on a level playing field with those born to wealthy parents, to give them the same access to a world-class education,” Crowell said.

Kaminsky said the $32,000-a-year tuition price tag for Giant Steps eventually may be too much for her family, and the tax credit proposal is needed for some parents, especially in rural Missouri, to access effective private programs in the first place.

In Other Words
“The idea that you need only public schools or only the aristocracy is going to get educated is erroneous. To me there are two parts of equity, and one is not forcing people to pay for other people’s education. That seems more like theft than equity. ...”

“If you had private schooling, different schools would find different choices on these issues and different people could be satisfied. Just like we have many types of cars and many kinds of shirts, if you have a one-size-fits-all [system], you don’t satisfy consumers. ...”

“I’m not attacking goodness. [Public education] is not good. We shouldn’t be calling it public education; we should be calling it socialist education.”

Loyola University economics Prof. Walter Block, speaking at a February 20 panel discussion on education reform and school choice hosted by the University of Central Arkansas and the Arkansas Policy Foundation, quoted in the Arkansas Democrat Gazette, February 21, 2008.

“After falling short in previous legislative attempts to enact private tuition tax credits in Missouri, reformers are cautiously optimistic about the prospects of a proposal for a program targeted to special-needs students.”

Projecting Savings
The bill’s sponsor also wants school officials to recognize the potential cost savings in SB 993.

“My hope is that the public education establishment will look at it and see that special-needs children are breaking the bank for many school districts,” Crowell said. “If we can get more money put behind their pursuits so that parents can choose a public, private, or parochial school, we’ll be putting additional dollars into education.”

A January 2008 report from the Show-Me Institute found significant cost savings in Missouri’s previous tax credit proposals. But Roland pointed out the absence of a cap on either the number of participating students or the scholarship amount would make forecasting the savings from SB 993 nearly impossible.

“Without those kinds of boundaries, it makes it a lot more difficult to anticipate what the effect will be,” Roland said.

Roland indicated tax credits were favored as a solution over vouchers because of likely constitutional challenges to the latter stemming from the state constitution’s Blaine Amendment language.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Milwaukee Voucher Program Students More Likely to Graduate than Others

By Jim Waters

A new report documents a significant difference in graduation rates between low-income Milwaukee children using vouchers and those enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools. Researchers hailed the report as further confirmation that school choice programs improve at-risk students’ chances of getting their high school diplomas.

The study, commissioned by the Milwaukee-based group School Choice Wisconsin and authored by University of Minnesota-Twin Cities sociology professor John Robert Warren, reported private school students’ graduation rates were substantially higher in three out of the four years considered.

The largest gap—14 percent—occurred in 2003. The gap was 9 percent in 2005 and 2006.

Warren said the results for 2004, the only year in which graduation rates for public school students reportedly outpaced those for children attending private schools—and then by only 4 percent—“appear to be anomalously high.” That year, 65 percent of public school students graduated, compared to 61 percent of choice students.

“Students in choice programs are more likely to graduate from high school than students in public high schools,” Warren said.

Room for Improvement

Graduation rates for students in the Milwaukee Public Schools system have improved slowly over the past decade, according to information provided by the school district.

“This provides solid new evidence for our claim that choice actually raises performance in all schools,” said Richard Innes, an education research analyst for the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a free-market think tank in Kentucky. “The fact that the public schools are also improving their graduation rates shows that choice does not destroy the public system, as some opponents claim.”

“A new report documents a significant difference in graduation rates between low-income Milwaukee children using vouchers and those enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools.”

Still, graduation rates for both private and public schools need to improve, said Mike Ford, a senior research associate at School Choice Wisconsin. The highest graduation rate choice schools managed to achieve during the four years examined by the report was 64 percent, in 2006. Public schools managed to graduate more than 60 percent of students only once.

“Neither group’s graduation rates are as high as they should be,” Ford said.

Significant Achievement

But given that students participating in the city’s voucher program are from low-income homes and often have come from public schools where they were neither the best students nor likely to graduate, the results indicate a significant achievement for the choice program.

“It’s not just about numbers on a page. It’s about poor kids who now have a much brighter future because they were able to attend private schools using school vouchers,” said Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

“This story is also about the kids who likely dropped out over the past several years because they didn’t have ready access to private schools,” Coulson said.

Coulson noted the report could provide leverage as choice programs—even demonstrably successful projects such as those in Cleveland and Washington, DC—face persistent, cantankerous critics in the educational establishment, who, along with like-minded lawmakers, continually press to scale back the programs.

“As long as the Milwaukee program is capped at a small percentage of one city’s student population—less than one-fifth, in fact—politicians beholden to teachers unions can safely fight to kill it and not risk being voted out of office by angry constituents,” Coulson said.

Coulson continued, “It is only when school choice programs benefit a larger share of the population that they will be safe from legislators who would rather play politics than help kids get the best education possible.”

Cause and Effect?

Warren, who says he’s a school choice agnostic, reported 1,870 additional Milwaukee public school students—a 14 percent increase—would have graduated during the four-year period studied if the public schools’ graduation rate had equaled that of the school choice program.

The author cautions his research does not conclusively establish school choice as the cause for the graduation rate difference.

“Correlation is not causation,” Warren said. “It’s equally plausible that there’s something different about these kids because their parents are more involved in making these choices.”

Warren said ongoing evaluation of Milwaukee students’ performance by a team of researchers, including University of Arkansas professor Jay Greene, as part of the School Choice Demonstration Project—an objective, long-term evaluation of the effects of school choice—should yield more clues about whether participation in Milwaukee’s choice program is the cause of the better graduation rates.

Past Research

Greene’s prior research has shown differences in reading and mathematics test scores, as well as graduation rates, between students in Milwaukee Public Schools and those enrolled in the city’s private schools.

Coulson said Warren’s findings fit well with the conclusions reached by other researchers and are “part of a much larger pattern.”

For example, Coulson notes, a national study conducted a decade ago by economist Hoover Neel—“Choice For Poor African-American students were much more likely to complete high school, be accepted to college, and complete college if they attended Catholic schools than if they attended the local public school, even after controlling for differences in students’ socioeconomic status.”

Jim Waters (jwaters@hpps.org) is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

INTERNET INFO


California Likely to Reject Federal Options to Reform Failing Schools

By Ben DeGrow

With California facing a cash-strapped state budget, some choice advocates are calling for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) to follow his tough reform talk by expanding parental options in education.

“With California facing a cash-strapped state budget, some choice advocates are calling for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to follow his tough reform talk by expanding parental options.”

In his January 2008 State of the State speech, Schwarzenegger touted his intention to be the first governor to use “powers given under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to turn challenged districts around.” Currently, 98 California school districts have fallen short of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets enough to qualify for corrective action.

Each of the 98 districts has failed to meet its basic academic progress goals for at least three years, some for as many as seven or eight years.

Not Far Enough

Schwarzenegger’s plan has focused on providing state-approved technical assistance to help local school districts craft plans to meet NCLB accountability standards, expand education data access and capabilities, and offer new avenues to license teachers.

Dr. Vicki Murray, senior education fellow at the Pacific Research Institute, a think tank in Sacramento, praised the governor for his reform but said it doesn’t go nearly far enough.

“It’s a good first step, but the real issue is that no parent should be expected to make their child a sacrificial lamb to the schools that fail to improve year after year,” Murray said. “Choice should be real alternatives, [and] it should be universal and immediate.”

Under NCLB, school districts have to offer students in failing schools free transportation to another school in the district. But many California districts have only a few schools from which to choose, and in some cases, they don’t have any schools demonstrating academic success. As a result, Murray says, this sanction does not offer families much hope.

“Sure, parents can pull their kids out of a school,” Murray said. “But when so many schools are underperforming, what’s a parent to do?”

Seeking Remedies

Clint Bolick, director of the Goldwater Institute’s Scharf-Norton Center for Constitutional Litigation in Arizona, agrees about the shortcomings of NCLB.

“The law itself is deficient in not providing for meaningful remedies,” Bolick said.

Bolick noted many districts are not even enforcing the weak provisions the federal law affords. In 2006, in his former position as director of the Alliance for School Choice, he helped launch legal action against California’s Los Angeles Unified and Compton school districts for failing to comply with the federal law’s choice provisions. The complaint is lodged in the state secretary of education’s office, where it is awaiting action.

Bolick said the secretary “has the power to issue monetary sanctions” but has yet to follow through. He hopes the governor’s pronouncements will turn things around.

“It would be absolutely titanic to have Gov. Schwarzenegger on board with a strong enforcement of No Child Left Behind, even though the law does not provide perfect remedies,” said Bolick.

“[N]o parent should be expected to make their child a sacrificial lamb to the schools that fail to improve year after year. Choice should be real alternatives, [and] it should be universal and immediate.”

VICKI MURRAY, PH.D.
SENIOR EDUCATION FELLOW
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Budget Deficit

The direction of California’s reform discussion has shifted since reports emerged in December 2007 revealing the state faces an overall budget deficit of more than $14 billion.

“A lot of people think reform [means devoting additional financial] resources, so that put a lot of rain on their parade for 2008,” said Murray.

But Fred Glass, spokesman for the California Federation for Teachers (CFT), believes the budget shortfall can be cured by restoring a rescinded vehicle license fee and instituting a severance tax comparable to those in other oil-producing states. He said Schwarzenegger’s plan is meaningless if the deficit cannot be overcome.

“You can dress up reality any way you want, but the reality remains that it’s hard to make progress when you’re starving the system,” said Glass, citing a 2008 Education Week survey that ranked California 43rd in per-pupil funding.

CFT’s slate of proposals to fix underachieving school districts includes reducing class sizes by hiring more teachers and contributing additional funds to programs that provide mentorship opportunities between new and experienced educators.

Corrective Action

Murray says that type of approach has been tried repeatedly without favorable results.

“Schools prefer the softer sanctions, like tweaking the curriculum and providing more teacher training,” Murray said. “But, of course, that doesn’t do anything. You just look like you’re doing something, and you’re not fundamentally changing what’s being done.”

Instead, Murray would like to see the governor make use of the serious sanctions available to him under NCLB. Types of corrective action chronically failing schools could face include undergoing complete staff overhauls, being taken over by a private management company, or converting to charter schools.

Glass does not see a serious possibility of the governor following through with any of those actions, nor does he think it would help the state’s 98 underperforming districts.

Those kinds of concerns don’t address the root problems,” Glass said.

But Murray sees a real opportunity for Schwarzenegger to set a bold new course.

“He is taking a strong stand against an ossified, recalcitrant system,” Murray said. “California could be the first state to really turn things around.”

Ben DeGrow (ben@I2L.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Charter School for Autistic Kids to Open in Minneapolis this Fall

‘Courageous’ parents blaze trail for expanding school choice options

By Andrew Campanella

Tamara Phillips never dreamed she’d start a school one day, but when she saw her 14-year-old autistic daughter, Ari, disinterested in school and lacking opportunities for social interaction, she was inspired to tackle an education bureaucracy that wasn’t offering solutions fast enough.

“There is this ‘illusion of inclusion’ in many public schools, where children with autism may be sitting in the back of a classroom, but there really isn’t any learning of substance going on,” Phillips says. “And the social aspect just is not there.”

Showing both the power of committed parents and an unbridled passion for providing a better education for children, the launch of the soon-to-open Lionsgate Academy in Minneapolis provides a narrative of choice, inspiration, and intense planning.

Dissatisfied Parents
As a social work graduate student, Phillips sees many families who have children diagnosed with autism. She estimates 95 percent of the children she’s helped so far have experienced anxiety and depression as a result of bad experiences in traditional public schools.

So Phillips teamed with another parent, Bernadette Groh, to begin the process of starting a charter school specifically for autistic students in her hometown of Minneapolis.

The school—Lionsgate Academy—is slated to enroll upwards of 100 students diagnosed with autism in grades 6-12 this fall.

“These two families were not satisfied with the programs their children were receiving in the public schools. They wanted a program with more parental involvement, and they started to do research,” explained Leslie Laub, a psychologist and retired principal and director of education who serves on Lionsgate Academy’s board of directors.

Due Diligence
For Phillips and her group of parents, the process of starting a school wasn’t—and still isn’t—the easiest of challenges.

After two years of planning, writing a 250-page charter grant application, and consulting with charter school experts, Lionsgate board members are now searching for school locations, narrowing the field of candidates for the school director position, and searching for qualified teachers to recruit.

“The idea of a school for children living with autism—defined as those with brain development disorders that impair communication and social interaction—has inspired hundreds of parents who, like Phillips, are dissatisfied with the special-education programs provided in public schools. To date, more than 700 parents have contacted Phillips about the school, and she is frequently asked how parents can follow in her footsteps and start schools of their own.

Phillips offers them a dose of optimism and caution, stressing the importance of strong planning and consulting with experts.

“We knew that we were not educators,” Phillips said. “So we aligned ourselves with educators and other professionals who know how to create a school. We met with people who had started charter schools before, we visited private schools throughout the country, and we met with a charter school consultant.”

Unique Focus
Laub says Lionsgate Academy will provide a differentiated education focused on year-round schooling, longer breaks, college and life preparation, and opportunities for social interaction. The school has teamed with the University of Minnesota to offer specialized services.

“We are going to focus on social skills in every single class, and we will use community resources so that children learn social transition skills,” Laub said.

Both women say the biggest challenge facing Lionsgate is fundraising—the same one that faces most charter schools, no matter the population they serve. The school’s founders hope to raise $1.5 million over the next three years.

Regardless of whether they meet that exact goal, however, Phillips vows the school will open, and she is thankful that parents in Minneapolis and across the country have provided a strong support network to work for Lionsgate’s success.

“I think that when you are looking at parents of kids with autism, you see a totally dedicated group of people who will go to the ends of the Earth to get the best learning environment for their kids,” Phillips said.

“There is this ‘illusion of inclusion’ in many public schools, where children with autism may be sitting in the back of a classroom, but there really isn’t any learning of substance going on.”

TAMARA PHILLIPS
MOTHER AND CO-FOUNDER
LIONSGATE ACADEMY

Growing Movement
According to the Center for Education Reform, a charter school advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland, Lionsgate Academy will be among 154 other charter schools in Minnesota. The state passed the nation’s first charter school law in 1991, and charter schools in Minnesota serve more than 23,000 students.

The opening of Lionsgate—and the demand among parents for specialized educational opportunities—follows a trend in which parents of children with special needs are demanding more educational options for their children, according to the nonprofit Alliance for School Choice, a national advocacy group based in Washington, DC that promotes school vouchers and scholarship tax credit programs.

According to the alliance, five states offer private school choice programs for students with special needs. More than 21,410 students are currently participating in those programs—a 10 percent increase over the 2006-07 school year.

Though school choice is a controversial topic nationwide, Phillips says she hasn’t experienced any backlash over Lionsgate’s opening.

“If anyone has a problem with what we’re doing, they haven’t told me,” Phillips said. “And it wouldn’t bother me if they did, because we’d continue.”

Andrew Campanella (acampanella@allianceforschoolchoice.org) is director of communications and marketing at the Alliance for School Choice in Washington, DC.
Baltimore Is Paying High School Kids to Study

By Aricka Flowers

The Baltimore school system has joined the ranks of districts experimenting with a controversial pay-based incentive plan to improve student test scores—but this time, it’s not for teachers.

In January, Maryland School Superintendent Nancy Grasmick approved a plan to pay Baltimore-area students up to $110 an hour for improving their scores on the state’s high school assessment exam. Depending on the results in Baltimore, the experiment could spread statewide.

Aimed at high school sophomores and juniors who failed the Maryland High School Assessment Exam at least once, the program is being regarded as a chance to get students more interested in making the grade. Some 5,000 students could take part in the program.

In a February 8 Education Week article, Andrés Alonso, chief executive officer of Baltimore’s school system, said, “The possible outcomes from ... not graduating from high school are so great that I felt that putting a program in place that could rescue some of these students was a small risk to take.”

Potential to Backfire

Under the plan, students who have failed at least one exam will be paid $25 if they increase their score by 5 percent over their previous score. They will receive an additional $35 if their score increases another 15 percent on the second test, and an extra $50 bonus can be earned by raising their score another 20 percent on the third benchmark exam.

Though Grasmick signed off with the caveat that the program be closely monitored for student improvement, critics say this is the wrong approach to achieving lasting positive change.

“There is research in lab and school settings that concludes that incentives, or bribes, to increase test scores do not work,” explained Robert Schaeffer, public education director of The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a Massachusetts-based organization that works to promote quality education and testing. “The monetary incentive may produce short-term gains, but in the long term it is not effective and may be harmful.

“It’s like steroids,” Schaeffer continued. “They temporarily boost performance, but in the end, they undermine the capacity to do hard work. Programs like these set kids up to believe they’ll get paid for performance. And when they enter a class that doesn’t have a pay-for-performance bribe attached to it, they don’t care to perform. You have to either give ever-increasing doses of the drug, or money, or you end with a collapse of motivation.”

Performance as a Reward

School officials are not only banking on the idea that money will be enough of a motivator to get students to spend more time on their studies; they are also hoping it will help remove some of their distractions. Supporters of the program say the money could give lower-income students—who otherwise would have to work at jobs outside school—more time to study by allowing them to make money while focusing on schoolwork.

But experts say rewards, even monetary ones, are not as much a motivator for teens as one might believe.

“Up to the age of 10, things like rewards do work for kids as a motivator,” said Peter A. Spevak, Ph.D., director of the Washington, DC-based Center for Applied Motivation, which studies the subject. “But for young adults and [grown-ups], these types of motivators do not work. For [them], it’s more about motivating people to do and be their best. Pay is just an extra at the end of the day.

“If our society is based only on pay, that would be a bad thing,” Spevak continued. “People are not thinking about how this impacts children in the long run and how it will affect their view of the world as an adult citizen. What will happen to volunteerism, for instance?”

Choice Works Better

Another gripe critics have about Baltimore’s plan is that it uses taxpayer money. The state predicts it will spend $935,000 on these incentives, with the funds coming from a $6.3 million budget for increasing student test scores.

“We spend an enormous amount of tax dollars to give students a good education—and that’s not saying all public schools do a good job, because they don’t,” said Christopher Summers, president of the Maryland Public Policy Institute, a Rockville-based public policy and research organization. “But to say, ‘Hey, we will give you money if you do well’ is just asinine.

“We’ve already spent a lot of money on improving test scores and were promised these big improvements. And where are the results?” Summers asked. “If there is extra money available, we feel it should be put towards some sort of voucher program. That way, if students are not doing well in one school, maybe they can go to another school that better fits their needs.”

Advocates say the new plan does not neglect good students. The program includes funds to pay high-achieving students $10 an hour to tutor academically struggling peers.

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

INTERNET INFO

“Promises of Money Meant to Heighten Student Motivation,” by Katie Ash, Education Week, February 8, 2008: http://tinyurl.com/2q92jn

COMMENTARY

Paying Students Can Pay Off

By David Kirkpatrick

Some schools’ policies for rewarding student achievement have made the news lately. An article in the February 13 edition of Education Week, “Promises of Money Meant to Heighten Student Motivation,” identified programs in places as diverse as Fulton County, Georgia and New York City that pay students in various ways if they apply themselves to doing better in school. At about the same time, February 10 to be exact, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran a similar article.

This is not a totally new concept, but the reports note the trend is growing. In fact, the Inquirer states, “financial incentives are becoming a hallmark of antipoverty efforts in New York.”

There, not only are students eligible for payments, but so are adults. For example, students in high-poverty high schools can receive up to $1,000 for passing an Advanced Placement (AP) test, while low-income adults can be paid for attending parent-teacher conferences or for having a full-time job.

Some people object to such efforts even though they are not affected by them. This is a result of one of the problems of public schools—their political nature. If a school district’s administration, staff, students, parents, and general taxpayers have no problem with a different approach that shows promise, why should anyone else be able to cause problems just because the idea offends their sensibilities?

All Stress Rewards

In an earlier commentary on this subject a few years ago, I noted if those objecting to students being paid to do what they theoretically should be doing anyway want to be consistent, they should object to teachers being paid for what they should be doing. A few days ago I came across a column written by someone in Ohio who had read my comment and said it was the most absurd thing he has seen.

He’s right. It is absurd. That was the point. Although he can read and write, he apparently cannot recognize irony.

The reality is that all schools heavily stress rewards, including financial ones, to motivate students. Non-monetary rewards include giving gold stars in the primary grades for higher achievement, and giving As or honor-
Atlanta Experiments with Student Pay, Too

By Aricka Flowers

Two suburban Atlanta schools are testing a program, Learn and Earn, similar to Baltimore’s pay-incentive model. The program pays 40 students $8 an hour, for up for four hours per week, to take part in after-school math and science sessions.

Instead of using tax dollars like the Baltimore incentive plan, the program is privately funded by the Learning Makes a Difference Foundation, an Atlanta-based nonprofit founded by Jackie Gingrich Cushman and Kathy Gingrich Lubbers, daughters of former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Cushman says the program makes perfect sense.

“Learn and Earn is an innovative learning program that replicates what many parents have successfully done for years—providing a monetary incentive for academic performance,” Cushman wrote in a statement on the organization’s Web site. “Our society routinely pays sports, hip-hop, and Hollywood stars millions of dollars per year. Isn’t academic success at least as worthy of reward?”

Short-Term Success

Critics say programs such as Learn and Earn are not in students’ best interests.

“Schools are desperate to boost test scores because of the unreasonable requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act and, in some states, the state assessment programs,” said Robert Schaeffer, public education director of The National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

“They are looking for ways to raise test scores by hook or by crook,” Schaeffer continued. “This, in the short term, will have the potential to raise the scores of the toughest-to-reach students, but it will only be for the short term.”

The students enrolled in the program have performed below average (C- or worse) in math and science. The participating eighth and 11th graders can earn bonuses if they get at least a B average in both math and science and pass the state exam in those subjects. Eighth graders who merit bonuses will get $75 apiece, and high school juniors will get $125 apiece.

“[Atlanta’s] Learn and Earn ... program pays 40 students $8 an hour, for up for four hours per week, to take part in after-school math and science sessions.”

Evaluating the Problem

The program, launched in late January, is scheduled for evaluation after its 15-week trial period ends in mid-May. Cushman wrote, “The goal of the study is to provide the students with incentive and supports, thereby helping them improve their math and science abilities.”

Not everyone is sold on the potential of success for programs such as Learn and Earn.

“They will end up frustrated with this just as they have with every other silver bullet solution to the complicated issues surrounding educating these hard-to-reach students,” said Schaeffer. “None of these programs will work.

“You can use a medical analogy for this situation,” Schaeffer continued. “You need a system that does a better diagnosis of the patient and prescribes a remedy that is customized for the particular problems they are presenting. You have to find out why these students are not performing, and then figure out how to get them over the bar. You can’t just try to get them to jump higher.”

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Chicago.
Georgia
Continued from page 1

and Democrats.
“Georgia families want better and more public education choices than an attendance zone,” said state Rep. Jan Jones (R-Alpharetta), the bill’s primary sponsor. “This legislation will give families more opportunities to choose public schools that fit their children’s needs.”

Making Changes
Under current law, first enacted in 1993, groups seeking to establish a charter school in Georgia must get approval from a local school board or the Georgia Board of Education (GBOE). Charter schools approved by local school boards receive the same per-pupil funding as other public schools in the district, but those approved solely by the GBOE aren’t eligible for it. They receive only the funds that would normally go to a local school districts’ power to approve charter schools.

Under the proposed law, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission—the agency the bill proposes to create to authorize new charters—would have seven members appointed by the GBOE, including three recommended by the governor, two recommended by the president of the Senate, and two recommended by the speaker of the Georgia House. Commission members, who must have at least a bachelor’s degree, would serve two-year terms and select a chair and vice-chair of the commission. The GBOE could overturn a decision made by the commission with a two-thirds vote.

The Charter Schools Commission shall also “develop, promote and require high standards of accountability for a school that applies for and is granted a charter under this article” and “disseminate best practices for charter schools,” according to the bill.

Currently, Georgia operates 71 charter schools educating nearly 30,000 students. The state has nearly 2,000 traditional public schools. HB 881 would not take away local school districts’ power to approve charter schools.

More Choices, Parental Control
During the House Education Committee’s consideration of the bill, Jones said it would give parents more choices for their children.

“This bill supports local control because it gives parents greater control,” Jones explained.

During the House debate, which lasted for two-and-a-half hours, state Rep. Ed Setzler (R-Acworth) said the commission is necessary because local school boards have a strong incentive to reject charter school applications. In 2007, there were 26 applications for charter schools, but only two were approved.

“If you operate the only fast-food restaurant in town, would you be the appropriate authority to approve the Burger King that wants to move in across the street?” Setzler asked.

Poll Shows Support
Opponents of the bill say it undermines local school boards’ authority. In a January 31 editorial, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution called it a “charter school hustle” and a “frontal assault on the constitutional powers of school boards and a shift of critical decision making to a political commission that will have no firsthand knowledge of the district’s needs.”

A poll released in January by the Georgia Charter Schools Association and My School My Choice Georgia—a statewide grassroots charter school advocacy group—shows strong support for more education choices. The poll was commissioned by the Center for Education Reform (CER), a charter school advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland. CER spokesperson Jen Detwiler said the poll shows support for multiple authorizing agencies.

“Poll respondents supported allowing other authorizers for charter schools. More than 80 percent of black and Hispanic respondents supported allowing other authorizers for charter schools.”

Michael Coulter (coulter@heartland.org) writes from Pennsylvania.

INTERNET INFO

VISUALIZE SCHOOL CHOICE

The school choice movement has gained political momentum in recent years, with programs having been established in Milwaukee, Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. But today’s programs are nothing like the “free market in education” proposed four decades ago by the early proponents of school choice.

Economist John Merrifield shows that the school choice movement has become mired in false alternatives, petty distinctions, and diminished vision. Yet, he argues that school choice must not be allowed to fail like so many other government reforms—a freely competitive market for education must remain the ultimate goal. School Choices: True and False charts a clear course for the achievement of this goal.

“School Choices is a first rate analysis of how the school choice idea has been dumbed down and what it will take to develop the critical elements of a competitive education industry.”

—BRUNO MANNO, former Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning, U.S. Department of Education.

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School Choice Is Benefiting All Ohio Students

While experts say it should, district officials won’t discuss the facts

By Wendy Cloyd

In the past three years, more than 1,000 families throughout Youngstown, Ohio have taken advantage of the state’s open-enrollment law, charter schools, and new statewide voucher program for students in chronically failing schools.

Experts say students’ increasing academic success there demonstrates the benefits of choice.

Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio (SCO), said that’s what happens when parents get involved.

“Being able to choose school placement creates parent involvement,” Aldis said. “That is one of the leading indicators of the success of students.”

The question remains, however, whether such choice is spurring public schools to improve. Aldis said that question is too often unanswered.

“When you put in competitive pressures such as school choice, it seems that public schools would respond,” Aldis said. “But it doesn’t happen overnight.”

Better Performance

In fact, Aldis said, schools may coast along for many years under the impression everything is just fine. It isn’t until they recognize parents are seeking better alternatives elsewhere that they begin to try to improve.

“It takes a while for the market to respond, for choices to affect the actions of the public school,” Aldis said.

Currently, more than 90,000 children across Ohio are eligible for the Educational Choice Scholarship—also called EdChoice, the program for students in failing public schools. Under state law, a failing school is defined as one that has received a “D” (put on academic watch) or “F” (in academic emergency) on the state report card for two of the past three years.

The 224 underperforming schools that currently appear on one of those two lists are located in 31 school districts statewide. Nine are in Youngstown.

Youngstown district officials did not respond to requests for an interview to discuss how choice has contributed to district improvement. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, Ohio students’ scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have improved steadily over the past decade—about the same amount of time school choice options have been available.

Better Shot

The EdChoice Scholarship, now in its third year, allowed approximately 7,000 students to choose a better educational environment during the 2007-08 school year up from 3,000 students in 2006-07.

“I agree with Gov. [Ted] Strickland’s statement in the 2007 State of the State address,” Aldis said. “(He said) ‘Where you grow up in Ohio should not determine where you end up in life.’ The EdChoice Scholarship is an important tool in preventing this inequality by giving children in failing schools a path to a better education.”

That’s the mission of SCO, Aldis said—

“In the past three years, more than 1,000 families throughout Youngstown, Ohio have taken advantage of the state’s open-enrollment law, charter schools, and new statewide voucher program for students in chronically failing schools.”

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

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

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

MacDougal’s extraordinary journey shows the way for the rest of the nation and proves there are ways we can all help provide a ladder of opportunity for those in poverty. We each can Make a Difference in the ongoing effort to end America’s poverty problem.
Washington Offers Bad Ideas for Higher-Education Cost Containment

By Robert Holland

Worried about the rising cost of a college education? Never fear, your Washington politicians are here to save the day, ever eager as they are to please during a presidential election year.

Unfortunately, their remedies, contained in the Senate and House versions of the Higher Education Act reauthorization soon to be reconciled in conference committee, almost certainly will bring the Law of Unintended Consequences into play.

Politicos of both major parties are embracing a form of tuition price control that should work just about as splendidly as all exercises in government price control over the past 38 centuries—that is, disastrously.

“Politicos of both major parties are embracing a form of tuition price control that should work just about as splendidly as all exercises in government price control over the past 38 centuries—that is, disastrously.”

Wrong ‘Rithmetic

One bright idea is to require the U.S. Department of Education to post online and on paper a “watch list” of those institutions of higher learning where tuition-and-fee increases are running above average. This Wall of Infamy is intended to provoke outrage and force the offenders to curb their profligate ways.

There is one little problem. The cheapest colleges are far more likely to wind up on the hit list than the priciest ones.

That is a matter of simple arithmetic: A $500 tuition hike is a far bigger percentage increase at a little Bible college charging $10,000 a year than it would be at an Ivy League bastion where tuition is $40,000. (Of course, arithmetic is not one of Washington’s strong subjects—note all the pork-barrel earmarks and soaring deficits.)

Hidden Details

To analyze the impact of this proposal, The Chronicle of Higher Education conducted an in-depth examination of college tuitions in Massachusetts, the home state of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D), one of the advocates of higher-education price controls. The findings confirmed that arithmetic rocks.

In 2006-07, the average tuition increase for private colleges in Massachusetts was 5.9 percent. The Chronicle reported the state’s most expensive institution, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, increased its tuition by $1,120, or 4.4 percent—to $34,804. It would not have made the congressional Wall of Infamy.

Meanwhile, the state’s least-expensive private institution, Boston Baptist College, hiked its tuition by $943—to $8,277 per year. That was a 12.9 percent increase; hence, it would have incurred the wrath of Washington’s price controllers.

The Chronicle found similar disparities around the country.

Meddling in Markets

At the 11th hour, before the full House voted 354-58 on February 7 to approve the bill, House Democrats stripped out the watch list. However, they added draconian measures to require colleges with offending tuition increases to turn over confidential records to the U.S. Secretary of Education and tell her how they would mend their ways.

The itch to intervene in higher education markets in order to score points with tuition-payers is bipartisan, unfortunately.

In 2005, when Republicans controlled Congress, Rep. Howard P. (Buck) McKeon (R-CA), chairman of the key higher education subcommittee, advocated withholding student aid from colleges that failed to curb tuition increases. Now, the reauthorization engineered by House Democrats would give extra Pell Grants to colleges that limit tuition hikes.

“Both carrot and stick approaches ignore the economic reality that massive federal aid is what distorted the higher education market and helped fuel price inflation in the first place.”

Creating the Problem

Both carrot and stick approaches ignore the economic reality that massive federal aid is what distorted the higher education market and helped fuel price inflation in the first place.

While the White House is opposing “tuition price controls” devised by congressional Democrats, the Bush administration has shown its urge to dabble in other ways. For example, it sought to use federal oversight of accreditation agencies to require assorted “outcomes” measures for the wide mix of colleges and universities.

As Cato Institute scholar Neal McCluskey observed in an October 28 EdNews.org article, it is ironic that conservatives who historically have warned against federal control of education now want “to use government to control arguably the freest—and most envied—education market in the world, with its thousands of largely independent colleges and universities.”

The vibrant consumer choice within higher education stands in stark contrast to the dreary public monopoly in elementary and secondary education.

As for rising college costs, savvy consumers have recourses such as expanded use of low-cost community colleges and distance learning. They are not going to find help from posturing politicians.

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

In Other Words

“The truth is that neither increased spending nor government mandates will fix the current system of education: neither one successfully incentivizes. The unwillingness of politicians in both parties to take bold action to fix our system will destroy this nation’s global competitive advantage and will further increase the socioeconomic disparities between whites and minorities.... This inefficient, failing bureaucratic heat can only be vanquished by its ultimate enemy: competition.”

William Munroes, writing in the February 22 edition of the Ohio State University Sentinel, about why free-market competition is the only way to improve education in the United States.

INTERNET INFO

Report Finds Teachers’ Pay Is More than Adequate Across the Country

By Richard G. Neal

Supporting the almost-universal belief that teachers are underpaid, Education Week published an article on January 10 stating, “public school teachers nationwide make 88 cents for every dollar earned in 16 comparable occupations,” including accountants, architects, clergy, computer programmers, insurance underwriters, physical therapists, and registered nurses.

Education Week’s Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) prepared the report. EPE Library Director Kay Darko told me the article was based on the book How Does Teacher Pay Compare? (Economic Policy Institute, 2004). The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) is a Washington, DC research group devoted to “helping working people” and the development of “a strong effective labor movement.” It received $150,000 in 2007 from the National Education Association teachers union.

The EPE Research Team “downloaded two years’ worth of Census data on teacher salaries,” said Darko, to make salary comparisons.

According to the article, “With a median salary of $50,784 in 2006 dollars, workers in our set of 16 comparable occupations outearn teachers by a notable margin. This difference corresponds to a pay-parity index value of 88.0 for the nation, meaning that teachers earn about 88 cents to every dollar earned by comparable workers.”

Popular but Wrong

The long-lived conventional wisdom is that teachers are underpaid. That belief is virtually unanimous. But it runs contrary to many respectable research studies that conclude teacher salaries are at least equal to, if not in excess of, compensation for comparable occupations. In their article “How Much Are Public School Teachers Paid?” researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters come to some surprising conclusions. According to their findings, “The average public school teacher in the United States earned $34.06 per hour in 2005, and the average public school teacher was paid 36 percent more per hour than the average non-sales white-collar worker and 11 percent more than the average professional specialty and technical worker.”

In his article “Comparable Worth,” Richard Vedder, an Ohio University professor of economics and senior fellow at the Independent Institute, noted, “Teachers earn more per hour than architects, civil engineers, mechanical engineers, statisticians, biological and life scientists, registered nurses, university-level foreign-language teachers, and editors and reporters.”

In his paper, “Is Teacher Pay Adequate?” Michael Podgursky, an economics professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia and expert on teacher compensation, concluded, “In fact, when adjusted for annual weeks of work, teacher pay and benefits compare favorably with those of other college-educated workers.”

“The long-lived conventional wisdom ... runs contrary to many respectable research studies that conclude teacher salaries are at least equal to, if not in excess of, compensation for comparable occupations.”

Generous Benefits

Several other reputable studies (listed at the end of this article) come to the same conclusion. Teachers are paid more than the average worker and more than the average college graduate, and are paid as much as or more than those in comparable occupations.

To objectively evaluate teacher benefits relative to other occupations, several relevant conditions need to be factored in. For example, teachers work about 20 percent fewer days annually than other white-collar workers. Consequently, a teacher paid $60,000 per year is actually being paid $72,000 at the adjusted rate. Add another 25 percent (on average) for retirement and health insurance, and the annual benefit package increases to $87,000.

But that’s not all. Many other inducements make teaching attractive. Teachers have a family-friendly work schedule—they’re home early in the afternoons, and in addition to all regularly observed national holidays, they have summers off. Few teachers must endure stressful business travel. And unlike comparable occupations that require a college degree, prospective teachers have a plethora of grants and scholarships available to them to reduce the cost of a college education.

And let’s not forget that teachers are paid according to a compensation schedule that guarantees a salary increase every year, plus increases for additional college credits. The illogic of the teacher salary grid is explained in my book The Deserved Collapse of Public Schools (AuthorHouse, 2006).

Furthermore, often hidden from the public, teachers have additional benefits in their union-negotiated labor contracts, such as special leaves, reduced workloads, extra compensatory emoluments, and a variety of clauses that protect the interests of teachers—sometimes at the expense of student welfare.

Biggest Bonus of All

No fair assessment of teacher benefits can be made without highlighting the most valuable benefit of all: tenure, a lifetime of guaranteed employment irrespective of performance.

Other unionized workers would give an arm and a leg at the bargaining table to obtain such a benefit, but it’s a freebie for teachers. They don’t even have to ask for it, and it’s protected by law. One could rightfully conclude that in the new world of global competition, where millions of American workers struggle to hold their jobs, not only are teachers not underpaid—they have become a protected and privileged class.

Richard G. Neal (rneall@triad.rr.com) writes from North Carolina.
Curricular Standards and Parental Choice Are Fully Compatible

By Robert Holland

The idea of a split in the school choice movement has fascinated the mainstream media recently.

Long-time parent-choice advocate Sol Stern got it started with a provocative article in the winter issue of the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal arguing market mechanisms alone cannot improve public education. Reformers should seek a strong, content-based curriculum, as Massachusetts has done, Stern said.

Stern’s article described spirited disagreements between “incentivist” (choice and competition) and “instructionist” (curriculum and pedagogy) camps within the school reform movement. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution was among several media giants weighing in with critiques.

In excoriating Georgia legislators who seek an expansion of public charter schools to give children alternatives to failing public schools, the paper’s editorial board, in a February 17 piece penned by Maureen Downey, quoted the following Stern assessment of Massachusetts’ recent rises in test scores:

“The improvement had nothing to do with market incentives. Massachusetts has no vouchers, no tuition tax credits, very few charter schools [emphasis added], and no market incentives for principals and teachers.”

Out With the Old

The editorialists condemned the “inordinate attention” given to Georgia charters, implying the current 71 charters enrolling 26,000 children statewide are enough, if not too many. They slammed state Rep. Jan Jones (R-Alpharetta) for sponsoring a bill to create a state chartering authority that could authorize new charters when local school boards balk at the idea of in-house competition, as many do.

The paper even went so far as to accuse the legislators of wanting to “abandon traditional public schools.” Never mind that charter schools are public schools. Granted, they are untraditional, in that they can institute rigorous curricula (which Stern champions) that eschew whole language, fuzzy math, and ed school credentialing, and that parents and teachers are there by their own choice, not assigned by bureaucrats.

The editorialists assume tradition is a good thing when it means clinging to hoary, feel-good theories that have stunted American education and doomed countless students to a less-prosperous future.

“Long-time parent-choice advocate Sol Stern [wrote] a provocative article ... arguing market mechanisms alone cannot improve public education. Reformers should seek a strong, content-based curriculum, as Massachusetts has done, Stern said.”

Fuzzy Math, Indeed

Critical to the editorial’s point was Stern’s assertion that high-achieving Massachusetts has “very few charter schools.” One would suppose that a newspaper with as proud a tradition of truth-seeking as the Atlanta Journal-Constitution would fact-check that assertion.

In truth, Massachusetts has 59 charter schools, enrolling 23,000 children—figures close to the Georgia numbers that Downey et al. clearly deem more than “very few.” Moreover, among the 59 are some of the nation’s most effective and exciting charters, such as the City on a Hill Charter School in Boston, The Academy of the Pacific Rim in Hyde Park, and Mystic Valley Regional Charter in Malden.

Tests Don’t Lie

State departments of education typically are not big fans of charters and the competition they bring. Massachusetts’s department commissioned an independent study examining the performance of charter schools and the “comparison districts” (CSDs) on the state’s English and math tests from 2001 to 2005.

Statewide, when there was a statistically significant difference in test scores, “it is much more likely to favor the charter school than the CSD,” the August 2006 report concluded.

As a group, students in Boston’s 18 charter schools consistently outperformed those in traditional Boston Public Schools. Among African-American, Hispanic, low-income, and special-education subgroups, “charter school performance was statistically significantly higher than the CSD in each year since 2002 in both content areas.”

Does this mean charter schools were a bigger force for change than the content-rich state curriculum Stern lauded? No, but they clearly have been a positive force. And they could be an even bigger one—in Massachusetts, Georgia, and elsewhere.

Accountable Administrators

The alleged conflict between curricular reform and parental choice is illusory. The real question is how enduring change in instruction can be achieved if education consumers do not have the power to hold the education establishment to account.

As University of Arkansas scholar Jay Greene noted in a January 24 City Journal response to Stern, a fortunate alignment of the stars brought such non-nonsense reformers as John Silber, David Driscoll, Sandra Stotsky, and Abigail Thernstrom to the helm of Massachusetts’s K-12 education in recent years. But now, as they depart, “there is a great likelihood that their accomplishments will steadily be dismantled by the new governor, Deval Patrick.”

Curriculum mandates shift according to how the political winds blow. But parental choice via charters, vouchers, tax credits, homeschooling, and other devices can serve as a steady counterweight.

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

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Let Parents Decide How Best to Educate Their School-Age Children

By Eugene Hickok

With his State of the Union Address and proposed budget, President George W. Bush calls for taxpayer dollars to underwrite the education of low-income students stuck in failing schools. With his “Pell Grants for K-12,” Bush would model his plan after the highly successful program that has helped thousands of students go to college.

Those students can use the federal support to attend the college of their choice. Bush would make the same opportunity available for low-income students to attend grades K-12 at the school of their choice—public, private, or parochial.

Given the animus that so animates any discussion of “vouchers” in education, there is not much of a chance the president’s proposal will come to pass, especially in a Congress controlled by Democrats. Indeed, Bush’s signature education policy, No Child Left Behind, seems to be in some trouble. Moreover, reaction to Bush’s “Pell Grants for K-12,” in Washington and in other places, like Richmond, has been swift and predictable—following patterns long associated with the school choice debate.

And that’s a shame, for it is an idea that merits serious deliberation rather than the sort of political demagoguery that is usually embraced by those opposed to more options and choices for families in failing schools.

“With his State of the Union Address and proposed budget, President George W. Bush calls for taxpayer dollars to underwrite the education of low-income students ...”

Tired Old Arguments

As the debate goes forward, look for school choice opponents to trot out the same tired arguments. They’ll say government money should not go to non-public schools and that we should “fully fund” public education rather than divert funds from public schools.

Point No. 1: There is no such thing as government money. This is all about the peoples’ money going back to the people to help pay for the education of their children.

Point No. 2: What does it really mean to “fully fund” education? Has anyone ever heard a school board member, school superintendent, or state or local education leader anywhere ever say anything close to “Please, we don’t need any more money.” For those in charge of the education establishment there will never be enough money; education will never be fully funded.

Point No. 3: Under Bush’s proposal, the money doesn’t go to schools—it goes to families to educate their children. But even if it did, should we really care what school a child attends? What matters is the quality of the education a child receives, not the building where he receives it.

The opponents will argue that public education is how America educates Americans; the American people own the system, that’s why it’s called public education, after all.

But the way the system actually functions suggests it is hardly the peoples’ system. Public education tells parents and taxpayers, “this is your child’s school, this is when he goes to school, this is who teaches him, and this is what he is taught.” Today in America, we don’t own the system—the system owns us.

Long History of Choice

School choice presents the possibility of an entirely different dynamic driving the discussion. Imagine a scenario in which parents look at a number of schools and say, “This is my child, those are my hopes and dreams and expectations for her. Why should I entrust my child and my money to you?”

And by the way, this is a scenario that has played out for generations in higher education because of the G.I. Bill.

The opponents of school choice will warn that it will result in either widespread abandonment of public schools or the better students leaving with the more difficult-to-educate kids left behind—compounding the challenge of public education.

The truth is otherwise. Where school choice does exist there has not been a mass exodus. Indeed, the movement of some families from public to non-public schools has had the effect of improving education for children in both public and non-public schools.

Weak Defense

But consider their argument on its own terms. The apologists for the current system would offer as a defense against school choice that their schools are so bad that families would flee if given the chance—so they shouldn’t be given that chance.

For them, keeping kids in failing schools is more important than getting kids an education. For them, it’s about the schools—and jobs for those in the education establishment—not the kids.

The opponents of school choice have prevailed in most places because they have the obvious advantages of a monopoly that most Americans are familiar with even as they grow less than satisfied with it. School choice remains more theory than reality, something held up as an alternative to a stagnant status quo. But it does offer the idea that competition and freedom, two very American ideals, might be harnessed to create a new approach to education in America.

And few can debate how badly a new approach is needed.

Eugene Hickok served as undersecretary of education and deputy secretary of education in the Bush administration from 2001 to 2004. He previously was Pennsylvania’s secretary of education. This guest editorial originally appeared in the February 17 edition of the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Reprinted with permission.
Continued from page 1

District officials say that’s not good and it’s their job to ensure the best educational environment by addressing the segregation. School choice experts say open enrollment makes schools better by creating healthy competition, and parents deserve to keep the option of placing kids where they want.

A report released February 8 by 4J Superintendent George Russell said a declining number of young families in the community, coupled with parents’ ability to choose the schools their kids attend, has contributed to an imbalance in school populations throughout the district. A large number of students—approximately 32 percent—do not attend their neighborhood schools but instead use the district’s open-enrollment policy to transfer to an alternative school or another neighborhood school.

The report recommends schools cap open-enrollment transfers, to force student enrollments to even out among area schools.

“We have lost approximately 2,000 students since 1981, and over 4,000 students since 1969,” Russell wrote in the report.

Declining enrollment is not distributed evenly across the district, and affects some schools and regions disparately.”

“Eugene, Oregon’s 4J school district is considering retooling its decades-old open-enrollment policy because schools there are becoming socioeconomically segregated.”

Losing Students
Kelly McIver, 4J’s communications coordinator, said the community is aging, property values are high, and young families simply aren’t moving in.

“That makes the transfer process sting for those losing students,” McIver said. “Some schools are feasting and some are starving.”

The impact is especially significant in schools left with high percentages of low-income students.

“The reason that poverty levels are a problem is that it comes to bear on academic performance,” McIver explained. “When you get a tipping point—where more than half the kids are on free or reduced-price lunch—the academic performance of all students suffers. When you stay below that number, all students do better.”

Common Problem
Allowing people to choose creates self-segregation, McIver said. “It amplifies socioeconomic differences and puts a burden on schools when they aren’t handling the challenges equally.”

Matt Wingard, director of the school choice project at the Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland think tank, said it is common for school boards to try to engineer school populations to meet all sorts of cultural and political goals at the expense of parental choice.

“People are self-selecting these schools—that’s a good thing,” Wingard said. “Once people have choices, they sometimes make choices that the certified ‘smart’ people don’t like.”

If parents were the ones with the concerns, it would be a different story, Wingard said. But in this case it is the school board that’s worried—not the parents.

Chicken or Egg?
McIver said the district is trying to find a balance, allowing choice with limits—such as enrollment caps—but ensuring no one school has such a high percentage of kids with intensive needs that all students suffer.

“We staff by enrollment—the more kids there are, the more teachers that can be hired and the more options,” McIver said. “That means more music, more art, more P.E. When you have very few students, they are not getting the same academic chance.”

While the competition among schools created by parental choice can lead to school improvement, McIver isn’t convinced it tells the whole story.

“When a school has a good reputation, does it draw more kids because it’s good or is it good because there are more kids?” McIver asked.

Searching for Answers
Regardless, McIver noted, district officials are not saying parental choice is a bad thing.

“Generally parents who do make choices or choose alternatives are more involved with their child’s education, and it creates a better base of kids,” McIver said. “If there was somehow money to provide full program staffing regardless of enrollment, then it wouldn’t be an issue. They’d all be getting the same. But that isn’t the way it is.”

Wendy Cloyd (wendy_cloyd@hotmail.com) writes from Alaska.

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School Choice Recognized as Human Right in Most of Canada

By Robert Holland

Education reformers in the United States recently have been arguing whether parental choice is a sufficient force in and of itself to transform public education. To refocus the debate, they could look to the Maritime Provinces of Canada, where a school board member, William Forrestall of Fredericton (New Brunswick), has made the case that choice is not just an effective engine of reform but in fact a fundamental human right protected by international conventions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, states, “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children,” Forrestall pointed out in a February 7 analysis for The Chronicle Herald of Halifax, Nova Scotia. He cited additional international laws in support of that principle.

Yielding Results

As to whether school choice is effective when the putative right is tested by reality, the contrast between the four Canadian provinces on the Atlantic coast (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland/Labrador) and the rest of Canada is instructive.

Atlantic Canada’s education outcomes consistently lag those in the rest of Canada—most recently on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures 15-year-olds’ proficiency in reading, math, and science. What makes the difference, Forrestall says, is that publicly funded school choice has become the norm in all provinces west of the Maritimes, while Atlantic Canada has remained mired in monopolistic practices.

Perhaps the Atlantic region’s problem is that it has taken its cue too much from the colossus to the south: “Internationally, Canadian-style choice-based funding is being increasingly cited for the remarkable success of most Canadian students, when compared to the dismal outcomes of the American melting-pot monopoly model,” Forrestall wrote. “Unfortunately, Atlantic Canada has adopted the American-style funding model—and for our students, tragically similar outcomes.”

“Funded school choice is the democratic norm not only in most of Canada, but worldwide. With the exception of the U.S., virtually all healthy democratic societies fund school choice—even the former Soviet Union does so,” Forrestall noted. “The result of such funding for most Canadians is both real choice for all students and, very importantly, a public school management culture that effectively responds to the competitive pressures of choice-driven school systems.”

Questioning Methods

According to Forrestall, most Canadian provinces provide vouchers that parents can redeem to pay tuition at a school of choice. The amount ranges from $2,849 in British Columbia to $5,038 in Saskatchewan. Most private schools charge fees within that range, thereby making the right to funded choice a reality.

In the United States, there have been some breakthroughs for school choice, such as the voucher programs for needy children in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and the District of Columbia; the establishment of more than 3,000 public charter schools; vouchers for special-needs children in Arizona, Florida, and Utah; and private scholarships generated by tax credits in half-a-dozen states.

However, the public education establishment’s ability to snuff out broad-based initiatives, such as the universal vouchers enacted by the Utah Legislature last year, has caused soul-searching within the choice movement.

In the winter issue of the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal, veteran choice advocate Sol Stern authored a thought-provoking piece titled “School Choice Isn’t Enough.” While continuing to favor choice, Stern argued the emphasis should shift to mandating a rigorous curriculum, as Massachusetts has done.

Recalling Basics

The quality of the curriculum is undoubtedly important, but one problem with top-down mandates is that they are subject to change according to which way the political winds are blowing. Today’s mandate for the use of phonics in reading can be repealed by tomorrow’s regime mandating a return to look-say.

This process comes down to government officials issuing orders to the education bureaucracy, with families being stuck with whatever happens to be the order of the day, and how it may be interpreted.

As the Canadian experience suggests, true change comes when public money follows the students, as schools must respond to market forces. Given the chance, most parents will move their kids from bad schools to good ones simply because most parents want the best for their children.

That is more than just common sense, as Forrestall has reminded us. It is an internationally recognized human right.

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

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