PENN. HONORS STUDENTS AS SCHOOL CHOICE AMBASSADORS — page10

Scott Bui and Ashley LaTorre proudly display their legislative citations from the Pennsylvania Senate and House of Representatives. Scott, Ashley, and their families have chosen to take an active role in promoting the positive difference school choice has made in their lives.

Georgia Legislators Propose New School Choice Programs

By Andrew Campanella

If legislators and parent activists succeed in passing two key pieces of legislation, Georgia—which for decades offered few options for parents to determine the best schools for their children—may quickly become the state with the most private school choice in America.

On April 1, the state House of Representatives passed a $50 million individual and corporate scholarship tax credit proposal on a 32-20 vote, sending it to Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) for his signature. At press time, Perdue had not committed to signing the bill.

Meanwhile, a second measure, S.B. 458, which passed the Senate, Georgia p. 4

Florida Committee Chairman Seeks to Expand Voucher Program

By Ben DeGrow

A Florida lawmaker says unmet student needs and a tight budget call for expansion of an established school choice program targeted at families in poverty.

State Sen. Don Gaetz (R-Niceville), chairman of the legislative committee overseeing K-12 education in the state, is sponsoring S. 1440, a bill that would allow for increased contributions to the state’s Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) scholarship program and raise the amounts of the individual vouchers.

Florida p. 6

California Court to Reconsider Homeschooling

By Michael Coulter

California’s Second Appellate District Court of Appeals touched off a firestorm when it issued an opinion that parents have no right to homeschool their own children—a firestorm so great that on March 25, a full month after issuing its decision, the court agreed to rehear the case, with a decision expected.

California p. 8

Diverse Coalition Demands Choice for Kentucky

By Jim Waters

A diverse coalition of parents, preachers, politicians, and legislative pioneers combined fervor with facts at a school choice rally at the center of Kentucky’s government in early March.

In the Capitol Rotunda, which bears the Diverse Coalition

KENTUCKY p. 11

Maryland May Get Tax Credit Program

School Funding Offers Opportunity in Ill.

Homeschooling
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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Federal Education Budget Becomes Focus of Debate

By Dan Lips

Budget resolutions passed by the U.S. Senate and House include significant boosts for education spending in FY 2009.

“[T]he stage has been set for education spending to become an issue during the year’s political campaigns.”

Both budget resolutions were passed in March largely along party-line votes. In the House, the resolution was approved by a vote of 212-207, with no Republicans supporting the Democratic majority’s plan. The Senate plan was approved 51-44, with two Republicans voting in favor.

The House resolution calls for $7.1 billion in additional funding for job training and other education-related social service programs. The Senate also budgeted additional funding for education above the amount President George W. Bush requested, including the creation of a new $2 billion education reserve fund.

The Congressional budget resolutions are non-binding, but they outline the majority’s priorities and establish a framework for appropriations bills to be considered later this year. Bush has signaled that he intends to veto spending bills that surpass his funding requests. This sets the stage for education spending to become an issue during the year’s political campaigns.

Big Spending, Poor Results

Neal McCluskey, an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC, predicts spending will be the focus of the education debate in the campaign.

“Whoever is the nominee for the Democrats will make the supposed underfunding of No Child Left Behind a central point of any education debate,” McCluskey said. “They’ll also likely throw out a lot of big-dollar figures for new education programs covering everything from preschool to grad school.”

McCluskey urged voters to be skeptical of calls for increased education spending.

“Washington has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on education over the last several decades and can show hardly any academic improvement to justify it,” McCluskey noted. “Almost invariably, federal money has helped the adults employed in public schooling, while the children have just been convenient political props.”

“Washington has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on education over the last several decades and can show hardly any academic improvement to justify it.”

NEAL McCLUSKEY
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
CATO INSTITUTE

Money Isn’t a Reform

A new report published by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in March confirms McCluskey’s point, examining the effectiveness of spending as an education reform solution. The 2007 Report Card on American Education reviews trends in education spending and academic achievement.

“The historical data show we’ve been trying to buy our way out of low performance and it just hasn’t paid off,” explained Matt Warner, director of ALEC’s Education Task Force. “For example, class-size reduction is a popular reform with a big price tag. But today’s classes are already, on average, 15 percent smaller than they were 20 years ago, yet test scores haven’t kept pace with the dollars invested.

“As a nation, we are spending, in constant dollars, 54 percent more than we did in the 1980s, and our test scores are a mixed bag,” Warner said. “The answer is not more money—we need real reform.”

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

Continued from page 1

earlier in the session, was still pending in the House. If passed, that legislation will implement a “failing schools” voucher program to free children from public schools that do not meet federal performance benchmarks for seven consecutive years, or which are in danger of losing their accreditation.

Parents Rally in Support
Parents throughout the state, which received the dubious distinction of a “D” for student academic achievement from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 2006 and an achievement ranking of a “D+” by Education Week magazine in 2008, have rallied around the proposals, according to officials at the Georgia Family Council (GFC).

“Many parents in Georgia have been frustrated to see, year after year, their children locked in an educational environment that does not meet their needs,” said Jamie Self, a GFC government relations consultant. “This frustration is often compounded by the lack of financial resources to access any other option.”

Senate President Pro Tempore Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) is the primary sponsor of the failing-schools voucher legislation, while Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn) carried the corporate and individual scholarship tax credit bill. Johnson and Casas teamed last year to sponsor the highly successful Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program, which Perdue signed in May 2007.

Voucher Legislation
Invigorated by the success of the special-needs program, through which 5,000 parents applied for scholarships in just over three months, Johnson set out to craft legislation to address another immediate need: providing options for students in the failing Clayton County school system and in systems with similar student achievement deficiencies.

Georgia education officials say if Clayton County doesn’t dramatically improve its ability to educate children by the fall of 2008, it will lose its accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS has identified nine areas where the district must make significant improvements.

Johnson’s bill, S.B. 458, would provide vouchers—valued at $4,000 to $5,000 per student—to children who attend schools that either face the loss of their accreditation or have received the federal designation of “needs improvement” under the No Child Left Behind Act for seven consecutive years.

Ohio Model
Johnson’s proposal resembles Ohio’s EdChoice scholarship program, which provides private school choice scholarships for students that have attended failing public schools. More than 7,000 Ohio students receive vouchers through the program, according to the state’s education office.

Johnson dismisses accusations that he is seeking to dismantle the public education system with his initiatives, saying his goal is to see public schools improve and for parents to be given more options.

“I graduated from a public school, and my children graduated from a public school, but I believe in local control,” Johnson says. “The best form of local control is parents having real control over their children’s education.”

Tax Credit Bill
Casas’s bill would develop a corporate and individual scholarship tax credit program, allowing corporations to receive tax credits—not just deductions—for making donations to scholarship-granting or school tuition organizations. In turn, those organizations would provide scholarships to low-income children so they can attend private schools.

Modeled after the nation’s largest private school choice program, Pennsylvania’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program, Casas’s proposal would require nonprofits seeking to participate in the program to spend no less than 90 percent of their contributions on direct scholarships.

The Casas proposal would allow corporations to receive a 75 percent tax credit for donations to the scholarship-granting organizations, and the program would be capped at $50 million in annual credits. Unlike Pennsylvania’s program, Casas’s proposal would also allow individuals to receive tax credits—up to $1,000 per person and $2,500 for married tax filers—for making contributions to scholarship-granting nonprofits.

Casas is in the unique position of serving as a part-time legislator and a public school teacher. Despite opposition from national and local education bureaucracies, he’s determined to continue advancing school choice legislation.

“I’ve been a supporter of school choice since before I started teaching,” Casas said. “And as I teacher I have come to realize that the system is broken and that children really do get left behind.”

“On April 1, the state House of Representatives passed a $50 million individual and corporate scholarship tax credit proposal on a 32-20 vote, sending it to Gov. Sonny Perdue for his signature.”

Momentum Building
With the state’s existing special-needs scholarship program, the potential $50 million individual and corporate scholarship tax credit program, and a failing-schools voucher bill, choice is certainly on the minds of—and on the horizon for—Georgia parents in 2008.

If both bills are enacted, Georgia could become the most parent-friendly state in the nation in providing private school choice. Family advocates say the changes will have significant implications.

“We all know that children who are shut off from educational opportunity face a serious economic struggle as adults, which often locks families into cycles of poverty for generations,” Self noted. “Because of the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship program,” Self continued, “parents have seen that school choice can provide hope and opportunity for all students, regardless of income, race, or gender. That is why we’re seeing such tremendous momentum for school choice in Georgia.”

Andrew Campanella (acampanella@allianceforschoolchoice.org) is director of communications and marketing at the Alliance for School Choice in Washington, DC.

In Other Words

“Have you ever noticed an intersection where there’s a McDonald’s on one corner and a Burger King on another? Or an Exxon station located directly across the street from a Chevron station? Or a Holiday Inn a block up the street from a Hampton Inn? Do you ever wonder why that is? I mean, why don’t these businesses just operate like our government schools: only one per neighborhood?

“Because competition works. It improves service. It lowers prices for consumers. And it winnows out bad operators. Public schools, on the other hand, don’t like competition. In fact, they’re scared to death of it. Ever wonder why that is?”

— Political blogger Chuck Muth, writing on the need for real school choice in Nevada. Carson City Appeal, March 21, 2008
CHOICE AND EDUCATION: WHERE DOES YOUR STATE RANK?

A new state-by-state analysis reveals how willing states are to give parents control of their children’s educations.

Choice & Education Across the States, a new report card from The Heartland Institute, ranks state efforts to increase accountability and improve student achievement with four kinds of school choice: vouchers, charters, tax credits, and public school choice.

“School choice programs give parents the power to decide where their children are schooled. School choice is accountability. When parents have the power to remove their children from a school that is failing them, without financial penalty, they and their children are better served.”

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Maryland Is Close to Creating a Statewide Tax Credit Program

By Andrew Campanella

After nearly a decade of highly publicized financial and academic problems in the Baltimore City school system—plus academic achievement concerns in schools throughout the state—legislators in Maryland moved swiftly this winter to introduce legislation that would provide private school choice options to disadvantaged children statewide.

For the first time in the state’s history, a corporate scholarship tax credit bill—sponsored by Sen. Ed DeGrange (D-Glen Burnie)—passed the Maryland Senate, on a 30-17 vote in March.

The proposal, dubbed the Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers in Maryland (BOAST) bill, is similar to Pennsylvania’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program. [See story on page 10.] If the bill passes, corporations will be able to donate up to $200,000 per year to school tuition organizations and will receive a 75 percent state income tax credit for their contributions.

The bill was scheduled for an April vote in the House of Delegates.

“For the first time in the state’s history, a corporate scholarship tax credit bill ... passed the Maryland Senate, on a 30-17 vote in March.”

Bipartisan Support

The program is capped at $5 million, $2 million of which would be set aside for contributions to public school programs.

Based on national scholarship averages, approximately 1,500 children or more could benefit from private school scholarships if the bill becomes law, said Anna Varghese Marcucio, a director of state projects at the national nonprofit Alliance for School Choice in Washington, DC.

The Maryland Catholic Conference, which has expressed support for education reforms in the state, estimates 136,000 children already attend Maryland nonpublic schools, saving taxpayers $1.5 billion annually.

Several Maryland Democrats support the bill, and they strongly rebuffed claims by Maryland’s teachers union that it will harm public education.

State Sen. Nathaniel McFadden (D-Baltimore) reminded the Annapolis Cap-

INTERNET INFO

Maryland SB 373: http://www.md schem.org/boastmaryland
Florida

Continued from page 1

“Families in my area [of northwest Florida], families from the town I live in, have persuaded me of the value of this program, and how it has remarkably improved their children’s academic lives,” said Gaetz.

The primary co-sponsor of S. 1440 is state Sen. Al Lawson (D-Tallahassee). At press time, the bill had cleared the first of three senate committees from which it needs support.

Demand Unfilled
Created by the Florida Legislature in 2001, CTC provides 20,000 low-income students up to $3,750 a year to defray private school tuition expenses. But the scholarship program currently limits credits for corporate contributions statewide to $88 million a year. Because of that, about $20 million in potential donations in 2007 could not be accepted.

“The amount of contributions that had to be turned down is a significant understatement of corporate contribution interest,” Gaetz said. As a result of the cap, about 10,000 students who applied last year for CTC scholarships were turned away. Step Up for Students, a group that advocates for the program, has urged applicants who could not be served to contact their elected representatives about the need to raise the $88 million cap.

“Lawmakers already have received calls,” said Denise Lasher, Step Up for Students’ director of public affairs. “By the time this session is over, they will have heard from hundreds of parents in their districts.”

“[T]he scholarship program currently limits credits for corporate contributions statewide to $88 million a year ... and about $20 million in potential donations in 2007 could not be accepted.”

Raising the Cap
As introduced, S. 1440 would gradually raise the contribution cap to $238 million by 2012. The proposal also would increase the individual voucher amount by 20 percent, to $4,500 apiece. The average tuition of schools that participate in CTC currently is $4,400.

“It would enable parents in these poor families to keep children in schools that best serve their needs,” said Lasher. “It would be a godsend for those families who have to make up the difference in tuition.”

If S. 1440 passes, Step Up for Students could serve an additional 5,000 to 6,000 low-income students each year for the next five years, Lasher said.

Union Objections
The state’s teachers union believes the debate is focused entirely in the wrong direction, especially with a planned reduction of more than $300 million in annual K-12 education funding.

“Obviously, there are fixed costs in public schools,” Gaetz said, noting the need for building maintenance, utilities, and transportation. “But most costs are incremental, growing with each student that has been added.”

Gaetz says increasing the number of CTC scholarship recipients would help alleviate some of the schools’ capital construction burden as well. Florida’s Class Size Reduction Amendment, passed in 2002, gradually reduces the number of students per teacher, requiring many school districts to build more classrooms for the same number of students.

Defining Accountability
Even so, Pudlow believes private institutions should not be able to receive publicly generated funds, even if families choose them.

“Why does Sen. Gaetz propose to give those scarce resources away to a private provider, with no demonstrable track record, that serves a small minority of the student population?” Pudlow asked.

Gaetz says the evidence is in parental demand.

“In these difficult times, the question shouldn’t be about expanding the funding for this program,” said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association. “Why do we use taxpayer dollars to fund this program at all? Shouldn’t the state collect the taxes due from corporations and use that revenue to fund Florida’s public schools?”

Gaetz disagrees.

“The teachers union is ideologically opposed to this because they don’t like school choice,” Gaetz said. “But I’m not approaching this issue ideologically. I’m approaching it based on what’s best for kids, and based on what makes sense financially.”

Cost Savings
A 2007 report from the Tallahassee-based Leroy Collins Center for Public Policy concluded CTC saved Florida’s taxpayers nearly $140 million in public school costs between 2002 and 2004. The state’s public schools receive $7,200 in operating funds per pupil, considerably more than either the current or proposed scholarship amount.

“Obviously, there are fixed costs in public schools,” Gaetz said, noting the need for building maintenance, utilities, and transportation. “But most costs are incremental, growing with each student that has been added.”
Iowa Redefines ‘Minority’ in Wake of U.S. Supreme Court Decision

Critics say it’s racial assignment under a different name

By Jillian Melchior

The Iowa Department of Education has redefined the term “minority” in response to a ruling issued by the U.S. Supreme Court last summer that schools seeking racial diversity cannot use quotas to assign students to schools.

The 5-4 decision marked the first time the U.S. Supreme Court addressed the issue in K-12 education. In response, the Iowa Department of Education amended its open-enrollment rules for districts that previously enacted voluntary desegregation, said Carol Greta, an attorney for the state.

“Our only goal was to keep the districts able to operate [in a manner similar to the one used before the ruling],” Greta said.

‘Maintaining’ Status Quo

Before the ruling, the affected districts—Davenport, Des Moines, Postville, Waterloo, and West Liberty—employed a voluntary desegregation plan, Greta said.

Now, those districts have broadened their definition of the term “minority” student, considering a combination of socioeconomic status, English language-learning status, and student achievement data.

“The goal of the department is merely to maintain the status quo, so those districts who desire to maintain diversity and cut down on white flight can maintain the ability to,” Greta said.

Redefining Words

The redefinition was the product of an Iowa Department of Education meeting held shortly after the Supreme Court’s June 28, 2007 ruling.

Greta said the new definition is not an attempt to circumvent the U.S. Supreme Court ruling. Instead, she said, it parallels Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion that diversity can be maintained as long as race is neither the sole nor defining factor.

Others, however, say “circumvention” is exactly what it is. Don Racheter, president of the Public Interest Institute, a public policy research group based at Iowa Wesley College in Mount Pleasant, said the state education department’s redefinition of the term “minority student” represents a deeper problem—one that results in children getting stuck in “crudity, monopolistic, at-the-force-of-a-gun, taxpayer-enforced enterprises.”

The Iowa Department of Education employees who made the decision have advanced degrees and work in education, Racheter said, so they think they know better than parents how to educate children. The decision, he said, is not in children’s best interests.

“The districts that have plans in place claim that what they want to do is prevent white flight, but mostly what they’re trying to do is trap students in low-performing schools and keep them from going to a school where they can get a decent education,” Racheter said. “The people who are doing this thing are, I think, immoral. They are putting their own interests in front of the children involved.”

Instead, Racheter said, the Iowa Department of Education should let parents have more of a say in where their children go to school. He said parents can gain power by rallying with like-minded organizations, staying informed, and contacting state legislators.

Parental Choice

Other critics say the Iowa Department of Education is missing the U.S. Supreme Court’s point altogether.

Jim Hawkins, executive director of Professional Educators of Iowa, a teachers union based in Des Moines, said redefining the word will do little to stem the tide of wealthy parents moving to better districts or buying their way into private schools if they feel their local public school isn’t good enough.

“Letting parents be responsible and choosing is the issue,” Hawkins said. “Our education departments across the nation are not for parental choice.”

Instead of redefining minority status, Hawkins said, Iowa should focus on getting more parents involved with their neighborhood schools. That would encourage pride of ownership, he said, giving parents more responsibility for their child’s education.

“In Other Words

“This decision has significant implications for military families. Many of us choose to homeschool our children. We don’t have a choice of when and where we move. What if we move in the middle of the year? Is California telling me that even though my husband is off fighting a war for our freedom, I don’t have the freedom to choose how to educate my own children? I believe that the choice to homeschool my children should be left to me.”

—Anita Doberman, mother of five and wife of an Air Force pilot stationed in Florida, on a California court’s ruling that uncredentialed parents may not legally homeschool their own children. Clovis (New Mexico) News Journal, March 15, 2008

INTERNET INFO

Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District Number One, U.S. Supreme Court, June 2007. http://www.newcoalition.org/article.cfm?artId=21773

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

Continued from page 1

ed in June.
According to the February 28 decision, neither the U.S. nor the California constitution gives parents without teaching credentials the right to homeschoo their children, and nothing in California law permits unregulated homeschooling.

Criminal Sanctions
Reaction to the decision was swift and strong.
“The scope of this decision by the appellate court is breathtaking,” said Brad Dacus, president of the Pacific Justice Institute, a Sacramento-based nonprofit legal defense firm that consulted on the case. “It not only attacks traditional homeschooling but also calls into question homeschooling through charter schools and teaching children at home via independent study through charter schools and teaching children at home via independent study through traditional homeschooling but also calls into question homeschooling through charter schools and teaching children at home via independent study through public and private schools.
“If it is not reversed,” Dacus warned, “the parents of the more than 166,000 students currently receiving an education at home will be subject to criminal sanctions.”

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) pledged to uphold parents’ rights if the judicial branch does not.
“Every California child deserves a quality education, and parents should have the right to decide what’s best for their children,” Schwarzenegger said in a March 7 statement. “Parents should not be penalized for acting in the best interests of their children’s education. This outrageous ruling must be overturned by the courts—and if the courts don’t protect parents’ rights then, as elected officials, we will.”

The case, In Re Rachel L et al., began in juvenile court more than a year ago, when Los Angeles County social workers investigated a child abuse claim against Phillip and Mary Long of Lynwood. The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services asked the state Superior Court “to order that the children be enrolled in a public or private school, and actually attend such a school.”

The Second Appellate Court, which ruled the Superior Court erred in failing to issue the order, also concluded the state offers parents no inherent right to homeschool their children.

Home Schooling Options
According to the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a group based in Purcellville, Virginia, California does not have a specific homeschool statute, but parents can homeschool legally. One option is for families to file paperwork with the state in order to qualify as private schools.

According to the state Department of Public Instruction, more than 18,000 students statewide currently attend private schools with five or fewer students.

Private schools in California are not required to employ certified or otherwise government-credentialed teachers. Private school organizers need only file an affidavit indicating qualified teachers are on staff, the instruction is in English, “several branches of study required in public schools are taught,” and attendance is kept.

Parents also can homeschool by using a qualified private tutor or independent study program provided by a public school, or by participating in a private school satellite program.

“The scope of this decision by the appellate court is breathtaking. If it is not reversed, the parents of the more than 166,000 students currently receiving an education at home will be subject to criminal sanctions.”

BRAD DACUS
PRESIDENT
PACIFIC JUSTICE INSTITUTE

Union Applauds Decision
Homeschool advocates are working to protect the choice to educate at home, but a representative of the California Teachers Association (CTA) hopes the decision stands.

The CTA is “happy” about the decision, board member Lloyd Porter told the San Francisco Chronicle for a March 7 story.
“We always think students should be taught by credentialed teachers, no matter the setting,” Porter said.

HSLDA Chairman Michael Farris said the decision sets a dangerous precedent.

“The court decision must still be overturned before homeschool freedom can be restored in California,” Farris noted.

The Long family is appealing the case to the California Supreme Court, and HSLDA plans to file an amicus brief in favor of the Longs and on behalf of the association’s 13,500 member families in California.

HSLDA also has posted a petition on its Web site asking California to “depublish” the opinion—meaning if it’s allowed to stand, it would apply only to the Long family.

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

Is Your Child Being Educated or Indoctrinated?

The British High Court has ruled that Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth is partisan propaganda and contains at least 11 scientific errors. It ruled the film should not be shown in classrooms unless accompanied by a document pointing out the scientific errors. The Court also ruled classroom time should be given for presenting an alternative view.

Is your child being forced to watch Al Gore’s propaganda film? If so, you should:

• Call 312/377-4000 and request a free copy of Education or Indoctrination? Al Gore in the Classroom, a collection of background readings produced by The Heartland Institute.

• Talk to your child’s teacher, and if necessary the principal, and ask them to remove Gore from the classroom or provide students an alternative view.

• If your child’s teacher or principal isn’t responsive, contact Maureen Martin, senior fellow for legal affairs for The Heartland Institute, at martin@heartland.org, for free legal assistance.

Because schools are for learning, not politics.

INTERNET INFO

In Re Rachel L et al., California Second District Court of Appeals, February 28, 2008: http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artId=23056
California Decision Has Roots in Age-Old Bias against Homeschooling

By Maureen Martin

Though California’s constitution guarantees citizens freedom, independence, and privacy, the state regularly invades those rights—albeit with the consent of the governed.

But don’t tread on homeschoolers.

That’s what a California appellate court did with a February 28 ruling that parents have no federal or state constitutional right to homeschool their children and that they risk criminal prosecution if they do. The uproar was immediate and widespread.

The state’s top school official, many state legislators, and even Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) flocked to support homeschoolers. Hundreds of thousands of people signed petitions protesting the court’s decision.

This led to the court’s unusual agreement on March 25 to reconsider its ruling.

Homeschool Options

Under California law, attendance at state-sponsored public schools is mandatory for children ages six to 18 unless they attend private schools or are tutored at home. Private school teachers need only be “capable of teaching,” but private tutors must be fully credentialed by the state.

At least 18,000 of the 166,000 children currently homeschooled in California are doing so under parental paperwork qualifying the homes as private schools. Other parents instruct their children at home by affiliating with a private school located outside the home. Until cast into doubt by the recent case, these arrangements were viewed as consistent with California law.

Strange Case

There’s an old legal saying that bad facts make bad law. That was certainly true here. The case arose in juvenile court, which had supervision over three of the eight children in the family due to alleged “physical and emotional mistreatment” by the father. In such cases, the juvenile court has the power to limit parental control as necessary to protect the children, including ordering parents to send them to public schools.

The children involved were officially students at Sunland Christian School, under the school’s home-based independent study program. Their mother, who is not a credentialed teacher, taught them under Sunland’s supervision.

Evidently anxious to get the two youngest children out of the home during the day, their specially appointed lawyer asked for a court order requiring the parents to send them to public school.

The juvenile court refused to issue one. Though it found the quality of the homeschooling “lousy,” “meager,” and “bad,” the court ruled the parents had a constitutional right to homeschool their children. The appellate court reversed the ruling.

“Though it found the quality of the homeschooling ‘lousy,’ ‘meager,’ and ‘bad,’ the [juvenile] court ruled the parents had a constitutional right to homeschool their children. The appellate court reversed the ruling.”

Disturbing Precedent

The appellate court could have, and should have, limited its decision to cases in which the juvenile court has supervisory powers over abused children—called “dependency” cases under California law. It didn’t do this. Instead, it condemned homeschooling in language sweeping enough to ban it and criminalize it in any home, abusive or not.

Particularly chilling is the court’s approval of a homeschooling opinion issued by a lower court in 1961, Shinn v. People, in which local school officials repeatedly sent social workers to a home to build a case for “habitual truancy.” The police arrived too, and criminal charges were brought against the parents.

The children had to submit to forced psychiatric examinations. The psychiatrist opined homeschooling was “abnormal” and harmful to children.

The children were made wards of the court because they were allegedly “in danger of leading an idle, dissolute or immoral life” because they weren’t attending a public school.

Court Ignored Facts

The parents in the Shinn case argued the proceeding was illegal because there was no evidence of any inclination toward crime or misbehavior by the children, and no allegations of parental abuse or lack of supervision. “We see no merit in this argument,” the court said. It ordered the parents to stop homeschooling their children and send them to public school.

Several homeschooling advocacy organizations will be petitioning the court this time around for permission to submit amicus briefs to help the court make its decision. These include, among others, the California Homeschool Network, the Christian Home Educators Association of California, Private and Home Educators of California, the HomeSchool Association of California, and the Virginia-based Home School Legal Defense Association.

But in granting the rehearing, the court specifically invited briefs from likely opponents of homeschooling, such as the Los Angeles public schools and California’s teacher unions.

Times—and political attitudes—have obviously changed since homeschooling was declared “abnormal” in 1961. We’ll see just how much they’ve changed as this case proceeds.

Maureen Martin (martin@heartland.org) is The Heartland Institute’s senior fellow for legal affairs.

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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Pennsylvania Events Showcase School Choice Students, Parents

By Stacy L. Henninger

In anticipation of the seventh anniversary of the state’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program, Pennsylvania legislators this spring took part in awards ceremonies for children and their parents to highlight how well the program is working.

The REACH Foundation (Road to Educational Achievement through Choice), the group that oversees the tax credit scholarship program, held awards ceremonies on March 13 and 27 to honor scholarship recipients and their parents.

Attending the March 13 event at Holy Innocents Area Catholic Elementary School in Philadelphia were Pennsylvania state Sen. Christine Tartaglione (D-Philadelphia) and state Rep. John Taylor (R-Philadelphia). They presented students Scott Bui and Ashley LaTorre with legislative citations for taking an active role in promoting school choice.

“Since 2001 more than 3,000 businesses statewide have qualified for the EITC, donating $350 million for scholarships to 158,000 students.”

“My mom sent me to Holy Innocents A.C.E.S. in Philadelphia because at the time, there was only one public school in our neighborhood, and they were sending students to other schools because it was so crowded,” LaTorre said. “My mom also wanted to make sure I got the best education I could, so I would have all of the skills I need to succeed in high school, college, and in my career. Holy Innocents is preparing me to do anything I want. Holy Innocents receives money from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the EITC program, and I would not be able to attend this school without it.”

Bui, who attends the same school, agreed.

“My parents have chosen Holy Innocents because they want me to get the best education I can,” Bui said. “Here, they encourage the students to do well in school. Here, students can receive scholarships, like the EITC, and tuitions that any family would need.”

Good for Parents

Since 2001 more than 3,000 businesses statewide have qualified for the EITC, donating $350 million for scholarships to 158,000 students. This year, REACH estimates approximately 44,000 students will be able to attend the school that best fits their educational needs through the EITC program.

Last year, REACH launched its first marketing campaign, to educate the public, legislators, and media on the true meaning of school choice. The Visions of Choice campaign connects the concept of school choice and the real-life success it provides for thousands of families in the Commonwealth every year.

Earlier this year, REACH held a contest to solicit school choice stories from all over the state, and chose nine new families for its 2008 campaign. From the start, the campaign has always included a testimonial book with the families’ stories, postcards highlighting the children, and photos and stories posted on the REACH Web site. Bui, LaTorre, and Ryan and Kyle Wiesenberg—honored by state Rep. Art Hershey (R-Chester) at the March 27 event—represent three of those families.

“As parents, it is very comforting to know that our children are in a loving, caring, prayerful environment when we leave for work for the day,” said Paul Wiesenberg, the boys’ father. “In this busy, fast-paced world of ours, we believe parents need all the support possible to raise kind, giving, and compassionate children.

“The school reinforces the values of integrity, community, love, and compassion while excelling in providing high-quality education to our students,” Wiesenberg continued. “We are thankful our boys can attend the school we feel is best for them. This school would not be the blessing it is without the EITC program.”

“Holy Innocents receives money from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the EITC program, and I would not be able to attend this school without it.”

ASHLEY LATORRE
STUDENT

Good for Business

Hershey pointed out how the program benefits businesses statewide. “The EITC is a great way to partner the business and school communities together for the betterment of Pennsylvania’s children,” he said. “Since the program’s inception in 2001, the allocation for it has increased four times, with a current funding cap of $75 million. This clearly illustrates the success of the program, as well as the high interest from the business community.”

REACH Executive Director Andrew LeFevre agreed.

“Our public school system is often a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn’t always work for everyone,” LeFevre explained. “For each of our families, school choice made it possible to put their children in the school that best fit their educational needs.

“REACH hopes the Visions of Choice campaign will continue to show people the positive impact allowing parents to choose their child’s schooling can have on a family and a community,” LeFevre continued.

Stacy L. Henninger (shenninger@paschoolchoice.org) is director of communications at the REACH Foundation in Pennsylvania.
Kentucky

Continued from page 1

states of two famous Kentuckians representing different choices of a bygone era—President Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, who presided over the short-lived Confederacy—black pastors and white lawmakers came together to proclaim educational emancipation for Kentucky’s students and their parents.

Civil rights leaders in Louisville—Kentucky’s largest school district, in which approximately one-third of the 98,000 students are black—stressed reforming the state’s woeful education system is the foremost civil-rights issue of our day.

“In Jefferson County, 75 percent of our black children in our high schools are reading below the standard—and we can’t take it no more,” said Pastor Jerry Stephenson, minister at West End Church of Christ and chairman of Values Coalition USA, a group calling for Kentuckians to return to traditional values. “We need charter schools. It’s time to take the shackles off of our families.”

“There, all of the education and services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, told those attending the rally school choice programs for special-needs children.

Rouch said she and her husband were forced to remove their nine-year-old daughter from Kentucky’s public schools system after being unable to secure there the services she needs for help with her learning disability.

“Of course, as I advocated on her behalf, I have not been able to receive the services she needed, and we were forced to go to a private school that specializes in kids with learning differences,” Rouch said. “There, all of the education and curriculum could be customized to better meet her learning needs.”

Paul DiPerna, director of partner services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, told those attending the rally school choice programs for special-needs children in other states are growing, as is the satisfaction of participating parents.

“Huge Achievement Gaps

According to the 2007 Kentucky State Performance Report, 45 percent of the state’s black elementary students scored below proficient in reading, compared to 25 percent of white students. The gaps between blacks and whites are even larger in math (21 points) and science (28 points). More than half of the state’s black elementary students are not proficient in math.

Choice Convert

Such disparities convinced retired University of Louisville professor Joseph McMillan, Ph.D. to become a recent convert to school choice. “Until last year I was a strong proponent of public education because I saw it as the only way that our kids—black kids—could get an education in a segregated country,” said McMillan, who spent many years as a teacher and administrator in Michigan’s public schools and an education professor at Michigan State University before returning to Kentucky to teach at the University of Louisville. He taught there from 1976 until his retirement in 1996.

“Our kids are still not being educated in the public schools,” McMillan said. “So last year, in spite of my strong connection with public education, I changed my views about charter schools.”

“First, in spite of my strong connection with public education, I changed my views about charter schools. You can count on me.”

JOSEPH McMILLAN, PH.D.
UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE (RETIRED)
MEMBER, KENTUCKY COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS HALL OF FAME

McMillan, 79, a member of the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights Hall of Fame, said his son-in-law, a charter school principal in Muskegon Heights, Michigan, had been trying to convince him. It worked.

“You can count on me,” the elder education statesman said to a thunderous ovation.

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

“We need charter schools. It’s time to take the shackles off of our families.”

PASTOR JERRY STEPHENSON
MINISTER, WEST END CHURCH OF CHRIST
CHAIRMAN, VALUES COALITION USA

“It Takes a Village’

State Rep. Stan Lee (R-Lexington), the primary sponsor of a special-needs scholarship bill currently languishing in the legislature for the second consecutive year, is also sponsoring a bill that would make Kentucky the 41st state with a charter school law. Lee told those attending the rally that school choice supporters are making progress in “expanding the knowledge” about the issue and helping lawmakers become more comfortable with the idea.

House Bill 578 would allow local school districts, universities, and municipal and county governments to sponsor charter schools. A state commission would be established to oversee the development of charters throughout the state. In the bill’s current form, there is no ceiling on the number of charter schools that could open.

“Using the old African proverb made famous by current presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton, Stephenson said having charter schools in neighborhoods would encourage involvement by “the village” in its children’s education.

Stephenson called on parents, grandparents, businesses, and churches to re-engage themselves in the education process.

“We need charter schools. It’s time to take the shackles off our families.”

Pastor Jerry Stephenson, minister at West End Church of Christ and chairman of Values Coalition USA, a group calling for Kentuckians to return to traditional values.

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Florida Improves Test Results in Key Areas, Student Subgroups

By Ben DeGrow

A leading education researcher says a closer look at national test scores makes the case for other states to follow the reform programs implemented in Florida by former Gov. Jeb Bush (R). Dr. Matthew Ladner, vice president of research at the Goldwater Institute for Public Policy, a research group based in Arizona, said Florida’s dramatic rise in achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) cannot be ignored. The 2007 test results are the first following Bush’s eight years in office with an education program focused largely on broad, substantial reforms.

“The charts are pretty clear that something happens after 1998. You don’t see data like that very often,” Ladner said. “If I were Governor Bush, retired from office now, I’d be quite proud of these kinds of test scores.”

Bush’s three private school choice programs were enacted between 1999 and 2001.

“If I were [Florida] Governor [Jeb] Bush, retired from office now, I’d be quite proud of these kinds of test scores.”

MATTHEW LADNER, PH.D. VICE PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH GOLDWATER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Breathtaking Results

The NAEP improvement has been most marked among Florida’s minority and poverty students. Among Hispanic, African-American, and low-income students, fourth-grade reading achievement improved twice as much as the national average since 1998. The mean scores for all three subgroups are now at or above basic proficiency.

Patricia Levesque, executive director of the Foundation for Florida’s Future, a nonprofit education reform organization founded by Bush in 1995, noted Florida’s African-American students now outperform 73 percent of their counterparts across the nation, as opposed to only 17 percent in 1998. Similarly, Florida’s Hispanics rose from the 52nd percentile to the 92nd percentile among their ethnic group nationwide.

In addition, Ladner notes, in the past decade Florida’s Hispanics have moved past the overall scores of 15 other states in the crucial metric of fourth-grade reading. Most notably outperformed is Oregon, which serves a much smaller share of minority students.

“In a sense, the results speak for themselves,” Ladner said. “It’s quite breathtaking.”

Combining Techniques

During his two terms in office, Bush enacted an ambitious set of school reforms. Ladner credits the state’s relatively large and successful school choice programs, established early in Bush’s tenure as governor, as bringing about the improvements in achievement.

Though in 2006 the Florida Supreme Court struck down Opportunity Scholarship vouchers for students in chronically failing public schools, Florida still has the most generous corporate tax credit scholarship program and the largest voucher program for special-needs students nationwide. The Washington, DC-based Center for Education Reform also rates Florida as having one of the strongest charter school laws.

Ladner also believes a key factor in the success is Florida’s A-Plus Accountability Act, which includes stronger sanctions for failing public schools than in any other state.

“There is something really effective about combining these two techniques,” Ladner said.

Casting Doubts

Kevin Welner, director of the University of Colorado-Boulder’s Education in the Public Interest Center, questions Ladner’s argument for a causal connection.

“Recent research does suggest a possible relationship between high-stakes school accountability and the student test scores in Florida,” Welner said. “The data available, however, only allow us to speculate about causes.”

Besides Bush’s choice and accountability reforms, Welner says other possible factors may include the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) or other education policies, as well as economic trends.

“Most likely, the score difference was caused by an interaction between one or all of these, plus other factors,” said Welner.

Levesque, however, notes many of Bush’s reforms pre-dated NCLB.

Instructional Upgrades

Ladner says he was drawn to the Florida example through a debate launched this winter by City Journal magazine, in which writer Sol Stern proclaimed more attention should be given to imposing better curricula than to expanding school choice.

“There is absolutely nothing exclusive about doing instructional and choice-based reforms at the same time,” Ladner said.

Levesque noted reading instruction was at the heart of Bush’s second-term education reform agenda, following the earlier success of choice and accountability programs. In his second term, Bush created the Florida Center for Reading Research and increased funding for reading coaches to ensure scientifically based reading instruction reached more Florida students.

“We knew if kids didn’t know how to read, they had no chance for success in the future,” said Levesque.

“Among Hispanic, African-American, and low-income students, fourth-grade reading achievement [in Florida] improved twice as much as the national average since 1998.”

Unfinished Reforms

Levesque also observed that significant test improvements started appearing among Florida’s middle-schoolers in 2006—which corresponds with students’ development under Bush’s earlier choice and instructional reforms.

“It’s real,” Levesque said. “You can see the progress in the performance level track upward over time.”

Levesque said her foundation is not only actively resisting legislative efforts to roll back school accountability but also is working to improve and expand state testing at the high school level.

“What Governor Bush has always said is, ‘Success is never final, and reform is never finished,’” said Levesque.

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

INTERNET INFO


Wyoming Charter School Proposal Falls One Vote Short in Legislature

By Elisha Maldonado

A bill to allow greater freedom to establish charter schools in Wyoming fell one vote short of approval by the state House Budget Committee on February 14.

House Bill 152, sponsored by state Rep. Amy Edmonds (R-Cheyenne), needed support from two-thirds of the 59 committee members present for the vote in order to be introduced on the House floor. The bill garnered 38 votes but needed 39.

The bill would have covered the essentials of installing a state board of public charter schools and would have set up an independent authorizing authority—meaning local school boards wouldn’t have control over charter schools in the state.

Right now, Edmonds said, the only way to open a charter school is to go through the public school district. And that just doesn’t work, she noted.

“In Wyoming, the system is like Lowe’s going to Home Depot for a loan,” Edmonds said.

Desire for Choice

The vote came as increasing numbers of Wyoming parents are seeking fundamental changes to state laws to give them more choice in their children’s education, according to a study released in mid-February by the Wyoming Association of Public Charter Schools and the Center for Education Reform (CER), a national charter school advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland.

Similarly, a Wyoming poll conducted by CER earlier this year found 76 percent of those surveyed believed in allowing communities to create public charter schools.

“Clearly, people in Wyoming appreciate the idea of choice,” said Kara Hornung, CER’s director of communications. Roughly 60 percent of parents polled, Hornung said, say they should be able to choose their children’s school.

Hornung noted Cheyenne has only three high schools, all run by the local school district. There are only three charter schools in the entire state, Edmonds said.

Report Grades Nation’s School Choice Programs

By Wendy Cloyd

A February study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice offers a valuable evaluation of school choice programs in 21 states.

The report, “Grading School Choice: Evaluating School Choice Programs by the Friedman Gold Standard,” measured each program against standards set by Milton Friedman in the 1950s.

Friedman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, argued “the most effective way to improve K-12 education and thus ensure a stable democracy is to separate government financing of education from government administration of schools,” the report notes.

“Government should provide funds for every child to receive an education, and the role of government in education should be limited to ensuring that schools meet minimum standards for things such as health and safety.”

Friedman Foundation Executive Director Robert Enlow said the report is meant to remind school choice advocates of Friedman’s vision and give legislators nationwide a model for reference as they consider reforms—whether they’re creating new laws or improving those already on the books.

“They can say, ‘If we are going to improve, here is what we can do,’” Enlow explained. “For example in Cleveland we are trying to increase the dollar amount [of the citywide voucher program].”

Forming Models

Cleveland’s public schools receive a much higher per-pupil dollar amount than do families of students enrolled in the voucher program. Enlow said “the full amount should follow the child” no matter which school the student chooses to attend.

In states that have no school choice options, advocates can use the report to encourage good legislation.

“You could consider, for example, what good design looks like,” Enlow said. “Why is the Arizona program better than the Florida program? This report is a benchmark by which legislators and advocates can judge their proposed legislation and reexamine their existing programs in order to provide the broadest access and opportunities to students and families in their states.”

Basic Tenets

Enlow based his evaluation of school choice programs on three criteria:

- Solid purchasing power. Programs that provide students with purchasing power comparable to the resources available to the public school system are graded more highly than those providing only a little money to help students seek educational services outside the public system.
- Minimal restrictions on access. Programs that extend school choice to all students are considered better than those that discriminate on the basis of income, residence, disability, or other factors.
- Minimal restrictions on schools. Programs that make it easier for schools to participate, without imposing unreasonable regulations and restrictions, are graded more highly than those that limit school options.

Using What Works

The report is not intended to be overly critical of existing choice programs, Enlow notes.

“In most cases, having a school choice program is better than not having one,” Enlow writes in the report. “More freedom is better than less, and we understand that while we should strive for the gold standard, we don’t want the perfect to be the enemy of the good.”

Most importantly, the report reaffirms the organization’s commitment to the gold standard of educational freedom established by Milton Friedman.

“We support school choice for all, not just for some, and it’s our job to constantly remind the country of the need for the most basic American freedom of universal choice in schooling,” Enlow said.

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

INTERNET INFO


INTERNET INFO

California Dropout Study Sparks Controversy

By Aricka Flowers

A study of California’s high school dropout rate has sparked a debate about the merits of nontraditional schools.

According to the study, 41 percent of California’s dropouts come from nontraditional schools such as charter and alternative schools, which educate 12 percent of the state’s children.

Critics of the study, released in February by the California Dropout Research Project—a Santa Barbara-based group devoted to researching and reversing the state’s high school dropout rate—say it misrepresents nontraditional schools’ true dropout rates because of the way the numbers were calculated.

“When you look at the California Dropout Research Project’s own data, they put charter schools, alternative schools, and district schools in separate categories,” explained Vicki E. Murray, senior policy fellow in education at the Pacific Research Institute, a San Francisco-based organization that promotes individual responsibility and personal freedom.

Yet, they failed to separate the categories for this study, which skews the findings,” Murray continued. “Alternative schools are serving an at-risk population that is more likely to drop out. So of course, they had more dropouts. I emailed Russell Rumberger, the lead researcher, and asked him why they meshed charter and alternative schools into one category, and he said for ‘ease of presentation.’

Statewide Problem

Using figures from the California Education Department, the study’s authors found alternative schools had an average dropout rate of 50 percent, while charter schools had an average rate of 67 percent. The authors evaluated the 100 schools with the highest dropout rates, of which 25 were alternative and 17 were charters. School choice advocates cried foul because they believe the way the study’s data are presented unjustly discredits the benefits of such programs.

But Rumberger, an education professor at the University of California-Santa Barbara and director of the California Dropout Research project, stands behind the report. In a February 21 Los Angeles Times article, he said the point of the study was to highlight the state’s problem—not specific programs or schools.

“If the school doing a bad job, or are the kids at risk anyway, no matter what setting they’re in?” Rumberger asked. “This is where we should be concerned. If that many kids are dropping out, it’s unlikely that you’re doing a good job.”

Different Results

Murray decided to rerun the data using the California Dropout Research Project’s figures, separating charter schools from alternative schools in her calculation. She found staggering different results.

“When you look at the number of total dropouts in regular public schools, charter public schools, and alternative public schools,” Murray said, “the total percentage of dropouts from regular public schools amounts to 50 percent. Charter schools represent 17 percent of the total number of dropouts, and alternative schools represent 33 percent of the total number of dropouts.

“The takeaway message is that regular public schools, not alternative public schools, account for half of all the dropouts examined,” Murray concluded. “Putting what amounts to a handful of charter schools into that universe for reporting purposes doesn’t paint the clearest picture of the source of California’s dropouts.”

Better Solutions

Rumberger’s study lists a number of suggested reforms, including:

• collecting and reporting better dropout data to improve graduation rates;
• developing high school reform standards and “lighthouse” districts, which would contain several high schools with high dropout levels. Those districts would work as teams, with external help from better-performing regions;
• fixing the accountability progress reporting system at the state and federal levels;
• investing in proven dropout strategies to target the most disadvantaged schools and children;
• reexamining high school graduation requirements; and
• reforming middle school programs.

Faulty Methodology

Choice advocates said those suggestions won’t do much over the long haul.

“He is coming up with conclusions that are absurd on [their] face,” said Gary Larson, spokesman for the California Charter Schools Association, a membership and professional organization serving the state’s charter schools. “If you look at the methodology, it is faulty on a very basic level. The danger inherent in that is you’re focusing the solution on something that California doesn’t need right now—and neither does the rest of the country.”

The conversation on how to best address California’s high school dropout rate is sure to continue, but experts say it’s important to know which programs are working and which aren’t.

“It wouldn’t be surprising if certain charter schools had a higher dropout rate because they enroll students that aren’t thriving in the traditional public schools setting,” Murray said. “So the fact that they have comparatively so few dropouts shows that charter schools are doing a comparatively better job.”

INTERNET INFO


Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Chicago.
College Awareness Ad Campaign Takes its Message Directly to Kids

By Neal McCluskey

According to a report released in March by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, only half the students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system who have aspired to attend four-year colleges since 2004 have done what it takes to get there, largely because they haven’t known how to navigate the search and application processes.

They’re not alone. Nationwide, according to the people behind a new campaign to attack the problem by appealing directly to students, poor kids struggle to get to college.

Major Obstacles

Researchers from the consortium—a University of Chicago-based group put together in 1990 to study CPS—found several major obstacles keeping low-income, often would-be first-generation college students from attending four-year colleges, especially ones matching many students’ relatively high qualifications.

Two of the main difficulties, according to the report, are that many high schools don’t have “strong college climates”—they don’t push students to attend college—and kids can’t navigate the complicated Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) that is needed to obtain often essential financial assistance.

In the end, “if the most highly qualified students do not attend colleges that demand high qualifications, then their hard work has not paid off,” the authors wrote. “Making hard work worthwhile must be a central goal if CPS is going to ask all students to work hard and value their course performance and achievement.”

Launching Campaigns

KnowHow2GO—a new effort spearheaded by the nonprofit Lumina Foundation (a higher-education advocacy group based in Indianapolis), the Ad Council, and the American Council on Education (ACE)—is designed to help low-income students overcome the problems they face getting to college, understand the importance of higher education, and navigate the application process.

Because one of the main obstacles for low-income students is that their parents and schools pay too little attention to college, the campaign appeals directly to those kids.

“Students do not know the steps necessary to go to college,” explained Susan Conner, Lumina’s executive vice president of impact strategy. KnowHow2GO is “a public service advertising campaign” intended to encourage them to find out what those steps are and then take them.

KnowHow2GO is divided into three campaigns, Conner said: Air, ground, and “new media.” The first includes television and radio ads telling kids college can be in their future and they need to find adults who can help them get there.

The ground campaign works with numerous organizations ranging from the National Collegiate Access Network (NCAN) to Boys and Girls Clubs to help students clear hurdles such as FAFSA.

New media efforts include a KnowHow2GO presence on social networking sites such as Facebook.

“[Many high schools don’t have ‘strong college climates’—they don’t push students to attend college— and kids can’t navigate the complicated Free Application for Federal Student Aid that is needed to obtain often essential financial assistance.”

Mixed Results

KnowHow2GO has various arrangements in 15 states and two regions. In five states, including Illinois and Washington, as well as the Los Angeles Basin and the area surrounding Tampa, Florida, KnowHow2GO is being run with grants from Lumina. In 10 states—including Connecticut, which launched its campaign in January 2008—the campaigns are being run with technical assistance, but not financial support, from Lumina.

Since the program was launched just last year, in January 2007, it is probably too early to tell how effective it will be in getting low-income kids to attend college when they otherwise would not have gone or would have attended schools below their qualifications.

The evidence so far is mixed at best.

Tracy Dell’Angela, senior manager of outreach and publications at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, said no one who worked on her organization’s report had heard of KnowHow2GO, even though the program is operating in Chicago.

Conner, however, said an early assessment, not available at press time, suggests at least the air campaign is starting to work. The results, she said, showed “significant and promising increases in students who know about the campaign and are taking steps to go to college.”

Regardless of progress to date, both KnowHow2GO’s founders and researchers in Chicago know such efforts have a long way to go.

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

INTERNET INFO


KnowHow2GO: http://www.knowhow2go.org/

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More Trouble for Establishment Would Be Even Better

Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform Since Sputnik
By Chester E. Finn, Jr.
376 pages, hardcover, ISBN 9780691129907, $26.95

Review by Neal McCluskey
If you’re looking for a real agitator, someone who declares the emperor naked while everyone else insists he’s wearing a robe, T-shirt, turtleneck, and cardigan, you’ll be a little disappointed by Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform Since Sputnik.

Author and Thomas B. Fordham Foundation President Chester E. Finn rightly critiques much about American public schooling, insisting the turtleneck and cardigan aren’t there, but he ultimately refuses to acknowledge what all his experience shows: The emperor has no clothes at all.

No Outsider
Troublemaker begins with Finn’s boyhood in Dayton, Ohio—origines different from the elite-breeding Washington-to-Boston corridor that certainly put him in a position to be a troublemaking outsider.

That, however, is the extent of Finn’s non-establishment credentials. At age 15 he traded Dayton for New Hampshire’s elite Phillips Exeter Academy, and the rest of his path is pure insider:

“My expert face can claim forty years in the field, a trifecta of Harvard degrees, a stack of books, tenured professor, think tank fellow. ... As policymaker, I’ve worked as a junior White House staffer, assistant secretary of education, legislative director for a high-profile U.S. senator, aide to one governor and kitchen cabinet member for another, member of the President’s Education Policy Advisory council, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board, counsel to the U.S. ambassador to India, and more.”

Even with this résumé, one could cause lots of trouble, taking on sacred cow after sacred cow. But that doesn’t happen in Troublemaker.

“Chester E. Finn ... ultimately refuses to acknowledge what all his experience shows: The emperor has no clothes at all.”

While special interests such as teacher unions and school administrators have resisted much that Finn has championed, he has rarely gored anyone’s ox.

Ignoring Experience
Finn’s failure to be a full-on troublemaker certainly doesn’t render his book worthless. It’s a very readable rundown of the past four decades of education policymaking by a man who was there. It’s also enlightening to see what Finn has learned over the decades, especially as he’s seen reforms he once thought powerful neutered by politics. As he writes about his time heading the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement:

“After three years, I had made modest headway with my reforms, which of course crumbled soon after I had gone. I had also accumulated a lifetime’s worth of contempt for [the American Educational Research Association], for the labs and centers that were (and remain) the politically nimblest players on the education-research field, for the congressional appropriations process that looked after adult interest groups at the expense of kids, parents, and practitioners, and for those education department bureaucrats who comprised the third side of Washington’s infamous ‘iron triangle.’

Unfortunately, despite so much experience with a system that regularly defeats his efforts, Finn refuses to accept the most important lesson his experience can offer: Central government planning is no more successful in education than in any other field.

In Other Words

“...that they brush off accountability systems that also demand academic results. Some are sublimely confident that if the statutory structures and policies can be set right, quality will inexorably follow.

“...They and other ‘structural’ reformers err when they disregard what goes on inside the classroom. Particularly in the NCLB era, academic results count.”

Limiting Reforms
Though to an extent he recognizes parents must have control over their children’s education to counter self-interested policymakers and bureaucrats, Finn refuses to advocate giving them the full power they need. In the end, he cannot part with government control:

“Choice enthusiasts sometimes become so enamored of the market’s invisible hand ... that they brush off accountability systems that also demand academic results. Some are sublimely confident that if the statutory structures and policies can be set right, quality will inexorably follow.

“...They and other ‘structural’ reformers err when they disregard what goes on inside the classroom. Particularly in the NCLB era, academic results count.”

“While special interests such as teacher unions and school administrators have resisted much that Finn has championed, he has rarely gored anyone’s ox.”

Pacifist Approach
Here Finn’s inner non-troublemaker comes to the fore, asserting government must always be in charge of standards because choice is agnostic about results. But full choice is the key to strong standards and accountability, as a vast body of international evidence and Finn’s own experiences make clear.

When government controls the system, the system’s employees usually control the government—and it’s in their interest to set standards low. But when parents have full choice, as in the tutoring industry and the growing private education markets of the developing world, schools must respond to families’ demands, setting off the competition and innovation that drive standards ever-higher.

We could enjoy the same quality and progress in education that we take for granted in everything from computers to package delivery, but because some parents might not choose as he would, Finn would leave government in charge.

Chester Finn has tried hard to nudge Leviathan in a positive direction, but he has refused to accept what his experience proves: The system won’t budge, and we must go over or around it. Because of this refusal, he has never made the real trouble that American children need.

Neal McCluskey (nmccluskey@cato.org) is associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.
School Funding Problems Provide Ripe Political Opportunity in Ill.

By Dan Proft

Exemplifying a reform opportunity that applies across the nation, Illinois legislators will be presented this year with yet another chance to reconfigure the political balance of power in their state and reestablish their electoral relevance.

Against the backdrop of Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s (D) State of the State Address in February, House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) allowed Senate Bill 2288 to begin slithering its way through the General Assembly once again.

SB 2288 (formerly House Bill 750) has been the legislative Rasputin of Illinois politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike, dating back to Gov. Jim Edgar (R) in the mid-1990s. The thrust of the bill is to increase the state income tax permanently from 3 percent to 5 percent in exchange for temporary property tax relief.

Where would the net increase in state revenue go? Say it with me: To fund education. Herein lies the political opportunity.

"SB 2288 (formerly House Bill 750) ... [would] increase the state income tax permanently from 3 percent to 5 percent in exchange for temporary property tax relief."

One Stipulation

Instead of getting caught in a false debate about how much money for schools is enough, opponents of the hike (nearly all Republicans) should tell supporters of it (primarily Democrats) to name their price. Should the state increase the foundation level by 5 percent? Ten? Fifty? Fine. Whatever.

But opponents must hold fast to one stipulation in return for their blank check on funding: For the City of Chicago, those dollars will no longer be attached to the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Instead, they will be applied to individual CPS students so that their parents may send them to the school of their choosing, public or private, citywide.

This is something Republicans, common-sense Independents, and Democrats statewide can get behind—because everybody gets it when it comes to the importance of their children’s education.

Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan (left) has allowed a controversial tax swap measure to begin working its way through the General Assembly, following Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s State of the Address calling for more school funding.

Dire Statistics

Illinois families understand that today, more than ever, education is the gateway to opportunity and dream fulfillment. They are well aware of the increasing earning gap between college graduates and non-graduates in our global, digital economy.

And Illinois families understand they have a moral responsibility to do something about CPS’s chronic underperformance.

How bad is it?

One statistic says it all. According to a report released earlier this year by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, only six of every 100 freshmen who entered a CPS high school last September will ultimately earn a bachelor's degree from college.

Six in 100. Spread that math over a universe of 400,000 children and you begin to understand the enormity of the crisis.

Illinois families also intuitively comprehend that no matter where you live, when a system responsible for educating 400,000 children fails the overwhelming majority of them every year, as CPS does, we all pay.

Criminal Activity

So, knowing all that we know, isn’t it a shame what we allow to occur in Chicago? In fact, isn’t it a crime?

In 2006, CPS chief Arne Duncan told the Chicago Tribune, “When students are unprepared for college or the world of work, they are condemned to social failure. We are doing everything we can to dramatically change the high school experience for our teenagers.”

I don’t know who “we” are, and I don’t much care. Even were I to attribute the best of intentions to Duncan, CPS will never dramatically change itself. As we have seen, doing everything they can is simply not good enough.

That’s why the Illinois General Assembly stepped in to restructure CPS in 1995.

It was a genuine attempt, but it addressed form (creating local school councils) to the exclusion of function, and so fell short of the overhaul required.

We know CPS is an abysmal failure. We know we will all be held to account, morally and financially, for that failure.

We know there is precedent for the General Assembly to summon its collective will to intervene.

Most importantly, we know low-income children—of all races but disproportionately minorities—are getting a raw deal.

It’s not fair, and it’s not right—but with a smidge of political courage it is eminently fixable.

Proven Reform

The city of Milwaukee figured this out 17 years ago when it launched its Parental Choice Program. That effort was spearheaded by Democrat legislator Polly Williams and Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson. Bipartisanship on this issue is achievable in Chicago—it’s already been done elsewhere.

Likewise, Cleveland defended its city-wide voucher program all the way to the Supreme Court in 2002, and won. So it clearly passes constitutional muster as well.

To paraphrase a sentiment from the late, great Ray Charles, letting the market “do what it do (baby)” has given us a national landscape in which nine states and the District of Columbia operate 16 private-school choice programs—some tailored to students with particular challenges, such as Ohio’s program for autistic children and Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program for special-needs students.

According to School Choice Yearbook 2007, released in late March by the Alliance for School Choice, 75 percent of the programs enacted over the past two years garnered Democratic support in state legislatures.

Race to the Finish

CPS has already dipped its toe into the pool of competition. Charter schools and magnet schools, which CPS currently features, are nothing less than an admission that the rest of the system is in cardiac arrest.

If the neighborhood schools to which children are bound by their geography were getting the job done, why the need to create schools that have greater flexibility with the rules and curricula? Why the need to set up magnet schools with entrance exams to attract the city’s best and brightest? Shouldn’t all high schools citywide be viewed as “college prep” schools?

Frankly, expanding competition in CPS is a way for both political parties to escape the Sisyphean exercise of pouring ever-increasing amounts of money into a system beset by flaws so fundamental that no amount of money can fix them.

The political party in Illinois that devotes itself to the aspirations of low- and middle-income families trapped in the discredited eduocracy currently robbing their children of their futures—and stands up for proven, market-oriented reforms—will (and should) dominate the state’s political landscape for generations to come.

Dan Proft (dan@urqmedia.com) gives a weekly political commentary on the "Dan Wade & Roma Morning Show" on WLS-AM 890 in Chicago and is a contributing columnist to the Chicago Tribune’s Red Eye publication. Previous versions of this commentary appeared in the Southtown Star and St. Clair County Record.
Maryland May Target Dropouts by Increasing Compulsory Attendance Age

By Richard G. Neal

School dropout rates have been an intractable problem for decades. Until recently the actual rate has been universally understated, concealing a problem creating a national peril.

But today, thanks to various reliable investigative reports, the true dropout rate is known: Approximately one out of three high school freshmen nationwide will not graduate within four years.

Since this figure is a national average, it means the dropout rate for some school districts is more than 50 percent. As a matter of fact, one in 10 schools nationwide—that’s 1,700 schools—are “dropout factories,” where less than 60 percent of the students graduate on time, according to a Johns Hopkins University study.

School districts across the nation are trying to solve this vexing phenomenon. A Maryland effort is based on a 112-page study released in February by a 50-member statewide task force, “Attending to Learn: The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance.” The report contains several recommendations, the most controversial of which is to increase the compulsory age of attendance from 16 to 18.

Approval in Doubt

On March 21 the Maryland Senate approved a bill to raise compulsory attendance to age 17, instead of 18. If signed into law, it will take effect in the 2010-2011 school year and will cost an estimated $200 million by requiring the employment of 1,100 new teachers and space for 21,000 additional students.

Similar efforts by the state in the past have failed to raise the required attendance age.

Christopher Summers, president of the Maryland Public Policy Institute (MPPI), an independent, nonpartisan think tank based in Rockville, doubts the plan will work. He referred to it as a piece of “fiduciary irresponsibility.”

However, Summers predicted the measure would help the teachers union by adding many new members to the Maryland State Teachers Association, which supports the proposed legislation.

Ineffective Measure

Several other policy organizations agree with MPPI’s position. They find increasing the age of compulsory attendance does little to improve student learning or reduce the dropout rate.

The Home School Legal Defense Association noted, “Raising the compulsory attendance age fails to achieve significant results.” The John Locke Foundation, an independent think tank in North Carolina, wrote in a 2007 study, “Raising The Bar, Not The Age.” “There is no consistent relationship between the maximum compulsory age and graduation and dropout rates.”

Although some students will drop out of school regardless of what is done for them, most want to continue their education in a manner meaningful to them. According to a 2006 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation report, “The Silent Epidemic,” 47 percent of dropouts said classes weren’t interesting; 43 percent had missed too many days of school and couldn’t catch up; 38 percent said they had too much freedom and not enough rules in life; 35 percent said they quit because they were failing in school; and 32 percent said they had to get a job and make money.

When asked what might have kept them in school, 81 percent called for more “real-world” learning opportunities. Seventy-five percent wanted smaller classes with more individual instruction, and 71 percent called for better communication between parents and schools and more parental involvement.

Warning Signs Well-Known

The warning signs that students are at risk of dropping out of school have been known for decades.

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, a research group based at South Carolina’s Clemson University, the common variables found in research identifying possible dropouts include: poor attendance, low grade-point average, low standardized test composite scores, grade retention, discipline referrals, truancy, parents’ education level, socioeconomic status, special education placement, number of school transfers, low reading and math scores, ethnic/ gender/racial distinctions, language spoken in the home, suspensions, pregnancy, and living in a single-parent home.

These are the true warning signs a student is likely to drop out. Unfortunately, public schools do not address these problems, because their programs are generally based on preparing kids for college. For the potential dropout, such programs have little meaning, so they give up.

In addition, some of the at-risk characteristics of potential dropouts are beyond the ability of the schools to correct—such as parental behavior and teen pregnancy.

“One in 10 schools nationwide—that’s 1,700 schools—are ‘dropout factories,’ where less than 60 percent of the students graduate on time ...”

Vouchers for Dropouts

There is an immutable principle of learning that states, people learn best when they are ready. Most dropouts are not ready to stay in school, and the school can do little about it. But some of these dropouts will become ready later in life.

When I directed a large adult education program, I admitted several students whom I had expelled from high school when I was their principal. They had become ready to learn. It was a pleasure each time I handed these adults a high school diploma.

This experience convinced me that instead of wasting time and money on futile attempts to retain kids who are determined to drop out, we should give them lifetime, universal vouchers to complete their high school education some time in the future—when they are ready.

Because, after all, dropouts are taxpayers, too.

Richard Neal (rneal1@triad.rr.com) writes from North Carolina.
Louisiana Black Caucus Does Students a Disfavor

By Ralph Conner

The idea of March brought good tidings to newly minted Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R), who saw his economic development tax cuts approved by bipartisan majorities in both legislative chambers on March 15. The measure included a historic school choice bill, which the state’s black legislative caucus opposed.

The landmark legislation allows parents to deduct 50 percent of their children’s private school tuition—up to $5,000 per student—from their state income taxes, beginning in 2010. Home-schooling parents are eligible for the deduction, and all parents may deduct expenses for public and private schools uniforms, textbooks, and school supplies.

African-American lawmakers reliably echoed the teacher unions’ rhetoric, claiming any income tax credits diverting dollars from public schools will hurt poor and minority students, and arguing any income tax credit diverts dollars from the public schools to the detriment of poor and minority students.

But the reality of current school funding disparities shows public schools outstrip all others in per-pupil costs in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Less Expensive

Before the storms, the New Orleans Parish District spent $7,877 per student. This year, the state-run Recovery School District will spend about $12,900 per student, according to Louisiana School Superintendent Paul Pastorek. That constitutes a 65 percent increase in per-pupil spending.

Only 4 percent of the nation’s 108 largest school districts spend more than $12,000 per student. However, the true disparity becomes evident when we examine the cost per pupil for charter or special public schools or private schools.

At the Southern University Laboratory School in Baton Rouge, where Jindal sends his own child, tuition is only $3,852 per student. Sharon Clark, principal of Sophie B. Wright Charter School in New Orleans, says she routinely spends several thousand less per student than the New Orleans Recovery District.

The primary cause of this disparity could be a reason for black legislators to revisit the debate about funding private schools.

The Recovery School District receives the same per-pupil financing from Louisiana as other charter schools statewide. However, the Recovery School District receives substantially more special-education students, who come with additional funds from the federal government.

Disproportionate Representation

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all disabled children are entitled to a free, appropriate public education—defined by the U.S. Department of Education as one that meets the individual needs of students with disabilities as well as it does non-disabled students. To the maximum extent appropriate, disabled students are to be educated in the same classrooms as their peers.

The federal government has developed a system of individualized education programs (IEP) to be designed for each student eligible for special-education funding. The disabilities specified under IDEA are mental retardation, hearing and speech impairments, visual impairments, and emotional disturbance.

“[Louisiana’s] landmark legislation allows parents to deduct 50 percent of their children’s private school tuition—up to $5,000 per student—from their state income taxes, beginning in 2010.”

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students have been disproportionately represented among the ranks of special-education students for decades. In 2006, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), a 70-year-old nonprofit group based in Virginia, released a study showing a child’s ethnicity significantly influences his or her chances of being misidentified as a special-education student.

Studies have shown misidentified students have limited access to rigorous curricula and succumb to the bigotry of low expectations.

According to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes in disabled and gifted children, disabled African-American students are more likely to be taught in separate classrooms or schools than white students. CLD students, of which blacks form a substantial percentage, also have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions.

Inordinate Funding

Thus we may have an inordinate amount of special-education funding following black students who are misidentified as having special needs.

The teacher unions claim charter and private schools can control their admissions and class sizes to exclude “problem” or emotionally disturbed “difficult to educate” students. Little wonder, unions say, that charters and private schools actually perform better. They have allegedly eliminated the worst students and created smaller class sizes by refusing to accept all comers.

It is time for black legislators to reexamine this fallacy.

According to a 1997 study by the Midland, Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, while conventional public schools enroll the majority of difficult-to-educate students, they don’t accept everyone. At-risk students, those from juvenile courts, and emotionally disturbed pupils are often sent, at public expense, to private schools with expertise in educating them.

At least seven states have programs enabling public schools to contract with private, alternative schools to serve at-risk students. Some private schools include students with disabilities in the regular student bodies.

Private Schools Meeting Needs

The bottom line is that parochial schools, homeschools, and charters offer a wider variety of options for teaching the difficult-to-educate students black legislators often use as props to justify their universal support for public schools only.

Jindal’s tuition tax credit will provide the parents of black children who qualify as CLD or difficult-to-educate with access to quality educational services. According to the Mackinac Center, private schools are meeting the needs of students of all races.

It’s high time black legislators reflected upon the vast number of kids trapped in special-education programs that don’t serve them well. Then the black caucuses in state legislatures nationwide could find solace and value in tuition tax credit plans that offer more specialized services to address those children’s needs.

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INTERNET INFO


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