Failing Schools and Local Districts Undermining Families’ NCLB Options

By Aricka Flowers

If the Idaho Public School System were a private business, it would have closed by now, according to a study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. A survey found only 12 percent of parents statewide would send their children to public schools if they had other options.

IDAHO p. 9

One of the major promises of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been that kids in chronically bad schools will be able to reach beyond those institutions for help. According to a U.S. Department of Education report released in April, however, few kids have been using those options, and it’s not due only to disinterest.

The report—Volume IV in the department’s “State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act” series—examines implementation of NCLB’s school choice and supplemental educational services (SES) provisions through the 2004-05 school year.

Under the law, parents with children in schools that receive federal Title I funds and fail for two consecutive years to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state assessments—schools deemed “in need of improvement”—are entitled to choose for their child a school in a district not deemed as needing improvement. In

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On November Ballot, Florida Voters Will Decide Fate of School Vouchers

By Joe Follick

In a move that will almost certainly revive legal battles over using taxpayer money for private schools, a commission agreed to give voters an opportunity to reverse a 2006 Florida Supreme Court decision that found then-Gov. Jeb Bush’s prized voucher program unconstitutional.

With April 25’s final meeting after more than a year of work, the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission (TBRC) approved seven constitutional

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Public Schools Lose Support of Idaho Parents

By Neal McCluskey

If the Idaho Public School System were a private business, it would have closed by now, according to a study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. A survey found only 12 percent of parents statewide would send their children to public schools if they had other options.

IDAHO p. 9

Tennessee Fights to Keep Open Charter Schools

By Ben DeGrow

Tennessee is fighting an uphill battle to save public charter schools from being rolled back, even though a recent survey shows the education option to be popular with parents statewide.

House Bill 3935, sponsored by state

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The Heartland Institute, through its Illinois School Choice Initiative project, hosted a series of luncheons in 2006 with some of the leading spokespeople for the school choice movement. Audio recordings from the 2006 Educational Choice Speaker Series are available in a wide range of formats.

The audio recordings can be listened to online or downloaded to an iPod or MP3 player by subscribing to the Educational Choice Speaker Series Podcast. [Visit heartland.org](http://www.fromtheheartland.org/live/audio.html) and scroll down to the ISCI Educational Choice Speaker Series.

DVD recordings of the presentations are also available for purchase, unless otherwise indicated below. For more information, please contact The Heartland Institute at 312/377-4000, email think@heartland.org.

### THE FOLLOWING PRESENTATIONS ARE AVAILABLE:

**JANUARY:** George Clowes, The Heartland Institute

On January 19, Clowes kicked off the new monthly Educational Choice Speaker Series with a talk titled, “Competition as an Effective Education Reform: What Works and What’s Ahead.”

**FEBRUARY:** Ken Johnson, Milwaukee Public Schools

(Audio Only) On February 7, Kenneth Johnson, Milwaukee School Board president, addressed “Milwaukee Public School Reform: Rethinking of Parents as Our Customers.”

**MARCH:** Virginia Gentles, Florida Department of Education

On March 16, Virginia Gentles, executive director of the Florida Department of Education’s Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, described the school choice programs available to parents in the Sunshine State.

**APRIL:** Lawrence Patrick, BAEO

On April 20, Lawrence Patrick III of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) addressed the need for educational choice for black parents and students.

**MAY:** Rebeca Nieves-Huffman, Hispanic CREO

On May 18, Rebeca Nieves-Huffman addressed the education crisis and how it affects Hispanic children. Huffman is president and CEO of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (Hispanic CREO).

**JUNE:** Robert Enlow, Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation

On June 15, Robert Enlow, executive director of the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, gave an overview of the school choice movement, assessing the strength of the movement.

**JULY:** Lisa Snell, Reason Foundation

On July 27, Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare at the California-based Reason Foundation, spoke about the pitfalls of universal preschool and the benefits of weighted student funding as a viable and effective K-12 reform.

**SEPTEMBER:** David Brennan, White Hat Management

On September 17, David Brennan’s speech, “The U.S. Education System Is Perfectly Aligned with Cuba and North Korea: Do We Really Treasure Individual Rights? Don’t We Value the Power of Consumer Choice?” stressed the importance of innovation in our education system.

**OCTOBER:** Clint Bolick, Alliance for School Choice

On October 19, Bolick closed the ISCI’s 2006 Educational Choice Speaker Series with a discussion of school choice cases currently in the courts, and what the future holds.
Think Tanks Mark Anniversary of “A Nation at Risk” Report

By Dan Lips

April marked the 25th anniversary of the release of the 1983 report “A Nation at Risk,” which highlighted widespread problems in American education.

The report is seen as having been a catalyst for the standards-based and school choice education reform movements. Washington think tanks marked the anniversary by revisiting the report and considering its current relevance.

The Cato Institute hosted a forum comparing the merits of standards and accountability versus market-based reforms. Sol Stern, a senior fellow with the Manhattan Institute, spoke in favor of standards and accountability, pointing to the achievements they have yielded in Massachusetts and Virginia.

“I urge everyone in the school choice movement,” Stern said, “to come in off the sidelines, support school choice, but also support situations in which significant improvement can be achieved by instructional and curriculum reform.”

“Just because standards are a good idea, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it is a good idea for government to mandate them and require them.”

ANDREW COULSON, DIRECTOR CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM CATO INSTITUTE

Debating Mandates

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, argued market-based reforms are the key to ensuring quality standards.

“Just because standards are a good idea, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it is a good idea for government to mandate them and require them,” Coulson said. He believes only choice and competition can lead to lasting improvement and innovation in instruction methods and standards.

He pointed to private-sector standards as such innovations.

“There is a plethora of education standards that I have high regard for,” Coulson said, citing International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and ACT and SAT tests. “And they all have something in common—they were developed by the private sector and pursued voluntarily.”

Considering Reagan

The Heritage Foundation marked the anniversary by hosting a panel to look back at President Ronald Reagan’s opinion of “A Nation at Risk” and his views on education. Longtime Reagan senior advisor and former U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese recalled Reagan believed in limiting federal involvement and returning control to states, cities, and parents.

To apply Reagan’s vision for education today, Meese argued, policymakers must “decrease the role of Washington in education, with its burdens, with its requirements, and with its bureaucratic red tape.”

He also suggested following Reagan’s lead in calling attention to the education crisis.

“We do have a national problem of education, [but we must] recognize that the solution belongs at the state and local level and with the active involvement of parents to take responsibility for the education of their children.”

ED MEESE
FORMER U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL

DeMint currently is co-sponsoring the A-PLUS Act, legislation that would allow states greater flexibility within the regulations of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. His bill would allow states to determine how best to use federal funds for education as long as they comply with basic requirements such as maintaining state-level testing.

“We do have a national problem of education, [but we must] recognize that the solution belongs at the state and local level and with the active involvement of parents to take responsibility for the education of their children.”

ED MEESE
FORMER U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL

“We see bubbling up everywhere some flexibility and some choices,” DeMint said. “We need to fan the flames there. One of the ways we can do that is with more flexibility at the state level.”

Dan Lips (dan.lips@heritage.org) is an education analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Use of Test Scores as Tenure Factor Is Banned for NY School Districts

By Christin Coyne

Local school districts in New York will not be able to use students’ standardized test scores as a factor in determining which teachers receive tenure, at least for the next two years. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (R) and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein battled teacher unions but lost in April, when lawmakers decided to limit school districts’ authority to set standards for tenure.

“The current system takes the important decision of granting tenure far too lightly and is simply unconcerned with whether the teacher is actually effective in the classroom,” said Marcus Winters, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. “The result of this system is that bad teachers are equally protected under the system as are good teachers.”

Bloomberg agreed.

“This makes New York the only state in the nation that blocks local districts from using student data to evaluate teachers—and in this case, there is no honor in being first,” Bloomberg said in an April 9 statement. “It is nothing more than a special-interest protection for the few teachers who shouldn’t get an automatic lifetime appointment to the classroom, and our children will—once again—get the short end of the stick.”

Budget Battle

Before the change, state law said tenure should be based on, among other things, “evaluation of the extent to which the teacher successfully utilized analysis of available student performance data and other relevant information when providing instruction.”

Hammering out new tenure language was the final issue holding up approval of the state’s budget in early April. Legislators finally agreed on wording stating “the teacher shall not be granted or denied tenure based on student performance data.”

“We should remember that using test scores in tenure decisions would have been a change from the status quo,” Winters explained. “It was directly aimed at New York City, which is the only system in the state of which I am aware that was considering such a change. [This decision] will further handcuff Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein from making much-needed reforms to the city’s school system.”

Broad Basis

Teacher unions, led by the New York State United Teachers, contend student test scores are designed to test students, not teachers. They say other factors, such as skills in managing the classroom, involving parents, and creatively presenting material, should be examined instead to give a broader picture of each teacher’s abilities.

“We have no independent or conclusive research that shows you can accurately measure the impact of an individual teacher on a student’s academic achievement—much less using student test scores, particularly those given midyear, to do it,” United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said in an April 9 statement. “No one is afraid of accountability, but the measures have to be fair and accurate.”

“Student scores on standardized tests provide valuable information about a teacher’s performance.” Winters countered. “Test scores certainly do not tell the entire story about a teacher’s effectiveness, but if used properly, they can help schools identify those teachers we most want to keep in the classroom.”

Christin Coyne (ejcoyne@students.phc.edu) writes from Virginia.

NCLB

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schools that miss AYP for another year, students must be offered free tutoring as well as choice.

Using Choice

The good news in the report is that more students used choice and supplemental services in the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years than in NCLB’s first year. In 2002-03, only 18,000 students nationwide used the school choice option provided by the law, and 42,000 used SES. By contrast, in 2003-04, 38,000 students nationwide took advantage of school choice and 233,000 used SES. Data were unavailable on SES for 2004-05, but 45,000 students nationwide used school choice.

Despite increases in absolute usage, findings about the percentage of eligible students using the NCLB options were less positive: Only 17 percent of eligible students used SES in 2003-04, and only 1 percent of eligible students took advantage of public school choice in 2003-04 and 2004-05.

The report offers several explanations for why choice and SES utilization were not greater. One is that in many districts choice options simply aren’t available. The report notes 77 percent of districts have only one high school, 67 percent have only one middle school, and 53 percent have only one elementary school.

Undermining the Law

Another reason for low take-up is that parents don’t feel exercising their options would be worth the effort it would require.

For instance, 75 percent of eligible parents who didn’t use choice said it was because their child’s assigned school “is located in a place that’s easy to get to.” Forty-six percent of eligible parents who didn’t use tutoring said it was because the times when tutoring was available were “not good for my family.”

Most damning, however, is that districts themselves might be undermining NCLB’s options. Researchers found in the 2004-05 school year only 29 percent of districts that were required to offer school choice notified eligible parents of their options before the first day of school. In addition, district letters notifying parents of their options were often “confusing, misleading, or biased in favor of district-provided services.”

“Are they trying to keep people in their districts, whether they like it or not,” Hornung said.

Evading Consequences

With that as a distinct possibility, in late April the U.S. Department of Education proposed several new regulations to address the problem. These would include requiring districts to notify choice-eligible families of their options at least 14 days before the beginning of the school year and providing clear information about the availability and benefits of supplemental services.

Dan Lips, an education analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, while encouraged by the proposed regulations, did not think they’d end district evasion.

“If enacted, the Department of Education’s new regulations would be an improvement over existing law,” Lips said. “Unfortunately, I fear many public school systems will still find a way to get around these provisions and deny parents these options—as many have successfully done since 2002.”

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

INTERNET INFO

Tennessee

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Rep. Richard Montgomery (R-Sevierville), would remove a sunset on new charter school authorization currently set to take effect July 1. The legislation, still pending at press time, would also expand student eligibility for charter enrollment.

Limited Pool of Students
By law, only students from failing public schools in Tennessee’s four largest cities—Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville—may enroll in charter schools. The state currently has 12 charter schools, all located in Memphis or Nashville.

HB 3935 would allow any student in the state’s four largest cities who meets the federal poverty definition to attend a charter, regardless of their current school’s status.

The defeat of HB 3935 not only would prevent new charter schools from forming but also could further reduce the pool of eligible students, if failing schools improve or shut down.

“If this bill doesn’t pass, and charter schools are not reauthorized, then charter schools in Tennessee will die,” said Drew Johnson, president of the Tennessee Center for Policy Research.

Success in Nashville
The director of one of Tennessee’s most successful charter schools agrees.

“As schools get off the failing list, that means fewer and fewer kids and parents get to make choices about where they go to school,” said Randy Dowell, school leader for KIPP Academy Nashville.

Opened in 2005, KIPP Academy Nashville serves an overwhelmingly poor and African-American student population in grades five through seven. Despite this disadvantaged student body, KIPP Academy had math and reading proficiency testing rates at or above state averages in its first year.

“We have really high and very clear expectations for what we want students to accomplish, both for learning and for their character development,” Dowell said.

Charters Popular
Allowing charter school authorizations to sunset would come at a time when evidence of Tennesseans’ support for the public education option is remarkably high.

According to a survey of 1,200 likely voters released in March by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 46 percent of Tennesseans favored allowing charter schools. Support was even higher, 55 percent, among respondents aged 36 to 55.

“That’s the age group that tends to be the most emotionally and financially invested in schooling,” said Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s director of partner services.

With no exposure to charter schools in many parts of Tennessee, only 34 percent expressed familiarity with the public education option. But of that group, 63 percent had a favorable view of charters.

“It suggests that the more people know about school choice options, the more favorable they are,” DiPerna said.

Informing Lawmakers
Given the choice between four different types of education—traditional public, charter, private, and homeschool—nearly twice as many people chose charters (28 percent) as other public schools (15 percent). The response rate for charters was higher in Tennessee than in Idaho, Illinois, and Nevada, the other three states in which Friedman has sponsored surveys.

“HB 3935 would allow any student in [Tennessee’s] four largest cities who meets the federal poverty definition to attend a charter, regardless of their current school’s status.”

Widespread Dissatisfaction
Johnson said the primary obstacle to offering parents more choice is the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), which he said is responsible for placing the sunset provision in the 2002 charter school legislation.

“The teachers union in Tennessee wants to prevent any sort of option for students because they essentially don’t want the competition that would show how badly they are doing,” Johnson said.

The TEA did not respond to a request for comment.

More than half of Tennesseans in the Friedman survey described their state’s public school system as either fair or poor.

“Parents are displeased with the current education being offered to their kids in Tennessee’s public schools,” Johnson said.

DiPerna hopes the survey results will awaken state policymakers to the growing demand for real educational options.

“I think legislators, through no fault of their own, can have a misperception of what the public thinks about school choice,” DiPerna said. “But this kind of polling can show them their constituents are open to charter schools, vouchers, and tax-credit scholarships.”

The Friedman Foundation plans to release survey results from Oklahoma in June, and from Maryland later this year.

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

INTERNET INFO
Tennessee HB 3935: http://www.legislature.state.tn.us


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Florida

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amendments for the November ballot. Each needs 60 percent approval from voters to take effect. The TBRC meets every 20 years with the power to put constitutional amendments directly on the ballot.

The TBRC also removed another impediment to vouchers by asking voters in November to remove the constitutional ban on using taxpayer money for religious or faith-based programs.

Combining Issues
The panel’s April 25 meeting ended in a haze of mystery. Bush allies on the TBRC succeeded in passing a plan that would end the constitutional ban on using taxpayer money for K-12 education anywhere other than the public school system. To help sweeten the measure for voters, the proposal was abruptly joined with an unrelated plan that requires school districts to spend at least 65 percent of their revenue on “classroom instruction rather than on administration.”

TBRC member Les Miller, a former Democratic lawmaker from Tampa, said he was “shocked” by the unexpected merger of ideas. He said the mixing of two plans may violate the constitutional requirement that ballot language be clear.

“The public is not going to know what it’s all about,” said Miller. “The constitutional lawyers are going to get rich between now and November.”

“We will be the first state, I believe, to create a mandate to publicly finance private education,” said House Democratic leader Dan Gelber (D-Miami Beach), a nonvoting member of the TBRC.

Dangerous Ruling
The 2006 court decision ended Bush’s Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provided vouchers for about 700 students in low-performing public schools to attend private schools. The court said the vouchers violated the state’s constitutional requirement for a “uniform” system of education by using taxpayer money at private schools that did not have to meet the same standards as public schools.

Patricia Levesque, a TBRC member and executive director of Bush’s think tank, the Foundation for Florida’s Future, said the TBRC’s plan was needed since the 2006 court ruling jeopardized other programs such as charter schools, virtual schools, and voucher programs for special-needs students.

Levesque acknowledged the political benefits of topping the voucher plan with the so-called “65 percent” plan.

“I would hope that 65 percent buoys the school choice” portion, Levesque said. “I hope school choice kind of buoy the 65 percent” plan. “There are probably people that feel one way or the other on the different items, and I hope they work together well.”

“Thanks to the good work of the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, Florida voters, not activist jurists, will ultimately decide the best way to provide a quality education for all of our students.”

JEB BUSH
FORMER GOVERNOR - FLORIDA

Letting Voters Decide
In a rare public statement, Bush applauded the plan.

“Unfortunately, the Florida Supreme Court struck down the successful program partly under the tortured reasoning that a better education from a private school was unconstitutional because it was different than the education provided by a public school,” Bush said. “Thanks to the good work of the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, Florida voters, not activist jurists, will ultimately decide the best way to provide a quality education for all of our students.”

The TBRC had defeated the voucher plan earlier in April. But it mysteriously came back to life during the final week of the session and was approved, leading some to wonder if votes were being traded among panel members for support on other plans.

“People didn’t vote for this on the basis of merit, they voted on the basis of deal-making,” said Ron Meyer, a teachers’ union attorney who won the 2006 Supreme Court case. “That’s not a good way to amend the constitution.”

Gelber, the House Democratic leader, said the TBRC had overreached its constitutional duty to focus on taxes and spending.

“I think if you asked the average Floridian whether the people they were hoping would provide relief and reform to Florida’s dysfunctional and inequitable tax system spent a minute of their day on vouchers, they would be shocked,” said Gelber. “I think this is as wrong-headed a proposal as the commission could come up with.”

Swapping Taxes
The clear centerpiece of the TBRC’s work was a “tax swap” that, if approved by voters, would cut property taxes by about 25 percent in exchange for an unknown increase and expansion of the state’s sales tax.

But that plan, like most of the others approved by the TBRC, did not need constitutional changes and could have been passed into law by the legislature.

The TBRC “became the commission where if people couldn’t get things done legislatively, they brought it to this commission,” Miller said.

Along with the tax swap and two voucher-related plans, the TBRC approved proposals to create tax breaks for land set aside for conservation and some coastal businesses and homeowners who make their homes more hurricane-resistant. The TBRC also approved a proposed amendment allowing county referenda on increasing local sales taxes for community colleges.

Those are difficult issues lawmakers “can’t tackle, which is precisely why we exist,” said Bruce Kyle, a circuit judge in Fort Myers. “Give voters the opportunity to decide whether or not they want the legislature to spend their money in this manner.”

Joe Follick (jfollick@earthlink.net) is the Capitol Bureau reporter for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, in which a previous version of this story appeared April 26. Copyright 2008, Sarasota Herald-Tribune. Reprinted by express permission of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.

Experts Weigh in on Vouchers, Teacher Unions, Failing Schools

“Ballot initiatives are notoriously tough to pass because it’s harder to convince people to enact something new than keep the status quo. As a result, even if it survives constitutional scrutiny over its clarity, the proposal shackling school choice to a 65 percent spending requirement is still probably doomed. It’s hard enough to pass a ballot with one new proposal. Giving voters two new things to deal with is close to suicide.

“If Florida’s school choice proposal goes down, at least 65 percent of the fault could very well lie not with choice but with its partner on the ballot.”

— Richard Moss, Utah State Board of Education

“Teachers unions have done more to damage American public schools than any other group or individual. Choice in education will empower parents with greater control of the education that is best for their child.”

— Vicki E. Murray, senior policy fellow in education studies, Pacific Research Institute

“Florida schoolchildren must not be left to founder in schools that can’t or won’t improve—no matter how many more pennies we promise to give them tomorrow. Let every education dollar follow students to better schools today.”

— Neal McCluskey, associate director, Center for Educational Freedom, Cato Institute
Florida Voters May Free Vouchers from Constitutional Stranglehold

By Christin Coyne

Florida voters will have the chance to amend their state constitution this November to increase the opportunity for school voucher programs, thanks to a 17-7 vote by the state’s Taxation and Budget Reform Commission this spring.

The commission—which meets only once every 20 years and has the power to place initiatives directly on state ballots—decided to give voters the chance to nullify a 120-year-old provision in the state’s constitution banning any state aid to religious institutions.

The measure must receive 60 percent of the popular vote in November to pass.

“[Florida] voters [will have] the chance to nullify a 120-year-old provision in the state’s constitution banning any state aid to religious institutions.”

Replacing Blaine

A new sentence stating “individuals or entities may not be barred from participating in public programs because of their religion” would essentially replace the Blaine amendment wording, which states “no revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.”

Patricia Levesque, executive director of the Foundation for Florida’s Future, said that argument his concerns about changing the constitution.

“Yes, we allow federal dollars to follow students to attend Texas Christian, Boston College, Liberty, Southern Methodist, and any other religious college,” Gaitsen explained. “Voucher programs simply allow the same option for parents of K-12 school-age children, he noted.

Avoiding Issues

In 2004 a Florida appellate court struck down Bush’s statewide school voucher program for students in failing public schools, the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, as unconstitutional, citing the Blaine amendment. Voters can decide that issue in November now that the reform measure is on the ballot.

Supporters of the proposed constitutional change cite the threat of lawsuits against faith-based organizations, especially since the Florida Supreme Court sidestepped the “no-aid” issue when it ruled on the voucher program in January 2006. Though the Florida Supreme Court affirmed the appellate court’s ruling, it “neither approve[d] nor disapprove[d] the First District’s determination that the [program] violates the ‘no aid’ provision,” according to court documents.

Debating Principles

Many opponents of the proposed amendment see it as an unnecessary, potentially harmful change to a long-standing separate yet working relationship between the church and the state in Florida.

In January, Reginald Mitchell, Florida legal counsel for People for the American Way, detailed in a letter to the commission his concerns about changing the constitution.

“[The no-aid provision] recognizes that it is no business of the government to be constructing houses of worship or funding religious education,” Mitchell wrote. “It requires government neutrality toward religion and prevents our state government from using money to favor and promote religion generally and particular faiths specifically.”

Tom Gaitsen, Florida field coordinator for FreedomWorks, said that argument is bogus.

“We allow federal dollars to follow students to attend Texas Christian, Boston College, Liberty, Southern Methodist, and any other religious college,” Gaitsen explained. “Voucher programs simply allow the same option for parents of K-12 school-age children, he noted.

Unlikely to Harm

Though Florida is only one of 37 states with Blaine amendments in their constitutions—added at a time when anti-Catholic bigotry was sweeping the nation—its wording is among the strictest, and it is one of the only ones interpreted as banning school voucher programs.

Larry Keough, associate director of education for the Florida Catholic Conference, spoke last fall before the commission in favor of a tightly worded amendment because of his stance on school choice.

“I believe school choice in principle is a fundamental issue,” Keough told the commission. “Some parents do not have the financial ability to choose the schools they believe are best for their children.”

Afterward, several commissioners asked questions reflecting a strong underlying worry of many voters of the proposed change: Do voucher programs take money away from public schools?

Keough said the current voucher program has not done so, and he does not expect the public education system to be undermined unless a “critical mass of hundreds of thousands” of children receive scholarships.

Christin Coyne (cjcoyne@students.phe.edu) writes from Virginia.

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.
New School Choice Yearbook Offers Up-to-Minute Facts, Figures

By Andrew Campanella

More than 150,000 children are participating in 16 school choice programs in nine states and the District of Columbia, according to the School Choice Yearbook 2007, released in April by the Alliance for School Choice, the nation’s largest organization promoting school vouchers and scholarship tax credit programs.

The 60-page book—the alliance’s annual flagship publication—provides information on public opinion polling, academic achievement research, and the impact of private school choice on public school performance. The book also provides data updates on every school choice program in the country.

“The evidence shows that private school choice is on the rise throughout the country—with every program in existence continuing to demonstrate solid year-to-year student enrollment growth,” said the book’s author and primary researcher, Geoffrey Goodman.

“The evidence shows that private school choice is on the rise throughout the country—with every program in existence continuing to demonstrate solid year-to-year student enrollment growth.”

GEOFFREY GOODMAN, AUTHOR

SCHOOL CHOICE YEARBOOK 2007

Growing Popularity

In fact, school choice program participation has grown by 86 percent in the past five years.

The book estimates Pennsylvania’s school choice program is the largest in terms of the number of participating students (38,046), while Florida allocates the most public money to school choice (in excess of $200 million across two programs). Data for the Yearbook are derived from state government statistics where available.

The book also includes feature sections on programs for students with special needs. Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Utah offer programs specifically designed for students with disabilities. More than 21,000 children participate in those programs, with total government spending on them estimated at $166 million.

The Yearbook highlights the growing support for school choice among Democratic lawmakers. Four Democratic governors signed school choice legislation in 2007 and 2008, and three-quarters of school choice victories in the past two years were realized because of support from Democratic lawmakers, a sign that school choice is increasingly viewed as a bipartisan issue.

Meaningful Resource

The alliance intends its Yearbook to serve as a key reference guide for lawmakers, the media, and parents, and to provide helpful data for supporters who wish to advocate voucher and tax credit programs in their states.

Accordingly, the Yearbook includes data demonstrating the need for school choice, such as stagnant high school graduation rates, the declining standing of American children on international assessments, and low proficiency averages on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

“The status quo of our nation’s public education system is not working for far too many children, particularly those who are minority and low-income,” said alliance President Charles R. Hokanson. “These children should not have to wait for public schools to slowly improve. They need high-quality options now.”

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

INTERNET INFO


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The survey also revealed only 4 percent of parents between the ages of 36 and 55 would use public schools over private or charter schools.

School choice advocates say these findings, released in late March, reveal much about Idaho’s public schools.

“What is significant is that this age group is the primary consumer of public education,” said Bryan Fischer, executive director of Idaho Values Alliance, a public policy research group based in Boise, of the 4 percent group. “These are the people that have their children in the education pipeline. This says the more parents use the Idaho public school system, the less satisfied they are with it, and the more they want to be provided with genuine choice in education.”

Growing Demand
Idaho’s results echo those the Friedman Foundation found in similar polls conducted in Illinois, Nevada, and Tennessee earlier this year. The Indiana-based organization is using the surveys to gauge American attitudes toward school choice.

“It’s about demand, and this is really showing that there is demand for different types of schools when all things are equal in terms of access,” explained Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s director of partner services and author of the study. “There is significant demand for charter and private schools. Homeschooling was also in pretty high demand in Idaho. The current system, not just in Idaho but all over the United States, inhibits free choice.

“We believe that the more people know about vouchers, tax scholarships, charter schools, and virtual schooling, the more demand will grow,” DiPerna continued. “It’s really about information, which this survey will also provide. We asked people what they knew about vouchers and charter schools, and not a whole lot of people knew about their options.”

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Chicago.
South Carolina Sees Controversy over Choice, First Amendment

By Jim Waters

A controversy over whether a school district has the right to deny taxpayers access to communication channels bought with tax dollars, on the basis of their political views, has arisen in South Carolina.

South Carolina’s Lexington 1 school district has been disseminating anti-school choice messages on its communication network without offering school choice advocates equal time. At least one citizen in the school district disagrees with this policy and is pressing the matter in court.

“This is all about money and power,” said plaintiff Randy Page, who is president of South Carolinians for Responsible Government. “Propping up a system just for the sake of propping up a system is wrong.”

Access Denied

Though Lexington 1 offered its communication network free of charge to Choose Children First, a group that lobbied against a school choice bill proposed by Gov. Mark Sanford (R) in 2005 that would have offered parents vouchers and tax credits to send their children to private schools, it denied Page’s request for equal time to discuss the benefits of the proposal. The bill eventually fell seven votes short of passage in the legislature.

The school district’s attorney, David Duff, says public bodies are not required to turn public communication networks into forums to satisfy every citizen who happens to disagree with the government’s political stance.

“If the government—in this case, the school district—wants to communicate its perspective on an issue that’s related to its mission or agenda, it should be able to do so without every citizen being able to go to their Web site and create a debate on the issue,” Duff said.

After a U.S. District Court judge in Columbia sided with the school district in July 2007, Page appealed. The Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Virginia heard arguments on March 20. A decision is expected before the end of October.

“South Carolina’s Lexington 1 school district has been disseminating anti-school choice messages on its communication network without offering school choice advocates equal time.”

Dissenting Views

Both sides have had help from outside the state. Page, who’s fighting the legal battle as an individual taxpayer, is being supported by school choice activists, including the Parents in Charge Foundation and its chairman, New York financier Howard Rich.

According to a March 11 news release issued by the foundation, if the lower court’s ruling stands “the education establishment will continue to use its resources as a means to lobby legislatures and distribute political propaganda against school choice initiatives and any other measures that they perceive as threats to their monopoly power.”

The district is funding the legal effort—led by a high-powered Washington, DC law firm—with taxpayer dollars, Hall said. Board members blame the expensive legal battle on Page.

When asked why it’s using school resources for a legal battle that’s been going on for three years, Lexington 1 board chairman Edwin Harmon said, “It’s a disappointment that it got to this point,” and referred all other questions to Duff.

Recruiting Parents

Lexington 1 campaigned actively against the bill, which would have offered tax credits and vouchers to give parents choices about where to send their children to school. A sample letter to the editor for parents on the district’s Web site claimed state leaders “have a moral responsibility to strengthen public schools—not abandon them with tax credits and vouchers that will divert money used to support my child’s school.”

Page says maintaining the status quo will simply allow the bureaucracy to continue to defend a failing system.

“Sadly, the Palmetto State has the worst graduation rate, lowest test scores, and highest percentage of failing public schools in the entire nation,” Page said. “Over the past four years alone, South Carolina politicians have dumped a staggering $1 billion into the state’s non-competitive K-12 abyss.”

Page estimates more than 200,000 South Carolina children are “currently trapped in failing or below-average schools.”

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

Missouri Schools Get New Option for Finding Talented Teachers

By Andrew Campanella

Missouri schools have a new freedom in filling teaching posts under a law signed April 30 by Gov. Matt Blunt (R)—the first bill he signed during the spring legislative session.

The law brings to eight the number of states in which the nonprofit American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) is running its innovative four-year-old Passport to Teaching program, which recruits and certifies talented professionals as K-12 teachers. To date, 1,000 people in Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah have completed ABCTE certification, and another 2,250 are currently enrolled.

The Missouri legislation was sponsored by state Sen. Luanne Ridgeway (R-Smithville) and state Rep. Scott Mushaney (R-Frontenac) and had been long championed by state Sen. Jane Cunningham (R-Chesterfield). It overcame heavy opposition by the state affiliate of the National Education Association on its way to passage.

“We need to provide the opportunity for highly motivated people with education and experience in these areas to have the training to bring their expertise to the classroom,” Blunt said in an April 30 press statement. “Missouri’s current system of alternative certification of professionals who want to become teachers is too restrictive.”

CONTINUED on right
Search Is on for Nation’s Worst Teachers

By Jillian Melchior

Urinating in a bottle and leaving it in a public school administrator’s office sounds like something a particularly ill-behaved middle-school boy might do.

Unfortunately, it’s just one of the stunts pulled by an unidentified, tenured schoolteacher that earned him a nomination for the Worst Teacher in America contest, sponsored by the Center for Union Facts (CUF). CUF is a nonprofit organization created to “show Americans the truth about today’s teachers unions,” its Web site says.

CUF launched the campaign in March to find the 10 worst teachers nationwide, taking out full-page ads in The New York Times and USA Today, airing commercials on CNN and Fox News, and buying an 80-foot, seven-story billboard in New York City’s Times Square.

“The contest is an effort to jump-start a conversation about how difficult it is to fire incompetent teachers,” explained CUF Communications Director Sarah Longwell. “We’re not trying to hurt anybody’s feelings, and this is not a witch hunt.”

The contest’s mastermind, CUF Executive Director Rick Berman, created it to highlight two points: Tenure systems make it impossible to fire incompetent teachers, and teacher public deserve to know which businesses are bankrolling Berman’s despicable tactics, but he is too much of a coward to reveal the source of his funding.”

AFT spokesmen refused to comment beyond that, and other teacher unions did not return phone calls requesting comment.

Reward for Quitting

Meanwhile, CUF regularly updates its Web site with lists of nominees for the Worst Teacher award.

The top 10 will receive $10,000 apiece if they quit their jobs and seek employment in a different field, Longwell said. The winners must give CUF permission to use their names; all other nominees will remain anonymous. Nominations must be verifiable—anything from court records to camera phone recordings.

Hundreds of Nominees

The competition will be stiff. Since the contest was launched, hundreds of teachers have been nominated for incidents ranging from the serious (waving guns at store clerks and having prison records) to the silly (like bottling one’s own urine).

Overall, the nominations have had a sobering effect, Longwell said.

“If Harry S Truman were alive today, he wouldn’t be allowed to teach history to 12th-graders,” Muschaneys ruled.

Rapid Growth

ABCSTE has achieved significant gains since the group’s president, David W. Saba, and chairman, Anthony Colon, took the helm of the organization in 2006. Using innovative marketing strategies to recruit teachers, the group has proven itself to state lawmakers and school districts.

In 2007 ABCSTE announced its Teach and Inspire program, designed to help stem the dwindling number of minorities entering the teaching field, and received a $6 million teacher incentive grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

“It is great to see that you can bring common-sense solutions to the states and, after a few years, people take action,” Saba said. “It takes some great legislators who are mainly concerned with great schools to get it done.”

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

By Jillian Melchior

ew measures introduced by Louisiana policymakers make the forecast for more school choice positive, thanks to a $10 million initiative included in Gov. Bobby Jindal’s (R) 2008-2009 budget.

The bill to carry out Jindal’s initiative, HB 1347, introduced April 22 by state Rep. Austin Badon (D-New Orleans), would distribute scholarships through the Louisiana Department of Education and Board of Education to New Orleans students attending nonpublic schools.

“We must also provide educational scholarships to parents in Orleans Parish who often have no choice for their children other than the local failing school,” Jindal said in his March 2008 Regular Session Opening Speech to the state legislature. “These scholarships follow a very simple and pure American principle—that every child has an equal right to good opportunities and a good education.”

Helping Families

If the bill passes, the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence program will give parents 90 percent of the money a public school would have spent on their child, or the full cost of the student’s education in the nonpublic school, whichever is less.

The program would use the $10 million already allocated for school choice in the governor’s budget, not taking away any money from the public school district, Badon explained, and it would be available to New Orleans students in kindergarten through third grade.

The bill’s advocates say the state could end up saving money if the bill passes before the legislative session ends in June.

“It’s the right thing to do because it gives parents the choice of how to educate their kids,” Badon said. “Each day, each month that goes by that we don’t do something, we’re all at fault.”

Saving Money

Badon said the scholarships might help the state avoid having to implement other costly programs in the future.

“We give vouchers for everything else,” Badon said. “Why can’t we give a voucher for this? I call it a scholarship. Maybe if we gave out educational scholarships, we wouldn’t have to give scholarships for other things.”

Badon said a good education could get Louisiana residents “off the road” of depending on state money.

Changing Attitudes

The bills that did not pass, however, opened the door for the ones currently on the table, observers say. Since last summer, Louisiana residents have elected a new governor and several new state legislators, many of whom support school choice.

“This governor is seen as the clean-up guy,” Mills said. “There is no doubt that new leadership has established itself as formidable and for change. He believes in empowering parents. When the system fails, it interferes with the parents’ prerogative. People who before have said, ‘I’d never vote for a voucher bill,’ are willing to consider it now because this governor’s made so much sense.”

Scalise said he and other legislators who care about school choice will do everything they can, including lobbying other legislators, to get the scholarship bill passed. That, he said, could lead to greater acceptance of future school choice initiatives.

“Many students [would] finally get access to schools that will give them a solid education where they were being let down by a failed public education,” Scalise said.

Growing Pains

Over the past three years, several efforts to expand school choice have arisen in the state, including Jindal’s budget initiative and HB 1347. The state established a competitive system of charter schools in New Orleans—and last year two school voucher bills were debated in the legislature, though neither passed, state Rep. Steve Scalise (R-Jefferson) noted.

“New Orleans is a model for the country right now in how to redesign a completely failed school system,” Scalise said. “A lot of states could learn from the reforms we’ve made since Hurricane Katrina.”

The changes have not come easily. In June 2007, the House Education Committee killed a voucher bill, and a month later Jindal’s predecessor, Gov. Kathleen Blanco (D), vetoed a bill that would have given private school parents a $5,000 tax deduction.
Arizona Considers Takeover of Failing Local School Districts

By Ben DeGrow

Arizona state officials’ proposed takeover of a notoriously poor-performing Phoenix school district has stirred a far-reaching debate about local school governance.

House Bill 2711 would allow a state-appointed turnaround superintendent to take charge of school districts with a majority of schools rated “underperforming” and at least one school rated “failing” under state accountability measures. At press time, the legislation was on its way to Gov. Janet Napolitano (D) for her signature.

Fixing a Train Wreck

Under the bill’s terms, five school districts would be eligible for sanctions. But proponents say it’s specifically targeted to improve Phoenix’s Roosevelt Elementary School District, with a 95 percent racial minority student population.

“The district has been seen as [one that’s failed] kids for at least 30 years, and every attempt at improvement has failed because of the toxic political atmosphere,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne.

Matt Ladner, Ph.D., vice president of research at the Goldwater Institute for Public Policy, agrees.

“Roosevelt is a train wreck of epic proportions,” said Ladner. “Things just can’t get any worse in the district.”

Aiming Higher


“I feel confident change is happening,” Palmer said. “People just have a disagreement as to how fast.”

Roosevelt’s AIMS scores are still well below the state average. ASBA analyst Michael Martin publicly argued in a newspaper column that Roosevelt students’ underachievement is because of widespread lead poisoning, but he introduced no evidence to support the claim.

“It’s just a really pathetic example of the myth of helplessness,” said Ladner, referring to a belief espoused by many government education officials and apologists that schools simply are unable to provide effective academic assistance to underprivileged students.

Horne also pointed to other Arizona districts with similarly challenging demographics that have produced better test results.

Strengthening Leadership

Under HB 2711, the state superintendent would recommend three qualified candidates to take over the helm of a failing district, subject to approval by the 11-member State Board of Education. Except for the state superintendent, all board members are appointed by the governor.

Palmer said while the proposed process is straightforward, proponents have not demonstrated a strategy for making the takeover successful.

“The superintendent has been saying we need to try something, and it needs to be drastically different than [anything] we’ve ever done, but as far as a clear plan that shows how it’s going to be done, I haven’t seen it yet,” Palmer said.

Horne said success would depend on a state-appointed leader visiting every teacher in every school and firing principals who fail to provide high standards of instructional leadership.

“If the turnaround superintendent is truly an outstanding educational leader, it would only be a couple years before you would see the district turning things around,” Horne said.

Shifting Control

Even so, Palmer says her association fundamentally opposes HB 2711 because it would violate the local community’s control over school district affairs.

“If people feel the board is not doing what they want, there’s a process to take care of that,” Palmer said. “There shouldn’t be a hostile takeover by one individual.”

Horne said that principle, at times, should be set aside.

“Local control is appropriate if the kids are learning; then the state should not interfere,” Horne said. “But it’s the state’s responsibility to help the students learn.”

Bringing Change

Horne said previous attempts have failed to persuade the Roosevelt school board to give a superintendent full power and accountability to implement an effective instructional program.

“My view is, if we come in from the inside and put an outstanding instructional leader in charge, that person will demonstrate how much higher the students’ scores can be,” Horne said. “The community will see the difference that can be made, and the political culture can change.”

But Palmer hopes change can be accomplished through current accountability mechanisms that would enable the district to receive help from the state education department in crafting a school improvement plan.

“If they need additional help to move it faster, we’d absolutely be supportive of moving within the confines of the current law,” said Palmer.

Horne counters by noting Roosevelt already receives more state resources than any other Arizona district. He accused legislative opponents of standing in the way of badly needed reform.

“The failure of schools to deliver education to students who come from poor homes is the biggest moral issue of our time,” Horne said. “The determination of the school boards association to defend the status quo at all costs is fundamentally an immoral position.”

Exploring Competition

Ladner said school choice would accomplish more for students in the failing district.

“The competitive pressure on Roosevelt is minimal,” Ladner explained. “What we have done to date is inadequate to put any bottom-up pressure on the Roosevelt School District.”

Local public charter schools, Ladner said, aren’t enough because they are plagued with long waiting lists. He believes a more promising approach would be to meet parents’ demands for more successful alternatives.

“I think the record on state takeovers is mixed at best,” Ladner said.

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

In Other Words

“If a state-funded program that allows bureaucrats to place children in private schools is constitutional, so, too, is a state-funded program in which parents are the choosers. Nothing in the Arizona Constitution suggests otherwise.”

— Dick Carpenter II, director of strategic research for the Institute for Justice, noting some children in special-education classrooms in Arizona face the loss of their state-funded scholarships while their peers—who are participating in a different government scholarship program—do not. The only difference between the programs is whether the school is chosen by the state or the parents. Tucson Citizen, April 23, 2008

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Arizona HB 2711: http://www.azleg.gov

Letters from Calif. Sixth-Graders Reveal Teacher’s Global Warming Indoctrination

By Maureen Martin

If you doubt some teachers across the country are trying to brainwash schoolchildren with global warming alarmism, take a look inside Michael Steria’s sixth-grade classroom at David A. Brown Middle School in Wildomar, California.

In March, 25 sixth-graders teamed up to write eight letters to The Heartland Institute describing what they had been taught about global warming by reading 10 articles about it. None of the articles, however, was about the science of global warming. Many described terrifying consequences that supposedly will result, convincing the students all living things—including all human beings—will be dead in 10 years.

Steria’s Teachings
Global warming “means that if we don’t fix the climate, everything will be destroyed and we won’t be able to survive,” two students wrote. Others found their global warming lessons similarly frightening. All excerpts below are the students wrote them, uncorrected.

• “I think your fools for denying G.W. you know it could kill us all & you’re just adding to it. I want you to help stop G.W. not increase it.”

• “We are going to tell you about global warming. I don’t care if you don’t want to read, but I’m making you read it you horrible people.”

• “We feel that it is wrong what you are doing. We know that you know that global warming is NOT we repeat NOT a myth. And we think it is selfish that you would take money over yours and your peers lives.”

• “We feel upset because you are making Global Warming worse instead of helping it. We know that almost half of the country knows that G.W. is a crisis. We know that you could help the environment with the $800,000 you have.”

• “We feel that they are destroying our planet by saying G.W. is not a crisis. You think GW is not a crisis but it is; you know deep down that it’s a real thing that’s happening. Everyone has a part in helping GW, and you’re making worse.”

• “I do not think that what you are doing is right because you are telling people that global warming is not a crisis. If this is not a crisis, how come floods have occurred in Asia, Mexico, and India. Plus, how can you explain why the glaciers are melting, they can’t melt themselves, because they are in the coldest region in the world.”

• “Air pollution shrinks fetus size, 31 states target global warming, World must fix Climate in 10 years-UNDP, National disasters have quadrupled in two decades, and Global Warming Denier Group funded by Big Oil Hosting Climate Change Denial conference.”

Off-Topic Articles
The students say they read 10 articles about global warming; their letters describe and identify seven of them. (See “Assigned Readings Show Teacher’s Global Warming Alarmist Prejudice” on facing page.)

However, three of the articles have nothing to do with global warming or greenhouse gases. Two are dire predictions from non-scientists at a United Nations disaster relief agency and other nongovernmental organizations engaged in disaster aid. One article relates state efforts at monitoring greenhouse gases. The last article is an ad hominem attack on a small percentage of Heartland’s funding sources. However, “donations from energy companies have never amounted to more than 5 percent of Heartland’s budget in any year,” explained Heartland President Joseph Bast.

Heartland receives far more money from individuals than corporations, Bast said, and receives far more money from energy consumers than energy producers. Any bias due to funding source would clearly cut against energy producers, he noted.

Nevertheless, several students reprimanded Heartland for its activities. One said:

“I am very unhappy with your disgracing actions to the world, because you guys and woman are trying to hide the facts about Global warming so you can make more money. Well you guys aren’t going to fool anybody except yourself.”

The reason is because if you were to look at a picture of Glacier National Park 50 years ago, you would see that there is less ice now then there was fifty years ago.”

Unjustified Certainty
Particularly troubling about the students’ letters is the children’s utter certainty that they know everything there is to know about global warming, and there is nothing left to learn. That would seem to be in direct contradiction of the principles outlined in the official Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve, by the California State Board of Education (2004), which state in part, “Scientists are deeply knowledgeable about their fields of study but typically are willing to admit that there is a great deal they do not know.”

One student summed it up by writing:

“We’ve read article about global warming. And we know all the facts.”

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

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“There are certain attitudes about science and scientists that a teacher must foster in students. Scientists are deeply knowledgeable about their fields of study but typically are willing to admit that there is a great deal they do not know. In particular, they welcome new ideas that are supported by evidence. In doing their research good scientists do not attempt to prove that their own hypotheses are correct but that they are incorrect. Though somewhat counterintuitive, this path is the surest one to finding the truth.”

Science Framework for California Public Schools Kindergarten through Grade Twelve California State Board of Education, 2004
Assigned Class Readings Expose Teacher’s Global Warming Prejudice

By Maureen Martin

A detailed look at several of the articles apparently consulted by students in the sixth grade classroom of teacher Michael Steria at David A. Brown Middle School in Wildomar, California suggests the extent of the indoctrination inflicted on the children.

Diesel Fumes Blamed

The students were taught diesel fumes from automobiles contribute to global warming and dangerously impair lung function in asthmatics. One student wrote, “Then here are the effects of G.W. Diesel traffic makes asthma worse....” (Note that all transcriptions are presented as the students wrote and sent them, without corrections.) Another wrote, “Diesel traffic makes asthma worse. Kids with asthma might die from diesel chemicals.”

Another student wrote, “A total of 60 adults half with mild asthma and half with moderate asthma, walked for 2 hours along Oxford street, where only buses and taxis are allowed, and then on a separate occasion walked for 2 hours in traffic free Hyde park.”

This is taken almost verbatim from a December 6, 2007 article published by the BBC under the headline “Diesel traffic makes asthma worse,” which stated, “A total of 60 adults, half of them with mild asthma and half with moderate asthma, walked for two hours along Oxford Street, where only buses and taxis are allowed, and then on a separate occasion walked for two hours in traffic-free Hyde Park.”

The only change made by the student is the addition of misspellings and other errors.

The article cites a study finding impaired lung function in the 60 asthmatic adults. The study noted three chemical constituents in diesel fuel emissions—particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon—but did not try to link lung impairment to any one of them in particular, although the researcher evidently considered particulate matter a likely culprit.

Study Misinterpreted

The article and apparently the study itself do not mention global warming. Steria apparently included it because it mentions carbon, part of the molecule constituting the most famous of the greenhouse gases that climate change alarmists link to anthropogenic global warming. His students clearly got his message that diesel fuel is bad—even deadly.

Expert testimony last year in a Vermont global warming case, however, identified diesel as being favored over gas because its use reduces carbon dioxide emissions. So even if the study applied to global warming, students were misled regarding its significance.

Air Pollution and Fetuses

The students learned “air pollution” results in small fetuses and this is “very bad,” according to their letters. They evidently read an article about a study done at Queensland University in Brisbane, Australia, “The Effect of Ambient Air Pollution during Early Pregnancy on Fetal Ultrasonic Measurements during Mid-Pregnancy,” published in the Journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Many articles about this study appeared in January 2008.

The study evaluated the impact of four conventional air pollutants—particulate matter, ozone, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide—on four fetal characteristics. Nitrogen dioxide was the only greenhouse gas whose effects were measured. The study found exposure to this gas had no impact on fetus size under any of the four measures.

So what is the relevance of this study to global warming? There clearly is none. An unbiased science teacher should have had no trouble figuring that out.

Bird Extinction Myths

One student cited an article about the threatened extinction of 53 bird species due to global warming. The only article about this number of possible species extinctions came from ABC News on November 28, 2007, “53 Bird Species Face Extinction in S.C.”

The report concerned a watch list compiled by the Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy for South Carolina. They found suburban sprawl—not global warming—was responsible.

Follow the Data

Another story the students appear to have consulted is “Natural Disasters ‘Quadruple’ Over 20 Years: Oxfam,” from November 25, 2007, by Reuters. The story is about a study issued by Oxfam, an international humanitarian aid organization.

“A detailed look at several of the articles apparently consulted by students in the sixth grade classroom of teacher Michael Steria ... suggests the extent of the indoctrination inflicted on the children.”

The Oxfam report is titled Climate alarm disasters increase as climate change bites, and its main focus is to document the need for more donations for Oxfam’s aid to future disaster victims.

“The total number of natural disasters worldwide now averages 400-500 a year, up from an average of 125 in the early 1980s,” the Oxfam study states, citing a report written by the United Nations’ International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).

The U.N. report is titled Disaster Risk Reduction: Global Review 2007 and focuses on information from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. CRED works in partnership with groups such as the Red Cross, ISDR, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

So the sixth graders learned disasters are rising based on data from Reuters based on data from Oxfam based on U.N. data based on CRED data. Not surprisingly, the data were incorrect. CRED’s own graphs indicate natural disasters have about doubled since the early 1980s, or a little more, and none of the reports discussed global warming as a culprit.

Failure to Teach

Steria missed a number of teachable moments, as this last case makes clear.

First, it presented an opportunity to teach students to consider the source. A report in which the author asks for more money and which contains no discussion of global warming science should be viewed with some degree of skepticism.

Second, students could have learned always to go to the original source, because data may become distorted with each retelling.

Similarly, the California State Board of Education’s official Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve, recommends students be taught the scientific method and scientific ethics, which require that researchers be skeptical about their own hypotheses and try hard to disprove them.

Steria had a golden opportunity to implement these guidelines by teaching global warming science in a balanced way, thereby equipping his students to think analytically and critically. Those habits and skills would serve them well in future scientific careers and as citizens.

He blew it.

Maureen Martin (martin@heartland.org) is senior fellow for legal affairs at The Heartland Institute.
School Choice Options Are Key to Milwaukee’s Competitiveness

By Tim Sheehy

The Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC) represents thousands of employers in the greater Milwaukee area. These companies provide jobs for more than 300,000 of the region’s citizens, and they face the challenge of producing products and services that can compete in a global marketplace. Doing so requires bright, talented, well-educated people who are lifelong learners.

MMAC appreciates the role Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) plays in providing the educational foundation critical to the success of MMAC members, the community, and the future.

Low Achievement

However, the world is not standing still. While other regions across the globe are hard at work competing with us, we face some stark statistics:
- Today, more than 160,000 of the Milwaukee region’s adult residents do not have a high school diploma.
- Only 18 percent of the city’s residents have earned a college degree. By contrast, nearly half of the residents of San Francisco and Seattle have completed college; 40 percent in Minneapolis, 30 percent in Omaha, and 27 percent in Chicago.
- Only 24 percent of black males in Milwaukee graduate with their age group.
- Eighty-three percent of MPS graduates enrolling at the University of Wisconsin-Madison are taking remedial courses, and after six years only 38 percent have graduated or are still in school.

The message is clear: We need to do better. That’s why MMAC supported legislation in 1994 to give low-income parents a wider choice of educational options.

“Giving parents choices doesn’t guarantee everyone will make a good choice, but … our community is better equipped to reach our goal of educating more students with these school choices than we are without them.”

Needed Changes

Reaching at-risk, low-income kids is not easy. The schools that have a fighting chance with these kids are the ones with good leaders, committed teams of teachers, accountability, consequences—and more time with the kids. Under its current structure, funding, contracts, and rules, MPS cannot do this on its own, and cannot change fast enough to reach all the kids most in need.

Our support for giving parents the ability to choose where their children are educated is based on the belief that this system will give more students greater access to a broader array of high-performing schools, thus increasing the number of kids who graduate with the skills to be successful in the workplace.

Choice, Charter Successes

This belief has been strengthened as the choice and charter policies we have supported have led to the growth of some outstanding schools. For example:
- CEO Leadership Academy: 199 students, 100 percent African-American, 98 percent at or near poverty, 92 percent attendance, approximately 85 percent of graduates accepted to college.
- St. Marcus: 306 students, 85 percent minority, 85 percent at or near poverty, 95 percent of eighth-grade students proficient or advanced in reading, 100 percent in math, and 82 percent in language arts.
- Notre Dame Middle School: 120 students, all low-income, graduation rates substantially above average, and 75 percent attend college.

Giving parents choices doesn’t guarantee everyone will make a good choice, but the dramatic growth in the number of parents utilizing choice and charter schools suggests our community is better equipped to reach our goal of educating more students with these school choices than we are without them.

Support for school choice does not mean we oppose MPS, though choice opponents often try to put us in that box. MMAC has invested more than $15 million in scholarships for kids attending MPS’s poorest high schools. We also helped attract more than $18 million in funding from the Gates Foundation for high school reform in MPS, and we supported the New Leaders for New Schools program.

However, after spending and advocating for tens of million of dollars over the past decade to support and promote MPS schools, we believe it is time for us to make a comparably modest investment in highlighting the value of educational options to Milwaukee’s economic landscape.

Giving increased school choice to parents is not a passing fad for us. It is something we view as a matter of economic life or death for our region.

There is no organization or special-interest group in Milwaukee promoting the value of parent choice in education as an economic asset. That’s why, as long as there are legislators trying to destroy the program, we will need to support it; and we will support it as long as we see results.

Tim Sheehy (tsheehy@mmac.org) is president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.
Will Florida Voters Choose Freedom Over School Uniformity?

By Robert Holland

They were called Opportunity Scholarships when, in 1999, Florida created them to give parents the power to move their children out of failing public schools. Until recently, this first statewide voucher program to be initiated in modern times seemed to have become Opportunity Lost, on two counts.

First, the Florida Supreme Court in January 2006 ruled in Bush v. Holmes that using public funds to award Opportunity Scholarships for kids to attend private schools somehow violated the state constitution's requirement for maintenance of a “uniform” public school system.

Second, on April 4, that unfortunate judicial entanglement of cookie-cutter education seemed to receive insulation from reversal anytime soon. A powerful state commission with the power to put constitutional amendments directly on the statewide ballot fell one vote short of setting a November referendum on modifying the “uniformity” clause in a way that would allow publicly funded scholarships for private school attendance.

But on April 25, the state’s Taxation and Budget Reform Commission combined the voucher-friendly language with another measure that would oblige public school districts to spend at least 65 percent of their tax money on classroom instruction. The reworked amendment passed 19-6 and will go to voters this fall.

Alternatives Needed

What’s needed is not more public education in the big cities. The elite should be figuring out ways to give families, including financially strapped minorities, alternatives to the failed government-run system in the inner cities.

Many families have fled the cities to seek better education for their children in private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, or well-run suburban public schools. That has left many children from low-income homes stuck in dysfunctional city public schools with little or no hope of escape. Too many of them wind up dropping out and becoming statistics in reports ballyhooed in USA Today and other media.

Instead of propping up the current dysfunctional system, the coalition of America’s supposed best and brightest ought to be seeking ways to give city kids passports to schools where they can learn, graduate, and go on to college or employment.

They could do this by endowing private scholarships or advocating for publicly funded ones (vouchers) or those generated through tax credits for individual or corporate gifts to scholarship-awarding organizations.

Real Change Stymied

Dare we say it? Empowering inner-city families with educational choice would be a far better use of billions of Bill and Melinda Gates’s charity dollars than bankrolling more boring summits filled with self-important people offering their pet theories for reforming systems that are incorrigible.

Is there much hope that a coalition that includes Public Enemy No. 1 of parental choice—the National Education Association—is going to do that? Regrettably, no.

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“It’s a tremendous victory for school choice. You have to ask yourself what is best for the child. We’ve got to give these kids the best opportunity for a good, solid education because if they drop out, we are sentencing them to a lifetime of struggle.”

— Georgia Public Policy Foundation Vice President Kelly McCutchen, on Georgia House Bill 1133, which was awaiting Gov. Sonny Perdue’s (R) signature at press time. The bill, introduced by state Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn), creates a tax credit scholarship program for individuals and corporations that donate to scholarship-granting organizations that allow parents to choose the best school for their child. Individuals would receive $1,000 in credits on their income taxes ($2,500 for couples) and corporations could receive up to 75 percent of their state tax liability for donating. Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 25, 2008
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