McCain, Obama Spokespersons Debate Federal Education Policy

Presumptive presidential nominees Sens. John McCain (foreground) and Barack Obama disagree on vouchers and other elements of federal education policy.

By Neal McCluskey

As it has done in education generally over the past six years, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) dominated the first debate between representatives of the two presumptive presidential party nominees, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL).

On June 6, the Association of American Educational Publishers hosted a debate between Obama advisor Jeanne Century, a University of Chi-

New Orleans Experiments with Citywide Voucher Program

By Jim Waters

It took an act of God, converted legislators, and a U-Haul at the governor’s mansion to bring meaningful school choice to New Orleans.

As a result, the city’s new $10 million needs-based voucher program may bring back some families who fled the city when Hurricane Katrina arrived three years ago.

“It gives people who are considering turning an incentive to come back,” said Yashica Smith, a single mother of...
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DC School Voucher Program Is Renewed for Another Year

By Dan Lips

In July the U.S. Congress debated the future of the DC Opportunity Scholarship program, the federal initiative helping 1,900 low-income students attend private schools in the nation’s capital.

Despite efforts by opponents to cut the program’s funding, committees in the Senate and House of Representatives voted to appropriate money for the program for another year.

On July 10 the Senate Appropriations Committee approved a District of Columbia budget that would continue funding for the program. The vote followed similar action by the House Appropriations Committee weeks earlier. If Congress approves the DC budget later this session, the scholarship program will be funded through the 2009-10 school year.

"Congress understands how important the scholarship program is to the mayor, to the city, to the very low-income families it serves, and most importantly to the children fortunate enough to participate."

JOHN SCHILLING
DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL PROJECTS
ALLIANCE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

Seen as Victory

John Schilling, chief of staff and director of national projects for the Alliance for School Choice, said the votes marked a victory for parents and school choice supporters.

"At the end of the day, the most important thing is continued funding for the program," Schilling said. Continuing funding through 2009-10 "sends a strong message that Congress understands how important the scholarship program is to the mayor, to the city, to the very low-income families it serves, and most importantly to the children fortunate enough to participate."

Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of DC Parents for School Choice, a grassroots organization, also applauded the votes.

"This means that parents won’t have to worry about finding schools for their children through the 2009-10 school year, which eliminates a lot of stress," Walden Ford said.

Uncertain Future

But supporters of the program worry the recent debate about its future raises questions about whether it will be renewed in 2009 and beyond. The Senate Appropriations Committee bill included language requiring the program to be reauthorized before receiving funding for the 2010-11 school year.

Walden Ford believes the uncertain future is affecting parents.

"Even though parents are willing and anxious to fight to ensure that the program is continued, many are now thinking ahead and looking for other opportunities for their children," Walden Ford explained.

Schilling was optimistic Congress will have good reason to renew the program next year.

"It is imperative that the local coalition—which is fueled by the passion of parents—remain very active in reminding Congress how important this program is to low-income District families," Schilling said.

Strong Parental Support

Schilling noted the program has attracted local support from DC leaders.

"The existence of the scholarship program is what generated additional federal investments in DC public schools and DC public charter schools," Schilling explained. "Congress should continue to support the comprehensive reform efforts launched by Mayor [Adrian] Fenty and Chancellor [Michelle] Rhee, and that requires keeping all options on the table for the city’s parents."

Walden Ford agrees maintaining choice options for DC families should be the central issue.

"Parents know that if the scholarship program ended, their children could wind up in a school that does not serve them well. The parents I’ve talked to feel like this would be devastating for their children and families."

VIRGINIA WALDEN FORD
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
DC PARENTS FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

"It is heartbreaking since parents are so pleased with how their children are doing," Walden Ford said. "Parents know that if the scholarship program ended, their children could wind up in a school that does not serve them well. The parents I’ve talked to feel like this would be devastating for their children and families."

Dan Lips (lips@heritage.org) is a senior policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Legislature Strips Funding from Two Arizona Voucher Programs

By Elisha Maldonado

A last-minute vote in the closing hours of the Arizona Legislature’s spring meeting stripped funding from the state’s two-year-old voucher programs for disabled and foster students, leaving roughly 350 children and their parents scrambling in search of schooling alternatives before classes begin this fall.

“On May 15 a state appellate court had declared the two programs unconstitutional because some of the private schools accepting voucher students are Catholic.”

On May 15 a state appellate court had declared the two programs unconstitutional because some of the private schools accepting voucher students are Catholic.

Debate

Continued from page 1

cago education researcher, and McCain advisor and former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Graham Keegan.

The debate—dubbed “The AEP Great Debate”—was sponsored largely by ED in ‘08, a campaign funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli and Edythe Broad foundations and supported largely by ED in ‘08, a campaign funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli and Edythe Broad foundations.

Federal Role

The debaters opened by summarizing their candidates’ overall philosophies and plans for education, then briefly discussed reading curricula. Soon after, panelist Joel Packer, the National Education Association’s director of policy and practice, got to what would be the heart of the forum with a question about the appropriate federal role in education.

“School choice received relatively little attention during the debate.”

R&D Support

Century and Keegan agreed the federal government has a legitimate role in supporting research and development of best education practices. Noting Obama includes investing in research and development as part of his education plan, Century said the federal government should fund a wide range of research and that we “need to find new ways to disseminate knowledge.”

Century criticized NCLB’s emphasis on random-assignment experiments, in which test subjects are selected randomly to ensure the group represents the overall population. Though scientists would consider a sample group of 12 students too small to be statistically significant, under the law it would be considered better than research with a broad sample using several analytical approaches.

Keegan said McCain believes research is “a very appropriate role for the federal government” and discussed improving state data systems.

NCLB Funding

Regarding funding for NCLB—critics have called the law underfunded almost from the moment of its passage—Keegan said she doesn’t think “there’s ever enough money” and noted the spending increases under the law have been unprecedented. The bigger problem, she said, is that too little education money actually ends up in classrooms.

While Obama agrees with the goals of NCLB, Century said, it has been “insufficiently funded and poorly implemented.”

School choice received relatively little attention during the debate. With time running out after the panelists concluded their questions, Packer asked if the candidates supported federal vouchers. Keegan quickly responded, saying McCain supports vouchers, though it was unclear whether he does so at the federal or only the state level. Century said Obama opposes them.

The debate was likely just the first of several to come, and Keegan noted McCain had not yet released his full education plan. He did so in mid-July, with proposals focusing on teacher quality, empowering principals, and expanding online education.

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Study: Teacher Performance Pay Is a Good Option for Maine

By Georgia Geis

A school districts nationwide experiment with new systems for paying teachers, a new study by the Maine Heritage Policy Center (MHPC) suggests the Pine Tree State should abandon its traditional payment system in favor of performance-based compensation.

“Maine desperately needs good teachers,” said Stephen Bowen, MHPC’s director of education policy. “The question is, can you use the pay structure to get you those top-quality teachers the school system is simply not producing for us?”

MHPC released the first installment of a two-part report, Reforming Teachers Pay in Maine, in June. In that first installment, titled “How Alternative Teacher Compensation Systems Are Improving Student Outcomes,” Bowen explains alternative compensation and reviews research showing certain types of performance-based teacher pay have led to positive student outcomes elsewhere.

“Since [Denver’s ProComp teacher pay] model was implemented in 2005, the number of teachers applying for jobs in Denver’s most challenging schools has multiplied eightfold.”

Successful Program

The report describes Denver Public Schools’ ProComp model, which has many components, including professional evaluations done by trained teachers and administrators; pay for performance tied to students’ test scores, attendance, and yearly improvement; and incentives for teachers to take jobs in high-need subjects and tough schools.

A four-year pilot study of the Denver program found “significant learning gains” among students of participating teachers. Since the model was implemented in 2005, the number of teachers applying for jobs in Denver’s most challenging schools has multiplied eightfold.

Denver’s ProComp system “has a lot of different ways for teachers to show they know what they are doing,” Bowen said. “The research indicates you want a fair measure of what the teachers are able to do.”

New Models

The second half of the study, to be released in September, will answer the question, “If we decide to do [alternative compensation for teachers] what do the successful models look like?” Bowen said.

Most Maine school districts use a “single salary schedule,” determined by a teacher’s years of service and level of education. This is the system the United States has used for nearly a century because of its simplicity and image of fairness.

The problem with the single salary schedule, said Bowen, is that the two factors—years on the job and education level—do not have any impact on a teacher’s effectiveness.

Planning and implementing an alternative compensation system is anything but simple, the study notes. There is a range of alternatives, from paying more for teachers in high-need neighborhoods to tying salary to objective student outcomes such as test scores and/or critical classroom observation.

Looking Ahead

William Slotnik, founder and executive director of the Community Training and Assistance Center, a nonprofit consulting firm in Boston that works with community-based organizations, school systems, and government agencies, led the four-year study of ProComp Bowen analyzed for his report.

“This is a very nuanced reform. Any effort that hopes to link what teachers earn and students learn has got to have organizational sustainability and financial sustainability,” Slotnik said. “Money alone doesn’t change anything. You must look at the broader support for teachers, such as quality of professional development, assessment tools, and supervision.”

Bowen said he understands the complexity of this type of systematic reform. MHPC is meeting with various stakeholders to get their input on what would work best for Maine. Currently, many small school districts statewide are being consolidated, and Bowen said this would be a good time for the state to implement performance-based teacher pay.

Georgia Geis (georgia.geis@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
Rhode Island

Continued from page 1

natives. The legislative prohibition, enacted in 2004 under pressure from teachers’ unions, was renewed twice but came to an end this summer.

“For the first time in four years, we’ll be able to open new charter schools,” said Steve Nardelli, executive director of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools. Many see the expiration as part of an encouraging trend.

“Rhode Island education is going through a transformation,” said state Sen. Daniel Issa (D-Central Falls). “The expiration of the charter school moratorium will present an opportunity for some new ideas and creativity.”

One-Year Wait

Students won’t be able to attend any new charter schools right away, however. Funding will not be available for more charters until autumn 2009 because of state budget restraints.

Nardelli said six strong charter school proposals are currently in the approval process. Two have been provisionally approved by the state authorizer, the Rhode Island Board of Regents, and as many as five charter schools could open their doors to students next year.

The state’s 11 charters served roughly 3,000 of its 147,000 public school students in 2007-08. About 5,000 more students are on waiting lists.

More than three-fourths of the state’s charter school students are considered at-risk, yet they tend to outperform the traditional public school population in test scores, graduation rates, and parental satisfaction.

Exercising Prudence

Nardelli credits the state’s authorizer for Rhode Island charter schools’ success.

“Our Board of Regents has been very prudent,” Nardelli said. “They have been very thorough in the approval process, and that has turned out to result in quality schools.”

Rhode Island currently has two kinds of charters in operation: Three district charters that employ union teachers, and eight independent charters that allow for more flexibility in management.

In June, the state legislature also approved the formation of a third kind of school, the mayoral academy. Created by municipal leaders, these schools will hire teachers based only on merit and will not establish tenure, will not pay teachers according to prevailing wage scales, and will enroll teachers in a defined contribution pension plan instead of the state’s retirement system.

Issa, who chairs the state Senate Education Committee, sees a great opportunity for this new type of school.

“People will be watching to see the actual product, as well as the student achievement,” Issa said. “This is an awesome responsibility for those involved.”

“[Rhode Island’s] 11 charters served roughly 3,000 of its 147,000 public school students in 2007-08. About 5,000 more students are on waiting lists.”

Courting Providers

One management company local leaders cite as a likely candidate to run new mayoral academies is KIPP (the Knowledge Is Power Program), which operates 65 schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia. The provider’s only New England school is in Lynn, Massachusetts.

“Rhode Island has been looking at us,” said KIPP spokesman Steve Mancini. He noted the earliest possible opening would be in 2011.

To be considered, Mancini said Rhode Island would have to assemble a strong community coalition, secure sufficient funding, and commit to opening at least five schools. Among the state’s three types of charter schools, only the mayoral academy would give the necessary freedom required by KIPP and similar providers.

“Everyone here at KIPP is heartened by these developments in Rhode Island,” Mancini said. “Elected officials are looking to models with strong track records. We are certainly flattered they are looking at us.”

Rhode Island educational leaders deserve praise for working together in a bipartisan way to implement much-needed reforms,” Campanella added.

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

In Other Words

“Prior to charter schools, for the most part, I think that as a union we could relax a little bit, because for the most part we were the only kid on the block. And you pretty much had to come to us. Unless you could afford to send your child to a private school or et cetera, you had no other choices.”

George Parker, president of the DC Teachers Union, on Newshour with Jim Lehrer, July 22, 2008

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Charter School Progress Halted by Delaware Legislature

By Aricka Flowers

The Delaware Legislature has put the brakes on charter school growth in the state by passing a joint resolution to place a one-year moratorium on charter school applications. The only exception is for four schools already in various stages of development.

Supporters of the moratorium, passed in June, say its purpose is to allow time for reflection and discussion of current charter school laws. School choice experts say it will undermine Delaware’s standing as a leader in charter school development and quality.

“The teachers-union-supported legislature said accountability issues were the reasoning behind the moratorium and that they wanted to take a year to assess charter schools in Delaware before approving any new ones,” explained Kara Hornung, director of external affairs for the Center for Education Reform, a charter school advocacy group based in Maryland.

“But with only 19 schools, there is not that much to look over,” Hornung continued. “It’s really an effort to roll back charter schools in Delaware. We rank every charter school law in the country, and Delaware was considered the seventh-strongest in the nation, so it received an ‘A.’ That will change next year because of the moratorium.”

“It’s really an effort to roll back charter schools in Delaware.”
KARA HORNUNG
DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

Holding Pattern

The moratorium’s status as a joint resolution may mean the ban expires sooner than the one year for which the legislation called. Resolutions last only as long as the legislative session in which they are approved, so this resolution is executable only until January 2009 at the latest. Some charter school supporters say that may have had a lot to do with the resolution’s success.

“The real intent was to slow down the legislative process regarding modifying the charter school laws in Delaware,” said Gregory Meece, president of the board of directors of the Delaware Charter Schools Network, a Wilmington-based organization focused on improving charter school growth statewide.

“There were opposing forces putting pressure on the legislature, and [lawmakers] preferred to wait until some sort of compromise is worked out between the parties,” Meece continued. “They also want to wait for new leadership to send a signal as to what direction to go in. It makes a little bit of sense from that standpoint.”

Continuing Challenges

Although charter schools are seeing growth, experts say decisions such as the Delaware moratorium highlight the challenges school choice supporters continue to face.

In Other Words

“We don’t have enough slots for every child to go into a parochial school or a private school. And what you would see is a huge drain of resources out of the public schools.”

Presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) on why he opposes school voucher programs to give parents of all income levels private-school choice. Obama currently is draining approximately $15,000 from Chicago public schools by sending his daughters to a prestigious private school in the city. ABC News, June 16, 2008

“Everybody should have the same choice Cindy and I and Sen. Obama did. My opponent talks a great deal about hope and change, and education is as good a test as any of his seriousness. If Sen. Obama continues to defer to the teachers unions instead of committing to real reform, then he should start looking for new slogans.”

Presidential hopeful Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), who could afford to send his children to private school, on why he wants others to have that same choice. The Associated Press, August 2, 2008

“The movement is growing. With over 4,200 charter schools serving 1.5 million children nationwide, you can see there has been incredible growth,” said Hornung. “But there is still much more to be done. Ten states do not have charter school laws, and other states have laws that are not even worth looking at.

“Reformers need to step it up a notch and realize that although we have some laws and are making gains, we can never get too comfortable with the status quo. We have to keep fighting for better educational options,” Hornung said.

Aricka Flowers (atflowers2@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
As the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) awaits an uncertain fate when Congress returns to session this fall, debate is brewing over whether schools should continue to be held accountable for achievement standards.

Civil rights groups have expressed their staunch opposition to efforts that would gut the accountability measures.

President George W. Bush created the legislation, unpopular with Democrats and even some in the Republican Party, in his first term to monitor school performance via test results and performance reviews. Some observers are calling for federal legislators to rework the standards-based provisions currently in place.

The No Child Left Behind Recess Until Reauthorization Act (H.R. 6239), introduced June 11 by Reps. Sam Graves (R-MO) and Tim Walz (D-MN), is a bipartisan proposal to release schools temporarily from the original legislation’s standards.

"NCLB’s accountability measures have been critically important in shining a light on the low achievement of students from Latino, African-American, and low-income communities. It has required educators to focus on these children."

RAUL GONZALEZ
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

Many civil rights groups, including the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the Hispanic civil-rights organization, oppose the bill.

"NCLR is very concerned about the No Child Left Behind Recess Until Reauthorization Act, which would gut the accountability provisions of NCLB until it is reauthorized,” explained the group's spokesman, Raul Gonzalez.

“NCLR believes that NCLB’s accountability measures have been critically important in shining a light on the low achievement of students from Latino, African-American, and low-income communities. It has required educators to focus on these children,” Gonzalez said.

Civil Rights Issue
Other groups joined forces to write a letter urging people to contact legislators and lobby against the bill. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), composing nearly 200 groups including the American Civil Liberties Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and National Organization for Women, sent the letter to Congress June 18.

LCCR maintains NCLB is a civil rights law and some of its requirements govern children’s rights to obtain a quality education. The NCLB Recess Until Reauthorization Act calls itself a “temporary suspension” of those requirements. Critics note this could force children...
who’ve used the law to transfer to a higher-performing public school back into the schools that failed to meet NCLB standards.

“While the law has not worked perfectly, teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members across the country are working with the law to help students make academic progress,” Gonzalez said.

“This proposed bill would dishonor the work of educators, parents, and the students themselves to close the achievement gap,” Gonzalez continued. “It is a shame that while students are enjoying their summer vacations, some grownups here in Washington are trying to make a backroom deal to deny them educational opportunities.”

Potential Rewrite
Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL), who represents a district consisting primarily of African-Americans, said Congress plans to work on rewriting the original legislation this year.

“As a member of the Education Committee, we’ve decided we’re going to rewrite No Child Left Behind,” Davis said. “We don’t intend to rewrite the baby with the bath water. We intend to hold onto the best features of the legislation and discard the worst ones and come up with some changes that will make No Child Left Behind a real road map to public education in the United States of America.”

Real Accountability
But without systemic reforms that hold schools accountable, the transparency NCLB provides may not be enough, experts say.

“Twenty-one thousand dollars should buy high standards and achievement for a student. But to buy accountability, it has to buy a way out for them also.”

DERRELL BRADFORD
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
E3

Derrell Bradford, executive director of the New Jersey-based school choice advocacy group E3, points out Newark’s per-pupil spending is as high as $20,482, the average teacher makes $80,000 a year, and the city has a nearly $1 billion school budget—but only 60.8 percent of seventh graders are proficient on a math assessment in which the state defines “proficient” as getting just 33 percent of the test questions right.

“In Camden, Bradford notes, only one in five eighth graders scores above 55 percent in language arts, while the city’s annual education spending is $340 million for 13,000 students.

“Twenty-one thousand dollars should buy high standards and achievement for a student,” Bradford continued. “But to buy accountability, it has to buy a way out for them also. Until the lid is removed from the transfer provision, and we stop asking local low-performing districts—the offenders—to also be the regulators, we will continue to have a more and more frightening conversation about how the lives of low-income students are being lost daily, but we will not have a serious discussion about what it takes to make serious, wholesale, radical change in these schools.”

Krystle Russin (krystle@purepolitics.com) writes from Austin, Texas.
California Homeschoolers Are Encouraged by Court Case Dismissal

By Christin Coyne

Homeschooling supporters received encouraging news in July when a state appellate court vacated a controversial decision from earlier this year nearly banning homeschooling in California. The court agreed to rehear the case.

In February, the court had ruled only parents holding government-approved teaching credentials can educate their own children at home. In late June, homeschooling advocates argued before the 2nd District Court of Appeals to overturn that decision. They were awaiting the results at press time.

The case began two years ago as a child-abuse complaint against a Los Angeles County homeschooling family, but in early July the family court that heard the initial arguments dismissed the case.

“The appellate court may decide that the issue is moot,” because of the family court’s decision to drop the case, said Linda Conrad, founder of the Association of Home School Attorneys and former legal chair of the HomeSchool Association of California.

“However, since the dismissal has been appealed, the issue is not moot at this point,” Conrad continued. “Further, the appellate court has the discretion to consider the issue and write an opinion even though the case was dismissed below. It may decide that the issue is one that is capable of recurring and yet evades review, for instance.”

Original Case
“This is a significant favorable development toward preserving homeschooling freedom in California,” said Mike Farris, chairman of the Home School Legal Defense Association, the Virginia-based choice group that argued the case before the 2nd District Court of Appeals. “This case has the potential to change the face of homeschooling across this country” by setting a restrictive precedent against the practice other states might be tempted to follow.

“This is a significant favorable development toward preserving homeschooling freedom in California.”

MIKE FARRIS, CHAIRMAN
HOME SCHOOL LEGAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION

The case arose when the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services asked the courts to require Philip and Mary Long to send their children to public school. The Longs had been accused of physically and emotionally mistreating two of their eight children. The lower court ruled the parents had a right to homeschool their children. The appellate court reversed the trial court’s decision, citing a 1953 appellate court decision requiring students to attend a public or private school or be educated by a properly credentialed tutor.

Murky Law
The opinion shocked the homeschooling community, particularly since California’s constitution concludes homeschooling parents must be government-credentialed to teach their own children.

Before February’s ruling, California parents had several homeschooling options, including filing paperwork to create a private school, hiring a credentialed tutor, or participating in an independent study program through a public or private school.

The appellate court, however, ruled parents could face prosecution if their children are not taught by credentialed teachers.

Uncertain Prospects
At this point, Conrad said, anything could happen.

“If the court wants to make a statement about homeschooling, it may use this case to do so. Or it may limit its decision to the unique facts in this case,” Conrad said. “If the case is not properly limited to the facts, there are some other legal options that the parties may consider, such as filing a petition for review in the Supreme Court.”

Beyond that, homeschooling groups can try to change the law.

“If, on the slim chance that the home-school groups decide legislative action is necessary, I don’t believe there will be a fight,” Conrad said. “In my experience, the legislature has been very supportive of homeschooling, and the governor has also publicly stated his support for homeschooling.”

Both California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell (D) have said the court made the wrong decision. Schwarzenegger has pledged to take the issue to the legislature should the decision stand.

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

School Choice Bills Fall Short in California

By Krystle Russian

California parents will have to wait at least another year for better educational opportunities for their children, as state legislators failed to approve all but one of several school choice bills introduced in the most recent session.

In the spring California state legislators introduced a package of five bills designed to give parents throughout the state greater choice about where to send their kids to school—a package choice advocates said would help Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) fulfill his dream of making 2008 “the year of education reform.”

The proposed measures would have freed California children from unsafe and failing schools, given tax credits to parents of private and homeschooled children, and let parents of special-needs children choose another school more easily than current law allows.

All the bills but one were either killed outright in committee or suspended without further action. The remaining bill, AB 2290—which would provide opportunity scholarships for low-income children to attend better-performing schools than the ones assigned to them by the government based on their ZIP codes—will be introduced next year.

Unsafe Schools Protected
The school safety bill, AB 2361, failed in the Assembly Education Committee on April 2, “which, in my mind, makes it clear the Democratic majority here care more about keeping the unions happy than they do about parent choice and student safety,” said Evan Oneto, press secretary for state Assemblyman Rick Keene (R-Chico).

“Parents might like to know how dangerous their child’s school has to be before corrective action is taken and they are allowed to transfer their child to another school,” Oneto said.

According to the California Department of Education, a school is considered dangerous if three students in the past three years have been expelled for incidents such as assault or battery on a school employee, robbery, extortion, sexual assault, selling drugs, possessing or selling firearms, brandishing a knife, or hate violence.
Study: Charter Students Are Outperforming Their Public School Counterparts in California

By Ian Randolph

Charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) outperform traditional public schools on nearly every student achievement measure, according to a new study from the California Charter School Association.

The study, Charting School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis, compared charter schools with similar district-run schools. More than 70 percent of charters beat their better-funded district counterparts on growth in California’s Academic Performance Index (API).

The study also found charters improve as they age. Young charters increase their API at nearly double the rate of traditional schools, while mature charters maintain a 105-point API advantage over their district rivals, the study noted. The report, released in June, confirms what other studies across the nation have shown.

“Just give charter schools the slightest amount of time and support, and charters can improve student achievement,” said California Charter Schools Association spokesman Gary Larson.

Rollercoaster History

Since passage of the California Charter Schools Act in 1992, nowhere have charter schools flourished more than Los Angeles, where 125 charters now serve 41,000 students. Los Angeles boasts the largest charter movement in the state and the seventh largest in the nation. Only Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas have more charter students statewide than Los Angeles has in its county.

Union bosses and district officials have fought the reform every step of the way. As a result, “charters are typically underfunded by $3,000 per student per year compared to traditional public schools,” Larson said.

For eight years, LAUSD openly flouted Proposition 39, which required the district to lease facilities to eligible charter schools. But in February, a court order forced the district to offer space on existing school campuses to a fraction of accepted charters. When United Teachers Los Angeles complained, the district rescinded seven offers, leaving those charters without facilities.

Parents Support Charters

In response to this and other cases of obstruction, thousands of parents took to the streets of Los Angeles this summer to protest and form “Families that Can,” the first-ever statewide advocacy organization for charter school families.

“School districts throughout California are mistreating our children, suffocating the growth of charter schools, and offering inadequate facilities and disproportionate funding,” said founding parent Corri Ravare.

“Through Families that Can, our families will fight unfair moves by school districts such as Los Angeles Unified and will demand equal education, equal treatment, and equal resources for our kids,” Ravare said.

Opponents Persistent

This year, legislators introduced a record five school choice bills in the California State Assembly. (See “School Choice Bills Fall Short in California,” page 10.) Opponents of choice killed those measures in committee, but their introduction indicates a growing awareness of the increasing demand for choice in the state.

“Charter schools are one more choice for public school parents,” said Caprice Young, CEO of the California Charter Schools Association. “People ask what choice is better—this report proves that charter schools are better.”

Most district officials refrain from embracing choice, choosing instead to focus on how traditional schools can learn from charters.

“I think what it says is that they have some of the best practices, and those should be replicated across the district in all schools,” said LAUSD Senior Deputy Superintendent Ramon C. Cortines.

“I would say the same about islands of excellence in the Unified district. We need to learn from each other.”

Choice supporters continue to push for change, however.

“We’re hoping that in the future, L.A. Unified and the state will have more charter-friendly policies,” Young said.

“This is just the beginning.”

Ian Randolph (irandolph@pacific research.org) writes from San Francisco.

CONTINUED from left

Playing Catch-Up

Though much work remains to be done, Vicki Murray, a senior policy fellow for education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, says the ground has been broken on school choice in California, and that’s a major step forward.

“More parental choice legislation was introduced in California during 2008 than at any point in its history, five bills in all. The state also led the nation, later joined by Virginia, for most parental choice bills introduced this year,” Murray said.

Murray also pointed out the state still lags behind the nation. “There are now 23 parental choice programs in 15 states, including Washington, DC. The number of states passing parental choice legislation has nearly tripled in the past five years, from six in 2003 to 16 as of May 2008,” she noted.

A Bipartisan Issue

Growing support among Democrats is one key to the progress being made, Murray said.

By way of example, she noted only one Democrat voted for Florida’s Step Up for Students tax credit scholarship program in 2001. But earlier this year, the Florida Legislature approved a $30 million expansion of the program with support from one-third of the Democratic caucus, half the black caucus, and unanimous support from the Hispanic caucus, she said.

“And in 2006, five Democratic governors signed parental choice programs and expansions into law, and a growing number of Democratic legislators are sponsoring parental choice legislation,” Murray said.

“Such support is not surprising, since close to two-thirds of all scholarships are awarded to African-American and Hispanic students,” Murray said.

“Comparisons with states like Florida make it difficult to excuse California public school performance,” Murray said, “especially since not one doomsday scenario predicted by status-quo defenders has ever materialized in any state with parental choice programs.”

Krystle Russin (krystle@pure politics.com) writes from Austin, Texas.
Scholarship Program Offers Chicago Parents School Choice

By Aricka Flowers

On Chicago’s south side, a scholarship program is offering parents a unique opportunity at school choice. Founded in 1989 by the late Sr. Ellen Carroll, O.P., a Sisinawa Dominican nun, the scholarship is offered to students who attend Visitation Catholic School in their elementary years. Students apply in their 8th-grade year and, if selected, can use the scholarship at the Chicago-area Catholic high school of their choice.

The idea sprang from a clear need for options outside the Chicago Public School system.

“Sister Ellen started the scholarship program because she saw students graduate from Visitation, go to the local public high school, and graduate totally unprepared for college or fail to do so altogether,” explained Stephanie Hicks, development director of the Visitation Scholarship.

“She wanted to give kids who graduated from Visitation [Catholic School], go to the local public high school, and graduate totally unprepared for college or fail to do so altogether,” Hicks said.

Unusual Suspects

Currently, 32 students are using the scholarship at 11 schools. Between five and 10 students are awarded scholarships each year.

To qualify, students must have a minimum 2.0 grade point average and strong recommendations from teachers. They also must have attended Visitation for at least two years and participated in extracurricular activities. The focus of the scholarship is to offer choice and opportunity to students who may not be typical candidates for such an opportunity.

“We are not looking for the most academically talented student,” said Hicks. “What we’re really looking for in students is a commitment to community service and being a well-rounded student. We want them to strive for their personal best academically, but it’s not an honors program.

“We look for the students we think really deserve a chance to take part in a Catholic, faith-based educational environment, even though most of our students are not Catholic, nor is that a requirement for the scholarship,” Hicks explained.

The scholarships are paid for by individual sponsors who make a commitment to support recipients throughout their entire high school careers. Sponsors agree to pay at least half their student’s tuition each year, communicate with the child at least once a month, and take part in two annual events.

“Student Accountability

Kevin Doherty, a father of six and president of a local insulation company, has been a sponsor for about 10 years and will see his fourth student enter high school this year.

“For the student who works hard and does well, there really isn’t that much opportunity,” Doherty said. “From my very first involvement, I’ve thought of the scholarship as school choice without the government. We’re not waiting for the government to give these kids their choice of where to go; we’re providing it for them.

“The really neat part about the scholarship is the accountability aspect of it. That is what drew my wife and me to participate,” Doherty continued. “This program is clearly not a handout. It is strictly an earned scholarship. These kids get their tuition check every month so they are accountable on a monthly basis.”

To keep the scholarship, students must maintain at least a 2.0 GPA, participate in 30 hours of service learning each school year, regularly communicate with their sponsor, participate in extracurricular activities at their high school, and attend all scholarship-related meetings.

Parental Participation

Scholarship recipients are not the only ones who have to stay committed to the program in order to keep their award. The student’s parents are also required to take part in monthly meetings.

“In order for the scholarships to be given, the parents have to attend a meeting once a month for every month the child is in school,” explained Hicks. “We cover topics like mental health and teens, financial planning, nutrition and teens, and knowing the law for new drivers. We cover a new topic each month, and that is part of the way the family helps earn their child’s scholarship.”

Freida Saffold has been a scholarship parent since 1999. All three of her children have received scholarships, with her two oldest having already graduated high school and moved on to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Her youngest child is currently using a Visitation scholarship for his sophomore year at St. Rita of Cascia High School.

She appreciates the mandatory parental participation aspect of the program.

“I know the more involved you are with your child, the more positive outcome you’ll have,” said Saffold. “Even though they may not tell you directly that they want you there, kids really yearn for their parents’ participation in their academic life. I don’t consider myself a helicopter parent, but I do consider myself one who stays close to her children.”

Community Involvement

With a 100 percent graduation rate for recipients in the class of 2007, Carroll’s vision for better opportunities and outcomes for Visitation Catholic School alums has come to fruition. Saffold says the scholarship has done a great job in helping her children navigate high school and prepare for college.

The additional help from the community was especially helpful to Saffold after her husband’s death a few years ago, she said.

“The program is great because it allows more people to be involved in seeing the child through high school, and I remember how difficult that time can be,” Saffold recalled. “I thought having more people keep an eye on my kids was a good idea. It was especially helpful when my husband passed away. I do believe in the ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ concept, and this program is a prime example of that.”

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
New Orleans

Continued from page 1

did the traditional urban approach to education.

Hurricane Katrina was not the only factor in transforming the district from one in which parents had almost no decision-making power to one in which virtually every public school is a charter school, with vouchers now also being made available.

Badon said three decades of poor academic performance, eight different superintendents during the eight years before Katrina, and corruption (including employees caught outright stealing from the district) created a change in the political atmosphere that paved the way for the creation of the nation’s fourth citywide voucher bill.

“African-American parents in this city aren’t usually able to afford a private school for their children. When they have an opportunity like this, I’m pretty sure they’re going to jump on it.”

YASHICA SMITH
NEW ORLEANS

“Behavioral-wise, things are different, too,” Smith said. “Private schools are more strict, and even if you have children return to public schools after having been in those private schools, the schools will be getting a model student—not a discipline problem—most of the time.”

Sea Change

For decades, the New Orleans public school system was among the worst-performing in the nation. According to the Louisiana Department of Education, 75 percent of New Orleans eighth graders scored “below basic” in reading and two-thirds scored “below basic” in math on the 2004 state assessment.

Between 1998 and 2005, enrollment fell 25 percent as parents showed their disappointment in the district’s abysmal performance by voting with their feet. But when the levees broke during the hurricane, so

Black legislators also provided strong leadership in passing voucher bills in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Washington, DC.

“We are beginning to find out for ourselves that ‘voucher’ is not a dirty word,” Duplessis said. “We’re also beginning to find out that the [government-monopolized] system doesn’t work, a fact that’s evident across the country. Instead of continuing to spend more money just repairing this old car, it’s time to just buy a new one.”

— Jim Waters

Blacks’ Support for School Choice Increases in New Orleans, Nationwide

In an eye-opening October 2007 Boston Globe article assessing developments in the New Orleans schools, James Peyser, former chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, wrote, “Since Katrina, nearly every aspect of the status quo has changed.”

That was evidenced, Peyser pointed out, by emerging changes from a centralized decision-making process to one that “puts authority where the students are, letting principals make more of their own decisions about resources, personnel, and curriculum.”

Peyser also offered black politicians’ changing attitudes toward school choice as evidence of a change in the status quo.

State Rep. Austin Badon (D-New Orleans), sponsor of a successful bill establishing a voucher program for low-income families to send their children to the school of their choice, and state Sen. Ann Duplessis (D-New Orleans), who sponsored the bill in her chamber, are black Democrats representing New Orleans.

They represent a growing number of black legislators open to alternatives to public education, a system that historically has been strongly supported by black politicians. A pattern of low test scores and graduation rates and high dropout and remediation numbers is beginning to supplant loyalty to the system and deference to teacher unions, which often oppose choice, nationwide.

“Our children are going to be competing against the entire world for success,” Duplessis said. “But no longer can this be about protecting the system. For me, I’m concerned about protecting the kids, and if we have to take every penny and redirect it to private institutions—if that’s what it takes—then we’ll do it.”

Since Katrina, nearly every aspect of the status quo has changed. The traditional urban approach to education, a system that historically has been strongly supported by black politicians, is giving way to a new model—a voucher system that allows parents to choose the school that best meets their children’s needs.
Ohio

Continued from page 1

A bill currently working its way through the Ohio General Assembly, SB 57, would create a Special Education Scholarship Pilot Program providing a maximum $20,000 scholarship for special-needs children in kindergarten through 12th grade between 2010 and 2015. Recipients could attend a public or private program of their parents’ choice.

“This bill is vital because it would empower parents of students with special learning needs to seek out the very best education for their child—public or private. In the end, parents are better suited than a rigid bureaucracy to know if their child is learning.”
CHAD ALDIS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SCHOOL CHOICE OHIO

The bill limits the number of scholarship recipients to 3 percent of the total number of special-education students living in Ohio during the previous fiscal year.

Sponsored by state Sen. Kevin Coughlin (R-Cuyahoga Falls), SB 57 passed the Senate on a 17-15 vote in early May along party lines, then did so again in the House Education Committee on May 28 on a 12-11 vote. The bill is slated for a full House vote this fall.

Modeled After Autism Program

The program established in the bill is modeled after Ohio’s four-year-old Autism Scholarship Program, which gives vouchers to parents of autistic students to allow the children to attend the school of their choice. In 2004, 70 students participated statewide—a number that swelled to more than 700 in the 2006-07 school year.

“Senate Bill 57 expands Ohio’s popular Autism Scholarship Program, which has enjoyed tremendous parent satisfaction, to all students with special needs,” explained Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, an advocacy group based in Columbus.

“This bill is vital,” Aldis continued, “because it would empower parents of students with special learning needs to seek out the very best education for their child—public or private. In the end, parents are better suited than a rigid bureaucracy to know if their child is learning.”

But Piet Van Lier, a researcher with Policy Matters Ohio, a progressive research organization with offices in Cleveland and Columbus, is troubled with the bill’s provisions.

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But Piet Van Lier, a researcher with Policy Matters Ohio, a progressive research organization with offices in Cleveland and Columbus, is troubled with the bill’s provisions.

“He said the autism program has a “lack of state oversight and accountability” that “restricts or discourages enrollment based on cost, severity of disability, and religious belief” and that it “seems skewed toward residents of Ohio’s wealthier school districts.”

“It’s quite possible, even likely, that these problems would be replicated to some degree by SB 57,” Van Lier said. “The overarching concern is that SB 57 would divert public dollars to programs that are available to a relative few. Policy Matters feels that these funds should be used to strengthen programs that are available and open to everyone.”

Autism Study Flawed

Aldis, however, said Van Lier’s critique of the Autism Scholarship Program is flawed.

“By ignoring and misrepresenting much of the data, Policy Matters has done an incredible disservice to the students using the scholarship and has missed the point of the scholarship,” Aldis said. “It’s designed to give parents additional options, more choices, to find the right environment for their child. The fact that a particular school may not serve all students with autism is a fact with public and private schools alike. Yet this is used as evidence the program does not work.

“Furthermore, the study suggests that the participation of schools with a religious affiliation is restrictive or discouraging to success.”

The autism program merits expansion, according to parents of the children involved, Aldis notes. “This scholarship will create a much larger base of eligible students, generate increased private school participation, and encourage improvements and innovations in the public schools,” he said.

“Most of all, it will give control to parents and not bureaucrats,” Aldis said. “What Mr. Van Lier often fails to mention is that whenever asked, parents using this program have always been incredibly satisfied.”

Paying for Scholarships

Under SB 57, funding would come from state and local sources. The amount ordinarily allocated to the local public school would go to the student’s school of choice, and in most cases the local school district also would transfer local tax funds to the new provider.

According to a May 27 memorandum from the Ohio Legislative Services Commission to state Rep. Randy Gardner (D-Toledo), a school district with a low percentage of state funding would transfer between $1,000 and $11,000 to a student’s chosen school. A district with a medium amount of state funding would transfer between $700 and $6,000 per student. A district with a high amount of state funding would transfer as much as $1,100, but such school districts could actually gain money in some instances because some districts are given more than $20,000 per student for those with severe disabilities.

That final element of the funding scheme is unwise, says Matthew Carr, education policy director for the Buckeye Institute, a Columbus-based policy research organization.

“The most disappointing aspect of this debate has been the willingness of the supporters to entertain a ‘hold-harmless’ amendment that would shield districts from the potential loss of funds when a student enrolls in a voucher program, because such a provision would create perverse incentives for the district schools—as they could get rid of the student and yet keep all of the funding,” Carr explained.

Michael Coulter (mjcoulter@gce.edu) writes from Pennsylvania.

In Other Words

“As long as the independent committee is operating on their own, they’re free to make expenditures however they see fit—as long as you’re not correlating or coordinating with campaigns.”

Rick Thompson, executive secretary of Georgia’s State Ethics Commission, on why All Children Matter—a Michigan-based school choice group—can spend more than campaign limits allow in advertising for legislative candidates who may be in favor of school choice. The group spent $33,000 in late July on mailings asking voters to support two particular candidates in their primaries; Georgia law limits direct campaign contributions to $2,300 from individuals or PACs.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 31, 2008
Report: Elementary Teachers Poorly Prepared to Teach Math

By Ben DeGrow

A new report on the math preparation of elementary school teachers has rekindled debate over the quality of teacher preparation programs.

In No Common Denominator, policy analyst Julie Greenberg of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) concludes most education programs surveyed are not providing adequate mathematics training to elementary teachers. Only 10 of 77 education programs in the sample were credited with providing an effective structure for this facet of teacher preparation.

“We have thousands of people being trained to do a job that’s pretty similar, who are being prepared in vastly different ways. There just can’t be much sense to that variation.”

Julie Greenberg
Policy Analyst
National Council on Teacher Quality

“We have thousands of people being trained to do a job that’s pretty similar, who are being prepared in vastly different ways,” Greenberg said. “There just can’t be much sense to that variation.”

But Sharon Robinson, president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), questions the report’s conclusions. NCTQ has “already established a bias against university-based teacher education,” she claimed.

Beyond Rote Instruction

The report concludes too many elementary teachers are not sufficiently equipped to give students the math skills they need to achieve at the next level.

“They aren’t comfortable teaching math,” said Greenberg. “This manifests itself in fairly rote instruction, which may be sufficient to allow elementary students to perform adequately on state and national assessments. But that falls short of giving them the conceptual understanding they need when they move into middle and high school level math.”

Only 23 percent of U.S. 12th-grade students perform proficiently on the mathematics section of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). National averages in SAT math scores have increased little in recent years.

Questioning Methods

Robinson expressed concerns about reviewing course syllabi and descriptions as a method for assessing the quality of education programs.

“I don’t think that’s a comprehensive or fully responsible way to study this topic,” Robinson said.

Greenberg disagreed, saying the collected materials gave significant insight into the instructors’ priorities and the scope and philosophy of instruction.

“They do not provide an exhaustive review, but more than enough information to categorize programs basically as being adequate or not,” Greenberg said.

Skip Fennell, past president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), said the method has validity but could be enhanced by further analysis.

“A syllabus is important for any course,” Fennell said. “It’s like the recipe, but it’s also important that the meal is very satisfying.”

Addressing Education Programs

Greenberg lauded Louisiana State University as a beacon for other education departments. “They have a program that is coordinating math content and instruction in ways that bear examination by other institutions,” she said.

Robinson pointed out LSU and nine of the 10 top-performing education programs in the NCTQ report belong to AACTE—which represents about 800 of the nation’s 1,300 education programs.

But the less-highly rated AACTE member programs face significant challenges, she added.

“They’re all kind of struggling in the face of academic guidance from the math community, and what parents want kids to know,” Robinson said. “That illustrates the confusion teacher educators have to negotiate.”

Calling for Collaboration

Fennell suggested Greenberg’s findings call for greater collaboration in ensuring teachers can teach math well. “The report is a great opportunity for math departments and education departments to get together,” he said.

Robinson shares a similar view.

“The programs we feel are the strongest have the best relationships across disciplines,” Robinson said. “That results in stronger pedagogy for students who are going to do all different things with math.”

Fennell said the report’s central conclusion stands: Instructors in the early grades need more math content in their coursework preparation.

“Prospective elementary teachers should have a pretty deep understanding of data analysis and probability,” Fennell said.

Massachusetts Model

As a model for other states, Greenberg recommended policymakers follow Massachusetts’s example in ensuring elementary teachers are adequately prepared in math instruction.

“They’re not creating vague standards for what teachers should know; they’re establishing specific coursework requirements, credit requirements, and a licensing test that is going to be unlike any other in the country,” Greenberg said.

Greenberg believes the new Massachusetts math content test, scheduled to be first administered in 2009, will be the most rigorous in the nation.

In addition to the report’s call for coursework and testing improvements, Fennell said creating elementary math teaching specialist positions might help boost students’ preparation for higher-level math. That idea was among several recommendations made in March by the National Mathematics Advisory Panel.

“At least it’s an opportunity to consider,” Fennell said.

Ben DeGrow (ben@21.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.

In Other Words

“You have to make sure they’re aware of it. We’re a government of the people, and so the court shouldn’t be taking away their ability to have a say on something [the courts] already had a say on.”

Patricia Levesque, member of Florida’s Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, on why the Florida Supreme Court should not be allowed to remove two proposed constitutional amendments regarding school choice from the state ballot in November. The high court struck down the state’s universal voucher program in 2006 on a 5-2 vote. The Florida Education Association teachers union asked a circuit court in early August to remove the proposals from the ballot so voters cannot decide the issue. Orlando Sentinel, August 3, 2008

INTERNET INFO


“Exit with Expertise: Do Ed Schools Prepare Elementary Teachers to Pass This Test?” (test with answer key), National Council on Teacher Quality: http://www.heartland.org/article.cfm?artId=23637
Voucher Competition Begins to Make Inroads in Milwaukee

By George Clowes

Although vouchers are supposed to prompt improvements in the public schools through competition for students, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) have shown little improvement in graduation rates or test scores — despite the migration of more than 19,000 students to voucher schools over the past 18 years.

This lack of improvement prompted influential school choice advocate Sol Stern to argue in City Journal earlier this year that school choice isn’t enough and other reform strategies, such as instructional reform, are needed.

However, a new study from The Heartland Institute shows Milwaukee’s public schools have actually experienced very little competition for students since vouchers were introduced. That’s because total public school enrollment grew rapidly and then remained relatively flat until recently. It is only in the past four years that MPS has experienced a significant loss of students to voucher schools and seen the size of its student body fall below the level it was at when the voucher program started in 1990.

“Overall K-12 enrollment in Milwaukee is now falling, and while voucher schools have continued to expand, MPS enrollment has dropped by almost 10,000 students since the 2003-04 school year ...”

Turning Tide

This swamping of voucher competition by increased public school enrollment was noted in both Milwaukee and Cleveland as early as 2001 by American Enterprise Institute scholar Frederick M. Hess, who commented at the time, “Competition in most urban districts is like a gnat to a bull, there but barely noticed.”

Increasing Competition

Although this increased competition for students will prompt some improvements in the public schools, Milwaukee’s voucher program and most others will not produce real reform in the public education system because they are a far cry from the universal program envisioned by the late Milton Friedman.

Friedman believed vouchers worth enough to buy a good private education should be available to all students. He said voucher programs should not impose excessive regulation, and they should allow parents to add to the value of the voucher.

The Heartland study finds most of today’s voucher programs are simply “rescue” efforts that provide an escape route for low-income children in failing schools. Such programs, which Friedman characterized as “charity” vouchers, are not capable of reforming the public school system.

A review of the effects of various voucher programs suggests four conditions are needed for voucher competition to be effective:

- competition must be explicit;
- the voucher value must be substantial;
- financial consequences should accompany loss of students; and
- public school enrollment should decrease when voucher students leave.

Making an Impact

Vouchers have affected MPS enrollment significantly only in the past four years. During the first eight years of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), MPS enrollment grew by almost 9,000 students, to a peak of 107,043 in 1997-98, while voucher students totaled only 1,545 students at that time.

Even in the six years following the 1998 court approval of MPCP, when enrollment soared to 133,268 by 2003-04, MPS enrollment remained relatively stable, falling initially and then plateauing at about 103,500. With 3,405 students in independent charter schools, public school enrollment in 2003-04 totaled 107,174 — virtually the same as MPS’s peak enrollment in 1997-98.

While MPCP and independent charter schools continued to increase enrollment over the past four years, MPS lost almost 10,000 students, dropping to 93,972 students in 2007-08, almost 4,400 fewer than the district had when the voucher program started 18 years earlier.

MPCP has consistently attracted an average of 1,500 additional students every year since 1998-99. Publicly funded K-12 enrollment increased by almost 20,000 students since 1990-91, and MPCP absorbed most of this increase in students.

Instead of turning solely to another reform strategy, such as instructional reform, the Heartland study recommends Milwaukee’s school choice leaders recognize the limitations of charity vouchers and reconsider their opposition to universal vouchers.

George Clowes (clowes@heartland.org) is a senior fellow for education policy at The Heartland Institute.

INTERNET INFO

“School Vouchers: Why Aren’t They Reforming Public Schools?” by George Clowes, The Heartland Institute, May 2008: http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=23540

Students in Failing Public Schools Need Federal Education Reform

By Dan Prof

During his address at the 99th annual NAACP Convention in July, U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) had an opportunity to make education reform a key issue in this year’s presidential campaign. But to paraphrase the immortal Don Adams as Maxwell Smart, McCain “missed it by this much.”

McCain correctly fingered the fundamental hurdle to education reform when he said, “When a public school fails ... parents ask only for a choice in the education of their children. ... No entrenched bureaucracy or union should deny parents that choice and children that opportunity.”

Real Reforms Ignored

However, McCain fell short on identifying an adequate solution. Instead of putting forth a bold vision for education that addresses reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and reflects the growing consensus on school choice, McCain offered the standard fare about merit pay, alternative certification, and devoting a few federal shekels to develop virtual charter schools.

Meanwhile, his opponent, Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL), has offered even more tepid, rehashed hash when explaining to low-income families in big cities why it’s fine for their children to be relegated to schools everyone knows will fail them while his own daughters attend the prestigious University of Chicago Lab Schools.

In other words, neither presidential candidate has offered much inspiration on the issue of education.

Dismal Reality

In what has been relentlessly billed as a “change” election, both candidates seem unnervingly content with the status quo on education despite nationwide systemic failures and parents’ concerns.

In April The Associated Press reported 17 of America’s 50 largest cities had public high school graduation rates under 50 percent. Detroit’s graduation rate is less than 25 percent.

In our global, digital economy, those numbers are death knells. A bachelor’s degree will earn twice as much over his or her lifetime as someone with only a high school diploma, and this disparity is widening.

Federal Reform

My strict constructionist friends say the U.S. Constitution provides no role for the federal government in education. That responsibility rests with the states.

“[N]either presidential candidate has offered much inspiration on the issue of education.”

That’s true, but the reality is that the federal government will spend nearly $40 billion on primary and secondary education this year, approximately 30 percent of which will be dedicated to help school districts meet the mandates under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

So, sidestepping the constitutional debate for a moment, here’s what I propose (Sens. McCain and Obama, take out a pen and paper):
• Scrap NCLB: It was well-intended legislation designed to infuse performance standards into school systems that had discarded all measures of accountability. Unfortunately, well-intentioned does not mean well-designed. NCLB is federal cookie-cutter legislation with a plethora of unfunded mandates and too many trap doors along the pathway to true choice.
• Set up a Stafford Loan-type program for targeted elementary and high schools. Colleges and universities compete for students. We know this. And students can take their federal Stafford Loan money and go to any school they want, public or private, which accepts such financing (virtually all colleges and universities). America’s collegiate system was, until recently, the envy of the world. So why not apply the same approach to elementary and high schools?

Subsidizing the Child

Setting aside the federal dollars for IDEA compliance would leave approximately $28 billion of the $40 billion the federal government spends on K-12 education to set up a no-interest (indexed to inflation) loan program for parents of students in failing schools.

We should make that money available to parents of students in schools where more than 75 percent of students test below proficiency in reading and math according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in 4th and 8th grades.

This way, the federal government stops investing in systems, particularly failing systems, and starts investing directly in students. It also gets the federal government out of the business of being the national hall monitor for our schools, which in turn prevents the imposition of more ineffective, one-size-fits-all mandates.

Since the goal is no longer a high school diploma but, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree, I would further advocate that loans taken out for primary and secondary education could be deferred without interest if the student goes on to college.

Proven Demand

Those who argue parents won’t take out such low-interest loans have not been watching the response to school choice programs in big cities.

In Cleveland, for instance, a family with a household income below 200 percent of the federally defined poverty line is given preference for scholarships of up to $1,875 annually. In 2002, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Cleveland’s citywide voucher program constitutional, 96 percent of the 3,700 children participating in the choice program elected to attend religious schools. The scholarship amount of $1,875 does not cover the annual tuition costs at very many private or religious high schools in metropolitan areas.

But school choice is in such demand that low-income families with children in failing public schools are willing to find ways to make up for any financial shortfall in order to leverage state dollars to send their children to better schools. In Cleveland, they must produce the money up front. This indicates the likely response others will have if the opportunity to borrow money for their children’s education, effectively without interest, is made available.

Seismic Change

Admittedly, $28 billion is not enough to provide no-interest loans to the estimated 11.5 million children in failing public K-12 schools nationwide. However, it would represent a seismic shift in how we think about education in this country. It would also launch the positive system changes that inevitably come from competition for students and the dollars that follow them.

More importantly, such a plan would prevent millions of children from being permanently relegated to second-class citizen status in this country, the inevitable result of being forced into schools that do not educate.

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School Choice Works

By Herbert J. Walberg

A mericans spend more on elementary and high schools and get less learning for their money than citizens in other developed nations.

Only 40 percent of U.S. high school graduates enroll directly in college, and of those who do, only four in 10 finish in four years. Only 31 percent of college graduates in America are prose-literate, meaning they can read and understand a newspaper.

The traditional government-operated school is not the only way to educate children, and it has clearly proven it is not the best way. Charter schools are one of the newer alternatives to traditional public schools—they are publicly funded schools with private boards often staffed by idealistic members of the communities they serve. They run on about 80 percent of the budget of a traditional public school, but recent studies show they do a better job of educating children.

“Only 31 percent of college graduates in America are prose-literate, meaning they can read and understand a newspaper.”

And they are desirable: More people want their children in charter schools than there are available spaces for them. In Massachusetts, for example, waiting lists comprise about 55 percent of the total enrollments.

Charter schools that don’t meet parental expectations don’t survive. Because parents choose whether their children will attend, undesirable charter schools lose students or fail to recruit them in the first place. Charter schools without students must close. Studies have shown the presence of charter schools forces nearby public schools to improve.

Common Good

Private schools are a more traditional alternative to public schools. Some parents, usually those with the financial means to do so, have rejected the public school system, despite the tuition cost of private schools. Dissatisfaction compels families to spend thousands of dollars on a service otherwise freely but badly provided.

Private schools have lived up to parents’ expectations. Study after study proves private education is better than public education: It is more cost-effective, graduates more students, and sends more students to elite universities. Public and privately funded voucher programs that allow poor children to attend private schools are usually heavily oversubscribed and must turn away families.

“Dissatisfaction [with public schools] compels families to spend thousands of dollars on a service otherwise freely but badly provided.”

Successful Desegregation

Catholic schools in particular have been rigorously studied. They operate on about half of the budget of public schools while consistently better educating their students. In racial breakdowns, they reflect the communities in which they operate. Public schools under court orders to desegregate are still struggling to do so, while private schools have largely accomplished this goal.

In 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court declared it constitutional for states to allow families to participate in voucher programs with parochial and independent schools, and these have generally proven to be an educational boost. When parents are allowed to decide which school their child will attend, they feel more connected to their children’s schools, and that connection itself promotes their children’s education.

When parents choose their children’s schools, segregation tends to decrease, because voucher parents more often choose less-segregated schools outside their own segregated neighborhoods.

Other Nations’ Experiences

Much of the most rigorous and extensive research on school vouchers has taken place outside the United States in such countries as Colombia and Sweden. The results: Voucher students generally excel.

Public school boards, educators, and unions express objections to school vouchers. Of course, few heavily subsidized providers want competition, particularly effective competition that appeals to customers. They justifiably fear public school enrollments, budgets, and jobs will decline substantially unless they can somehow improve.

They are right. How many citizens would choose to eat at costly, unfulfilling, government-operated restaurants?

As it is, parents are making some choices about their children’s educations. They will relocate when possible to put their children in a good school district. Because of this, good schools improve property values and draw industry to communities.

“Study after study proves private education is better than public education: It is more cost-effective, graduates more students, and sends more students to elite universities.”

More importantly, when parents have confidence in their schools, they participate more actively in volunteer programs, and they vote more resources to those schools. When parents think their schools are good, they become better.

Choice, whether attained through private schools, charters, or vouchers, helps parents adapt their own communities and their children’s schools.

Power to Change

Schools are like other providers of goods and services. When they compete, they become more cost-effective and provide better service. In the current system, public schools are largely protected from competition and have become so ineffective they threaten our nation’s prosperity and well-being.

Even so, lawmakers have instead increased the size of school districts, which has further reduced competition, citizen influence, and parental choice. This is backwards thinking. Larger, particularly big-city, school districts have not saved money but have hurt learning, creating mediocre schools and reducing the options parents have to move to better schools.

Parents who are able to escape to private schools no longer invest themselves in public schools. Those who can escape to smaller districts in the suburbs are similarly indifferent.

“In the land of the free, parents have little freedom in educating their children. Not only is this against the very things our nation stands for, but it is leaving us with generations of poorly educated children. It may be within our reach to change.”

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Herbert J. Walberg (think@heartland.org) is The Heartland Institute’s chairman of the board, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, and author of School Choice: The Findings (Cato Institute, 2008).
Rev. Al Sharpton, Other Prominent Democrats Break with Unions, Join Choice Movement

By Christin Coyne

Teacher unions and other traditional voices in education may be getting it wrong, the Rev. Al Sharpton has decided.

In the past, the civil rights activist has been known more for his opposition to school choice than for any teamwork with New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, but that changed radically in June when Sharpton joined Klein and a diverse group of fellow free-thinkers from all political stripes to form the Education Equality Project, a group advocating more charter schools and greater accountability.

“We keep going to the old ways that don’t work, to protect the political careers of some and the contracts of others at the expense of the children. And the results are the data that we have.”

REV. AL SHARPTON

“We keep going to the old ways that don’t work, to protect the political careers of some and the contracts of others at the expense of the children. And the results are the data that we have,” Sharpton said at a June 11 press conference.

“And someone has to have the political and the social courage—and I hope this group helps to begin that nationally—to say, ‘Wait a minute, the children are suffering,’” Sharpton said.

Civil Rights Issue

Klein noted African-American student achievement lags four years behind that of white students nationwide. Fixing that, he said, may mean Democrats such as Sharpton will have to call on the National Education Association (NEA) and other unions to stop standing in the way of systemic reforms.

“We failed to fix what was so obviously broken in the 1950s and long before that,” Klein said. “Today if you’re born African-American or Latino in this country, if your parents are poor, you’re much more likely to fail behind in a struggling school. You’re likely to get much lower scores in math and reading than you need and in other core subjects, and you’re much more likely to drop out. And if you do graduate, you’re more likely to graduate less prepared for college and for success.

“We need to be clear about this. To me, this is not just an issue of school reform. It’s a civil rights issue—indeed, the civil rights issue of our time,” Klein said.

“There is a problem in this country. The question, some say, is what “adequate and equitable funding” means. Charter schools operate with 40 percent less funding than other public schools,” said Jonathan Oglesby, director of public relations for the Center for Education Reform (CER), a charter school advocacy group based in Maryland.

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JOEL KLEIN, CHANCELLOR
NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS

Weaver said school reformers ought to focus on securing “adequate and equitable funding,” smaller classrooms, and more parental involvement. However, NEA and other unions are not so keen on tying teacher performance to wages or expanding charter schools, as the Education Equality Project proposes.

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“Charter schools operate with 40 percent less funding than other public schools,” said Jonathan Oglesby, director of public relations for the Center for Education Reform (CER), a charter school advocacy group based in Maryland.

According to CER’s 2008 charter school survey findings, released in July, charter schools’ main populations are at-risk, minority, and poor students. Eighty-five percent of charter school teachers responding to the survey do not participate in a union.

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

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