By Jillian Metz

The Florida Supreme Court removed two amendments from the November 4 ballot that would have protected the state’s existing school choice programs while creating an opportunity to implement additional choice options. On September 3 the court ordered Amendments 7 and 9 had to be stripped from the ballot as a result of a lawsuit filed by the Florida Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union. The seven justices unanimously ruled the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission exceeded its constitutional authority in proposing the two amendments to the state constitution earlier this year.

The commission, which meets once every 20 years to examine Florida’s tax and spending policies and recommend changes, has the power to place amendments directly on the ballot for voters’ consideration. It did so earlier this year, but the court said the amendments overreached its authority.

By Aricka Flowers

A study by a national education group shows the competition provided by Ohio’s Educational Choice Scholarship program is having positive effects not only on voucher recipients but on the state’s public schools as a whole.

According to the study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a national organization based in Indianapolis, the increased competition provided by the EdChoice voucher program—available to students in Ohio’s Voucher Program—sparks improvements in schools.

By Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, spearheaded the state’s efforts to give students better educational options through school choice.

Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, spearheaded the state’s efforts to give students better educational options through school choice.

Ohio Voucher Program Sparks Improvements in Schools

By Aricka Flowers

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Fewer People May Mean More Detroit Charters

By Jillian Melchior

As Detroit’s population dwindles in the wake of government scandals and widespread poverty, the city’s public school system is losing students. An unforeseen positive byproduct of this dire situation may mean more Detroit Charters.

By Aricka Flowers

N.J. Lawmaker Takes a Stand against Cheats

By Aricka Flowers

Recent reports of New Jersey teachers and administrators padding their salaries and retirement packages by receiving bogus degrees from unaccredited and suspect online universities has spurred state Senate President Richard J. Codey (D-Essex) to action. Codey in mid-August asked the state

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How Overcoming Our Fear of Markets and Economics Can Improve America’s Schools

“Education and Capitalism explodes the myths that the free market cannot provide a better quality education for all students than the current government monopoly. Walberg and Bast have amassed an impressive array of data and arguments to make the case for an alternative system of American education.”

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

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

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

MacDougal’s extraordinary journey shows the way for the rest of the nation and proves there are ways we can all help provide a ladder of opportunity for those in poverty. We each can Make a Difference in the ongoing effort to end America’s poverty problem.
Ga. Scholarship Plan Underway

Government roadblocks slow program’s launch

By Georgia Geis

Students in Georgia will have more opportunities for school choice thanks to the state’s new Tuition Tax Credit program, which was signed into law in May—but fewer than 100 have received the scholarships so far.

School choice advocates in Georgia envision the program providing scholarships for more than 12,000 students within its first few years. But the program had a modest start this autumn because of a delay by the Georgia Department of Revenue, with only 55 scholarships being given out by the eight scholarship-granting organizations approved by late September, according to the Georgia Family Council.

“This school choice advocates in Georgia envision the program providing scholarships for more than 12,000 students within its first few years.”

The Tuition Tax Credit program, which has an initial yearly cap of $50 million, allows individuals and businesses to receive a tax credit for donations to student scholarship organizations (SSOs).

The approved SSOs determine which students are qualified to receive the scholarships, which in turn allow parents to decide which accredited private school would be best for their children.

Finalizing Details

Eric Cochling, vice president of public policy for the Georgia Family Council, a nonprofit research organization based in Norcross, said one major reason for the program’s slow start was that the rules and regulations dictating how the tax credits would be handled for small, close-held limited liability corporations were still being finalized in late September.

“So a lot of the corporate support that we know is out there is being delayed until those corporations feel secure about where the law is and how they are going to be treated when they make their donations,” Cochling explained. “Even with that said, we have a lot of individuals and corporations who are already giving, and with the money, scholarships are being given out.”

State Sen. Eric Johnson (R-Savannah), who sponsored the bill creating the program last spring, said he understands it takes time to grow such a program, with several SSOs setting up nonprofit corporations and getting the word out to donors.

“I don’t expect to see many this year. But it will grow exponentially,” Johnson said.

Giving for Kids

Johnson said he has gotten a great response from Georgia businesses when he lets them know that instead of just giving a dollar to the government, they can give a dollar to fund a scholarship for a child.

“They are always pleased to know there are alternatives,” Johnson said.

Cochling shares Johnson’s optimism for the program, especially since other states have already had so much success with similar ones. He said Pennsylvania’s 17-year-old Educational Improvement Tax Credit program is a model for Georgia’s.

According to the REACH Foundation, the school choice group overseeing Pennsylvania’s tax credit scholarships, more than 44,000 students in the commonwealth are currently attending the school of their parents’ choice through the program in the 2007-08 school year.

The Georgia Family Council in May announced a new division, the Center for an Educated Georgia, to promote school choice and educational reform statewide.

Promoting the new tax credit scholarship program is at the forefront of the new group’s mission. The center provides information about the scholarship organizations online at educatedgeorgia.org. Cochling is serving as its interim director.

Improving Schools

To spread the word about the tax credit program, the Center for an Educated Georgia will produce advertisements, visit state and local chambers of commerce, and provide support for SSOs.

“The center will also commission original research showing the benefits of school choice,” Cochling said.

Georgia Geis (georgia.geis@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
New Jersey
Continued from page 1

The department of education to create new rules prohibiting teachers and administrators from getting pay increases or job perks for degrees from unaccredited universities. In early September, State Commissioner of Education Lucille Davy sent each school district guidelines on how to identify potential diploma mills.

According to Codey’s office, the state education department will soon announce new rules guiding salary increases, tuition reimbursements, and other perks for educators who pursue higher education. Under the new policy, such bonuses will be granted only to those earning degrees from institutions that pass the state’s accrediting criteria.

And that’s just the beginning.

“I believe the severity of the situation warrants further investigation by the attorney general,” Codey wrote in an August 18 press release. “How can you tell me someone who sends in their resume and writes a two-page paper to receive a secondary degree is not knowingly gaming the system?”

### Cheaters Won’t Prosper

Many experts second Codey’s sentiment about the knowingly deceptive approach some educators took in obtaining degrees from diploma mills.

Under the school system’s pay structure, educators who earn advanced degrees or a certain number of college credits will receive an automatic raise in pay, additional contributions to retirement packages, and tuition reimbursement. Because of this, many educators are suspected of taking the easy route by getting degrees from questionable online universities.

It is unknown how many New Jersey educators have taken degrees from such institutions.

“I think a lot of educators who got these degrees are going to say they thought it was real, but I don’t buy that,” said Alan Contreras, a national expert on diploma mills and administrator of the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization.

“Almost all of these degrees in question are doctorates, so that means the people getting them have at least one degree [already],” Contreras continued.

“That means they know what a degree program is really like. So for them to say that they didn’t know anything was suspicious about the programs is a tough sell. Plus, it’s easy to find out whether a school is accredited.”

### Matter of Emphasis

Although Codey is outraged by the apparently frequent abuse of diploma programs, many education experts are not batting an eye at the revelation.

“No one should be surprised that it was discovered that teachers and administrators got degrees from diploma mills,” said Gregg Edwards, president of the Center for Policy Research of New Jersey, a Bloomsbury-based think tank focused on fiscal policy.

“It’s a result of too much emphasis on advanced degrees to get an increased salary,” Edwards continued. “As a teacher, the only way to get a promotion in pay is through seniority or attaining credits in graduate courses. That puts a lot of pressure on them, and some succumb to doing it the easy way. I assume if you had a system that didn’t put so much emphasis on getting advanced degrees, you probably wouldn’t have this problem.”

### Call for Systemic Change

Edwards recommends school systems do away with pay increases based on advanced degrees, arguing they almost never improve students’ educational outcomes except in math and science. The incentive money would be more effective if used to attract better teachers or reward those who improve the measured academic performance of students over a school year, he said.

Codey finds it appalling that many educators who utilized diploma mills failed to focus on making improvements in their classrooms and instead used the degrees to boast about their new “credentials.”

“It’s completely and utterly ridiculous that people at the top of our educational system are being paid, rewarded in fact, for a degree that for all intents and purposes comes from a fake university,” Codey wrote in the release.

Essentially, these administrators pay a few grand for a degree, and then they are entitled to annual pay raises worth up to several thousand dollars, not to mention more pension credits because their salary has been bumped up.

“The biggest insult is that some of these people insist on being called ‘doctor’ after they buy their Ph.D. online. That’s about the equivalent of Colonel Sanders claiming he has real military experience,” Codey wrote.

### Aggressive Approach

In dealing with educators who have abused the degree-based compensation program, education experts say an aggressive, straightforward approach is needed, especially for administrators.

“Unlike classroom teachers, superintendents are less of a protected class,” said Derrell Bradford, deputy director of Excellent Education for Everyone, a free-market education reform group based in Trenton. “People see superintendents as free agents, and are more apt to say they are making too much money over teachers. I think there could be some potential caps on superintendent salaries.”

“When it comes to our high-poverty districts, the state department of education has said they will do what they can about educators who have contracts based on these fake degrees. People need to start confronting these administrators, either formally or informally, about their actions in order to stop this,” Bradford continued.

### Pressing for Investigation

Codey says he will push for the return of any monetary benefits teachers and administrators have reaped from obtaining diploma-mill degrees.

In late August he sent a letter to the state attorney general’s office requesting an investigation to find out whether administrators knew they were fudging their qualifications in order to get public funds, which became a criminal offense in the state last year.

“What this says to students is that the very people who are entrusted with establishing educational rules for course work, diplomas, and academic integrity have lost all legs to stand on as they themselves have cheated the educational system by undermining the legitimate degrees of their colleagues and of course students,” Codey wrote in an August 25 press release.

“This is a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ policy that the taxpayers are being forced to fund,” Codey continued. “It’s wrong, and once we find out exactly who is benefiting from these cash-and-carry diplomas, we’ll continue to put pressure on them to return these unearned perks.”

### In Other Words

“Either we do this with you or we do this to you.”

— DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee to the city’s teachers union president, George Parker, on firing bad teachers. The two are working out a deal to trade the teachers’ guaranteed job security for the chance to earn six-figure salaries if they prove they can teach well. Newsweek, September 1, 2008
Teachers Can Get Good Benefits without Paying Union Member Dues

By Evelyn Stacey

The Association of American Educators, along with the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, kicked off a back-to-school campaign this fall to inform teachers and the public about the many organizations offering them insurance and other benefits... without paying costly union dues.

The campaign started Labor Day weekend and continues in each state, informing communities and individuals through public service announcements. “It is a way to let employees know about their rights, and we are offering free legal aid as well,” said Patrick Semmens, director of legal information at the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Springfield, Virginia that provides free legal aid to employees whose rights have been violated by compulsory union membership.

“In many cases, especially in the states in which this campaign is being waged, teachers are unaware that they do not have to join the union, and they are often unaware there are other options,” said Heather Reams, associate director of the Association of American Educators (AAE). The Mission Viejo, California-based group is one of the nation’s fastest-growing national nonunion teachers’ associations, with members in all 50 states.

**Better Deal**

The two largest national teacher unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—promise to provide legal protection, job security, and collective bargaining for members. Currently, two million teachers nationwide are union members, and of that number, 1.3 million must pay union fees or be fired, according to a recent survey by the National Institute for Labor Relations Research (NILRR).

The California Teachers Association, the NEA state affiliate, offers up to $1 million in professional liability insurance. Union dues for California teachers average $57.42 per month and can reach $1,048 per year, according to the United Teachers of Los Angeles, the city’s chapter of the group.

Many teachers, however, do not realize they can get similar or better services without the hefty price tag. AAE, a nonunion professional association, offers California teachers $2 million in insurance at an average of $15 a month, just $180 a year.

**Candidate Support**

Teacher unions seem to keep dues-paying members in the dark about how and where the money is being spent, critics say. For example, members of the Wisconsin Education Association, the NEA’s state affiliate, didn’t know $1.5 million of their dues money would be used to pay for television ads to influence voters on hotly contested state Assembly races, according to an August 20, 2008 story in the Madison newspaper Capitol Times.

Dues taken directly out of teachers’ paychecks are consistently given to political parties, candidates, or causes that not all teachers support. During the 2007-08 school year, the NEA set aside $50 million to support the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential election, according to a July 5, 2008 article in The Hill, a Beltway newspaper in the District of Columbia.

“Teachers are not all the same, [and that practice] is presumptive and insulting to teachers as individuals,” said Semmens.

Union lobbyists consistently oppose innovations that would increase their members’ choices. In particular, unions oppose the individual’s right of association and the right to choose whether to belong to a union and pay its bills.

California is one of 23 states in which public school teachers must belong to a union, and therefore must pay dues. The remaining states are referred to as “right-to-work” states, in which people have the recognized right to work without being compelled to join a union, according to the NILRR.

**Mislabeled Content**

No one would know this from the NEA’s website, which describes “right-to-work” states as “states where unions can’t negotiate agreements that require all employees covered by a collective bar-

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**In Other Words**

“Too many city governments look to the schools first as a jobs program, second as a means for educating kids. Why shouldn’t they? The mostly poor citizenry they serve aren’t going to buy a house in the suburbs, and if they did, it would probably be a net fiscal plus for a city providing expensive services on a very thin tax base.

“Vouchers, Democrats say, are no substitute for fixing the schools. This would be true if anyone had anything other than nice-sounding phrases with which to fix them. Giving money to failing urban school districts is like giving money to failing third-world economies; the entrenched interests siphon it off for their own uses. Teacher salaries go up, janitorial pensions get fatter, more administrators are hired. But the kids don’t get any smarter.”

— Megan McArdle, on why Democrats who personally benefit from the ability to send their children to private schools too often act hypocritically when it comes to giving low-income families the same choice. The Atlantic, September 11, 2008

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**INTERNET INFO**


Florida
Continued from page 1

Amendment 7 sought to lift the state’s century-old “Blaine amendment” prohibiting tax money from going to religious institutions. In this case, the public funds would have allowed school vouchers to be used at Catholic schools statewide. In 2004 a state appellate court cited the Blaine amendment in its ruling striking down former Gov. Jeb Bush’s (R) universal voucher program, the first nationwide.

“The seven justices unanimously ruled the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission exceeded its constitutional authority in proposing the two amendments to the state constitution earlier this year.”

No Power for Voters
Amendment 9 had two parts. One would have instituted a 65 percent rule, which would require at least 65 percent of school funds to be used in the classroom and not for administrative purposes. The other would have expanded the definition of “uniform education” to include private options.

In ruling the universal voucher program unconstitutional in 2006, the Florida Supreme Court had cited a clause in the document requiring the state to provide a “high quality, uniform” education to all students, opening only public schools not that requirement.

“No, more than ever, Floridians should have a voice in determining, not just how much they are taxed, but how their tax dollars are spent,” Bush said in a September 12 newsletter. “Perhaps even more heartbreaking is the realization that Floridians will not have the opportunity to succeed.”

Diversity Arguments
Doug Tuthill, president of the Florida School Choice Fund, which awards the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship to more than 20,000 low-income children statewide, said the rulings potentially threaten the Sunshine State’s existing choice programs.

“Amendments 7 and 9 would have clarified that including private schools in a high-quality, uniform system of public education is constitutional in Florida. Because these amendments were removed from the ballot, our scholarship program now remains vulnerable to constitutional challenges,” Tuthill said.

“We are working to convince the courts and the public that the uniformity clause in our state constitution means ‘uniformity of opportunity’ and not uniformity of delivery,” Tuthill continued. “A one-size-fits-all system of K-12 education does not provide every child an equal opportunity to succeed.”

Because only 43 percent of black males in Florida graduate from high school in four years, the focus needs to be on diversifying delivery methods to achieve a high-quality education, Tuthill said. Fortunately, “the increasing bipartisan support in our legislature and in the public at large is strengthening our ability to defend school choice generally and our scholarship program specifically,” he said.

During the spring 2008 legislative session, a bill to expand the corporate tax-credit scholarship program received support from more than 50 percent of the House Black Caucus and 36 percent of all House Democrats—a dramatic shift in support from when the program was created seven years ago with only one Democrat voting in favor of the bill.

“Perhaps even more heart-breaking is the realization that Floridians will not have the opportunity to protect important programs, including the McKay Scholarship for students with developmental disabilities and Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships for students in low-income families.”

JEB BUSH
FORMER GOVERNOR - FLORIDA

Aside from the teachers union, other supporters of the lawsuit included the Florida School Boards Association, Florida Association for District School Superintendents, Florida Association of School Administrators, Anti-Defamation League, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People for the American Way Foundation, and American Civil Liberties Union Foundation.

Jillian Metz (jillian.metz@gmail.com) writes from Tampa.

In Other Words

“I won my last election with 66 percent of the vote, and I campaigned in favor of school choice. Everyone in my district knew I supported school choice, and they voted for me. So it’s obviously not as big of a wedge issue as the Democrats and my opponent think it is.”

— Utah state Rep. Carl Wimmer (R-Herriman), who expects challenger Dave Hogue—a former Republican legislator from Wimmer’s district who switched parties to run for his old seat—to make an issue of Wimmer’s support for school choice during the race. The Salt Lake Tribune, September 11, 2008
California Parents Retain Their Right to Homeschool Kids

By Jillian Melchior

California parents are able to continue homeschooling their children this fall thanks to the reversal of a decision rendered earlier this year by the state's Court of Appeals. The new ruling upholds parents' right to homeschool their children even if the parents lack teaching credentials.

The original ruling, issued in February, banned non-credentialed parents from homeschooling their children. But because the decision was reversed in August before the new school year began, it had little actual effect on homeschooling families.

That's not to say the original decision didn't raise alarm, said Ian Slatter, spokesman for the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, a national advocacy and support group based in Virginia. Homeschool families and advocates across the country united to protect their way of life.

"It was one of the most significant homeschool court decisions for the past 15 years," Slatter said. "They just didn't look far enough in statute books to get the right answer. They definitely made a big mistake. They'd be the ones to talk about why they got it so wrong the first time."

The original ruling evoked concern from several elected officials, with California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) calling for its reversal in March.

"This outrageous ruling must be overturned by the courts, and if the courts don't protect parents' rights then, as elected officials, we will," Schwarzenegger said in a news release.

Despite the reversal of opinion, the homeschooling community will continue to be vigilant, Slatter said. The original ruling showed how quickly homeschoolers' choice can be threatened, and the community must be organized and active to protect their rights, he said.

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Jillian Melchior (jilliankaym@gmail.com) writes from Michigan.
Vouchers
Continued from page 1
underperforming schools statewide—has spurred improvements in public schools. The analysis found in the 2006-07 school year—the program’s first year of operation—public schools showed positive effects in three grades, while no negative effects were found in the other seven grades evaluated.

The changes were so substantial researchers predict the enhancements will result in a one-standard-deviation improvement in the academic performance of public schools three to four years into the program. The findings were consistent among school types regardless of the quality of the school.

“What this shows is that vouchers do benefit students who remain in public schools, not just the students who use them,” said Greg Forster, Ph.D., a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation and author of the August report. “The study also shows that voucher programs should be larger and more universal so we can take advantage of these positive aspects.”

Helping Students
The EdChoice program allows students from underperforming schools to attend participating private schools.

Up to 14,000 students can take advantage of the scholarship program if they attend schools designated as being in “academic emergency” or under “academic watch” for two of the past three years. Each Ohio school is ranked according to performance on a six-category scale. Excellent with distinction, excellent, effective, continuous improvement, on academic watch, and in academic emergency.

“What this shows is that vouchers do benefit students who remain in public schools, not just the students who use them.”

GREG FORSTER, PH.D.
SENIOR FELLOW
FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION
FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

According to the Ohio Department of Education’s 2007-2008 Guide for Ohio’s Report Card System, being on academic watch means a school has met only 31 to 49.9 percent of 30 performance indicators for school evaluation. A school in academic emergency has met zero to 30.9 percent of the indicators. Performance indicators include meeting or exceeding the state requirement of 93 percent of students in attendance and 90 percent graduation.

Changing Expectations
Education experts say the marked improvements in Ohio’s public schools are to be expected after the implementation of a voucher program.

“I wasn’t surprised to see the improvements because I’ve never bought the argument that school vouchers and scholarships hurt public schools,” said Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, a Columbus-based organization that aims to protect and expand children’s educational options. “And now we have evidence. This is a very important step toward getting greater acceptance for voucher programs. Many times people prey on the fears that this will hurt public schools.”

Even elected officials have noticed a positive change in Ohio’s public schools since the voucher program was put into play.

“They became very focused on improving educational outcomes,” said Ohio House Speaker Jon Husted (R-Kettering). “Public schools did deliver more individualized services by starting schools that were not all one-size-fits-all schools. Some of the individualized programs have been single-gender schools and academies devoted to life skills. We are seeing the public school system offer programs that are unique to the individual needs of the children and desires of parents, which is making them much more responsive to public schools.”

Tired Old Arguments
Even though Forster’s study shows vouchers to be a positive for public schools, he doesn’t think it will stop opponents from arguing against the programs.

“This is one more in a long line of empirical studies finding that vouchers improve public schools,” Forster said. “No study has found that vouchers hurt public schools. But that has not stopped the other side from making that claim. I think the evidence will continue to be on the side of choice, but that probably won’t stop teachers unions from saying that vouchers hurt public schools.”

According to Forster’s report, Ohio should continue to see marked improvements in the state’s public school system. Because the first year of the EdChoice program was its most restricted, the successes noted in the first year of operation should increase as constraints fall away.

Husted said the expected additional improvements make a good case for bringing more school choice to the state.

“It’s hard to argue with success,” Husted said. “And when you can show legislators and opinion leaders how school choice is making a real difference in the lives of students in terms of both their human development and academic progress, it becomes more difficult to argue against these changes.”

“I think you are going to continue to see public schools make themselves more attractive to families and school-aged children. If they want more students, they need to deliver,” Husted noted.

Building on Success
Husted hopes the Friedman Foundation’s findings will help in his efforts to expand Ohio’s voucher programs in the near future.

“One of the things we hope to accomplish is a voucher program for special-needs students,” Husted said. “We have a bill that has passed the Senate and is now in the House, which we are hoping to pass on to Gov. [Ted] Strickland. He vetoed it in this general assembly, so we now have a standalone bill. We hope that as he begins to see the successes of the EdChoice voucher program, he will not veto the bill and will instead sign it into law.”

Aricia Flowers (atflowers2@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.

In Other Words

“I think most people, parents and children, appreciate the choice. You can decide what school you want to attend, and that appeals to people.”

— Bertil Ostberg, an official with Sweden’s Ministry of Education, on school choice. The nation is seeing great results from a 16-year-old policy allowing for-profit companies to run private schools financed by taxpayers.

“If you run a good operation, then you make a profit. But you won’t get any students if you are bad. You have to do a good job to get money; that is even more important for a private school.”

— Barbro Lillkaas, a Swedish mother considering putting her child in a private school. Swedish officials say independent schools have forced public schools to raise their own standards and improve efficiency. The Associated Press, August 11, 2008

INTERNET INFO

Ohio Autism Voucher Program Turns Five

By Michael Coulter

At the end of the 2007-08 school year, Ohio’s autism voucher program completed its fifth year of delivering school choice for parents of autistic children. Since its inception, the program has grown significantly, and participating parents have expressed great satisfaction.

“The best evidence of how well this program has worked in Ohio over the last five years is its wild popularity with parents,” said state Rep. Jon Peterson (R-Delaware). “Parents are in the best position to make important decisions on behalf of their children, and the popularity of the program is best explained by parents seeing their children fulfill their potential for the first time when they receive appropriate services.”

When the program went into effect in early 2004, students were eligible only for the final quarter of the school year. During that time, 70 students signed up for the program.

According to data presented in a study released in March by Policy Matters Ohio, the program grew to 300 students in 2004-05. In 2005-06, 475 students participated—more than 50 percent growth over the previous year. In 2006-07, 734 students enrolled, and by 2007-08, more than 900 students were participating from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.

Parents Like Program

“The Autism Scholarship Program has worked in Ohio over the last five years is its wild popularity with parents.”

JON PETERSON (right)
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DELaware, OHIO

Parents interviewed for this study... tended to express more satisfaction with services than did parents in district schools.”

Beth Lear, an education policy analyst with the Buckeye Institute, a policy organization based in Columbus, said in testimony to the Ohio Senate Education Committee last April that parental satisfaction “was the most important finding” that parents strongly supported the program.

“The Autism Society of Ohio, an Akron-based organization, says on its Web site it is neutral on the program, but it reports, “the feedback received from families has largely been positive,” in part because it “enables families to have a choice of tailored programs outside of the public school setting for specialized services” and allows “families to seek private services that otherwise would not be able to afford it.”

In Other Words

“It is the same story when it comes to the teachers’ unions, the biggest special interest of all in the Democratic party. They not only contribute money, they can contribute people who walk the precincts on election nights, rounding up the faithful to go vote.

“Even the Congressional Black Caucus dares not vote for vouchers or any other form of school choice that the teachers’ unions oppose. Better to let a whole generation of black children be trapped in failing schools that employ union teachers.”

— Thomas Sowell, on legislation supported by Sen. Barack Obama (D-ILL) and other Congressional Democrats that would eliminate secret ballots when the government conducts elections to determine whether workers in certain industries want to be represented by a union. National Review Online, August 14, 2008

Limited to Small Percentage

Despite this rapid growth, the program still enrolls only a small percentage of autistic students statewide.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, in 2003-04 public schools in the state enrolled approximately 5,000 students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)—legal documents developed for special-needs students—that included autism as a diagnosis. Just over 1 percent of the state’s students with autism participated in the scholarship program that year.

By 2006-07, more than 9,000 students statewide had IEPs indicating autism, and more than 8 percent of them participated in the voucher program that year. There has been exponential growth in the number of students diagnosed with autism since the department began collecting data on IEPs with autism in 1995.

Augmenting Practice

The federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to provide appropriate services to children with disabilities, and the nature of what should be provided is indicated in an IEP. The Autism Scholarship Program builds on this practice and provides scholarships for students with IEPs.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, “Parents can only claim and receive payment for services specified on the child’s IEP” up to $20,000. The average cost of vouchers requested is about $15,000.

The services to students with autism can be provided by private schools that have operated for at least one year and are registered with the department.

Parents Like Program

“The Autism Scholarship Program has enjoyed tremendous parent satisfaction,” said Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, a group based in Columbus.

A March 2008 report written by Piet Van Lier for Policy Matters Ohio, a progressive think tank with offices in Cleveland and Columbus, included several criticisms of the program but acknowledged, “parents interviewed for... tended to express more satisfaction with services than did parents in district schools.”

In her April 8 testimony to the Senate Education Committee, Lear responded to such criticisms by noting special-service providers cannot necessarily offer all services to all parents, and that religious-based programs constitute only a small percentage of the total offered. No parent is forced to accept a religious program, she noted.

Lear also rejected claims the program is too slanted toward wealthier parents, citing data indicating the 10 school districts with the greatest per-pupil spending have seven times as many autistic children as the 10 poorest districts.

“Evidence most tend to be lower-income, minority children and their families.”

Michael Coulter (mlcoulter@gcc.edu) writes from Pennsylvania.

Criticisms Debated

Van Lier’s 50-page critique of the program—the only lengthy study to date—argues it should be restructured because he says special-service providers can be unduly selective. Only 15 of 40 providers examined accepted students regardless of level of disability, according to the report. According to Van Lier, 14 of 40 charge fees greater than $20,000, discouraging lower-income parents from using the vouchers.

In addition, Van Lier says some providers’ religious commitments would discourage some parents from using the program, and most of the eligible providers are located in more heavily populated areas, making them inaccessible to parents in rural areas. He also said vouchers tend to be used by upper-middle-income parents.

“Even the Congressional Black Caucus dares not vote for vouchers or any other form of school choice that the teachers’ unions oppose. Better to let a whole generation of black children be trapped in failing schools that employ union teachers.”

— Thomas Sowell, on legislation supported by Sen. Barack Obama (D-ILL) and other Congressional Democrats that would eliminate secret ballots when the government conducts elections to determine whether workers in certain industries want to be represented by a union. National Review Online, August 14, 2008
This summer, Patrick Byrne, chairman and CEO of Overstock.com, Inc., was elected co-chairman of the board of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an advocacy group based in Indianapolis. Byrne has founded 19 schools around the world that have served more than 7,000 children since 2005. Domestically, he has funded private school scholarships for low-income families in Utah since 2005 and was the primary supporter of Utah’s Referendum One in 2007, a campaign for the state to become the first in the nation to enact a universal school voucher program. In addition, in 2005 he founded First Class Education, an effort to empower teachers by driving more dollars directly into the classroom. Byrne recently sat down with School Reform News reporter Jillian Metz to discuss the future of education.

Jillian Metz: As the new co-chair of the Friedman Foundation, where do you think the greatest potential lies for school choice in the United States? How will you contribute to helping the movement reach more of its potential?

Patrick Byrne: Great opportunities exist in the South. There are political dynamics in the Southern region that create fertile soil, because education is an issue among African-Americans and Hispanics that is driving them away from the teachers union-owned wing of the Democratic Party.

Metz: As the November elections approach, who do you feel will deliver the change our nation needs in terms of education? Do you feel strongly about either presidential candidate?

Byrne: No, because I don’t believe the change we need will come from the federal government. In fact, the only thing we need from the federal government is for it to tiptoe backward, out the door of the classroom. I believe we need to abolish the Department of Education and move toward local control. Ultimately, all I want out of either candidate is to make sure that this is a state issue.

With that said, John McCain has come out and said he is a staunch voucher supporter. I think Barack Obama is privately pro-voucher. Obama has said we need to consider vouchers; however, during the election process he cannot publicly support vouchers. After the election, I think he would come out with a moderate pro-voucher position.

Metz: What do you think is the biggest challenge we currently face in providing a higher-quality education to our nation’s children?

Byrne: The biggest stumbling block to improving education in America is the monopoly of the education guild. The monopoly is created as a combination of the teachers unions, or guild, the educators, and the government officials all the way from the district level to the counties, as well as the state all the way up to the U.S. Department of Education. So if you take all the government officials and you add in the teachers guild, you end up with an establishment, which creates a virtual monopoly.

Metz: As you may know, Florida had a constitutional amendment on the November 4 ballot proposing 65 percent of all education funding be spent on teachers’ salaries and other classroom costs—which is a philosophy you conceived. The Florida Supreme Court pulled this off the ballot on September 3.

Byrne: I am very disappointed. Florida’s Supreme Court is very political. The state supreme court is pro-establishment and is hurting kids. The Florida Supreme Court is not concerned about law and constitutional principle; it is about defending an establishment and is against reform. In addition, the justices will root to find any principal text against reform.

Metz: As you look around the nation, which states do you feel are excelling in the school choice movement and which do you feel will be the next to offer parental choice?

Byrne: As states come under increasing budget pressures and more parents become fed up with their children’s failing education, there is really just one route to go. A lot of states are out there exploring educational opportunity methods, but you cannot predict when states will move from the actual exploring stage to the action phase because too much individual politics is involved.

Arizona is excelling, and what is nice about it is that it is so widespread. The people who take advantage of it are scattered, making it harder for a legislative board to vote it out. If any legislator were to come out against the programs, he or she would stand to lose a significant number of votes.

Louisiana is a good example of a state with a modest program that started off with 800 scholarships this year. People were lining up at 4:00 in the morning to get these scholarships with only one day’s notice about their availability.

Georgia is promising. Florida’s voucher movement had a setback with the ballot amendments, but it is not dead—especially with the bipartisan support the program receives.

There has been a lot of work done to lay the groundwork for choice in the state of South Carolina over the past five years or so. There has been a significant amount of educating the general public about school choice, and as we have found in other states, the more education and awareness that takes place, the more support we find for school choice.

South Carolina has had some serious educational problems and challenges, and this has helped the overall environment as well. And it does not hurt that the governor is supportive of school choice.
Support for Charter Schools Is Strong Nationwide: Survey

By Ben DeGrow

National charter school advocates say public support continues to grow for the popular alternative to traditional public schools.

According to the Center for Education Reform’s report on America’s Attitudes Toward Charter Schools, four in five Americans cannot correctly identify a charter school as a public school. However, nearly the same number support the concept of “allowing communities to create new public schools” with accountability, the same academic standards, and no additional taxpayer funds.

“One they’re given a basic understanding of what these options are, a whopping 78 percent show support for charter schools,” said Kara Kerwin, CER’s director of external affairs.

Byrne: Utah is politically conservative, but they do have a chord of not wanting to be seen as too different or too wacky, which caused concern with the voucher proposal.

One of the problems in the school choice movement is that everyone in America understands that education stinks, but everyone thinks their school is better than average. So we have a lot of loyalty from locals to their government schools. In particular, Republican moms are the ones who are linking arms with the guild.

Utah has a very weak governor. He sat in my living room and told me three things: He would be the “voucher governor,” vouchers will be his legacy, and the reason he was running for governor was to bring vouchers to Utah. After the voucher legislation was passed at the state level, polls came out on the referendum revealing voters were 80-20 against vouchers. I told the governor that we would have to link arms and campaign for this. His response was that “this was outside his comfort zone.” And this is why the governor and I are not on speaking terms and I say I would vote for a Communist before I’d vote for him again.

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“Once they’re given a basic understanding of what these options are, a whopping 78 percent show support for charter schools.”

KARA KERWIN
DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

“Once they’re given a basic understanding of what these options are, a whopping 78 percent show support for charter schools,” said Kara Kerwin, CER’s director of external affairs.

“Nearly 70 percent agree with public school choice. Through the years, these numbers remain pretty high.”

Fifty-nine percent of respondents favored the use of student performance measures in determining teacher compensation.

Demanding More Choices

The CER report, released in August, highlights the results of polls conducted nationally and in seven states since 2005. Majorities of respondents consistently expressed their support for giving children the option to choose a school beyond their neighborhood assignment.

“It’s encouraging to see that a strong majority of Americans reject the idea that students should be assigned to public schools based simply on where they live,” said Dan Lips, a senior education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.

“The policy of location-based school assignment that prevails in many communities consigns millions of American kids to bad schools,” Lips said.

One major advocacy group thinks the widespread support for charter schools and rejection of rigid neighborhood school assignments bodes well for other educational choice initiatives as well.

“This study shows yet again that parents across America want a true portfolio of options when it comes to educating their children,” said Andrew Campanella, a spokesman for the Alliance for School Choice, a national group based in Washington, DC. “That includes strong public schools, private schools through vouchers and tax credits, homeschooling, virtual schools, and charter schools.”

Familiarity Breeds Support

According to the national survey, parents most likely would be prompted to choose another school if their child feels unsafe in the one assigned by the government. Inability to communicate with teachers and poor building facilities were also leading causes, while inadequate after-school activities and the decisions of other parents were less likely to provoke a change in schools.

CER’s report found states with stronger charter school laws and more media coverage of the issue, such as California, yielded somewhat greater familiarity with and support for charter schools.

“For too long, defenders of the status quo have been able to build opposition among parents by creating fear about change,” Lips said. “But this poll suggests that as people better understand the benefits of school choice they are becoming more supportive.”

CER probed more deeply to discern public support for specific proposals to strengthen charter schools in two states, Georgia and Wyoming. Seventy-two percent of Georgians approved of having an alternative charter school authority outside the local school board. Nearly six in 10 Wyoming residents agreed.

“Wyoming has one of the worst charter school laws, and some legislators were trying to open it up with reforms,” Kerwin said, noting a bill to set up an independent chartering authority nearly overcame entrenched opposition there earlier this year. “That poll helped to focus efforts on where we needed to inform people about their options.”

Growing Mandate

In Georgia, a narrow majority expressed dissatisfaction with the existing public education system. In results such as these, Campanella sees an opportunity for raising general awareness of the current system’s shortcomings.

“We need to continue educating the public about the problems that plague the public schools, and that we have heard for a quarter-century or more from teachers unions and entrenched bureaucrats the same answers to educational problems,” Campanella said. “We have nothing to show for it.”

Kerwin observed the tremendous support for charter schools uncovered in the CER report strongly suggests the public would be receptive to significant change now.

“Our elected officials need to be listening to that mandate,” Kerwin said. “They should be paying attention to what their constituents are asking them to support.”

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

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choice. As a result, we are optimistic that some sort of program will be enacted in the near future.

Metz: Were you surprised at the outcome of the Utah universal voucher program referendum in 2007? One might expect Utah, one of the most politically conservative states, to embrace choice.

Byrne: Utah is politically conservative, but they do have a chord of not wanting to be seen as too different or too wacky, which caused concern with the voucher proposal.

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Jillian Metz (jillian.metz@gmail.com) writes from Florida.
By Ben DeGrow

The end of an eight-month moratorium on new charter schools in Nevada may expand the state’s increasingly popular independent public schools of choice, supporters say.

The Nevada Board of Education has ended a freeze unanimously approved on November 30, 2007, agreeing to consider charter school applications once again. The moratorium was prompted by complaints the state education department lacked sufficient staff and resources to process 11 incoming applications and monitor the state’s existing 22 charter schools.

Andy Matthews, spokesman for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colo., said it was ridiculous for Nevada education officials to try to halt an increasingly popular educational option.

“What’s most absurd is when you have increased public demand for a service, in the real world you respond to it by meeting that demand,” Matthews said. “There’s a disconnect in how government deals with that demand.”

Hardly ‘Overwhelmed’

Ricci Rodriguez-Elkins, president of the Center for Charter School Development Nevada, said the state education department has one full-time and one part-time staff member to review applications, aided by other employees on a limited basis. A smaller team of three to five state employees is charged with site visits and ensuring compliance.

In the Nevada Policy Research Institute’s May 2008 report Quality and Quantity, Matthew Ladner noted neighboring Arizona successfully oversees 482 charter schools with a staff of eight—a much larger ratio than supposedly “overwhelmed” Nevada state staffers. In addition, Nevada law provides the state 2 percent of charter school per-pupil funding for oversight, while Arizona’s state education department receives no such fee.

“If Arizona’s statute provided for a greater of oversight fee, the Arizona State Board could have a budget of over $13 million—easily exceeding the point of diminishing marginal returns,” Ladner writes.

Ladner says Nevada’s moratorium was on shaky legal ground, as state law mandates a State Board of Education subcommittee “shall hold a meeting to consider” a charter school appeal. But he also cites 2005 legislation that said the board “may approve,” rather than “shall approve,” satisfactory applications.

“It’s not clear whether the State Board is obligated” to approve charter applications, Matthews agreed.

Frozen Out

The state’s moratorium followed the lead of Nevada’s two largest school districts—Washoe County and Clark County—which had decided to stop approving new charter schools in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Applicants denied by the local school districts had recourse to appeal to the State Board before the board enacted its own freeze.

“We could never understand why the school districts and State Board of Education were crying wolf and not wanting to deal with the charter schools. Charter schools felt like they weren’t getting much help, because it seemed officials didn’t want them to be successful.”

Barbara Cegavske (right)
State Senator
Las Vegas, Nevada

Cegavske said Nevada’s moratorium was on shaky legal ground, as state law mandates a State Board of Education subcommittee “shall hold a meeting to consider” a charter school appeal. But he also cites 2005 legislation that said the board “may approve,” rather than “shall approve,” satisfactory applications.

“It’s not clear whether the State Board is obligated” to approve charter applications, Matthews agreed.

In Other Words

“It’s embarrassing to be a Democrat when you hear Democrats talk about education. The Democratic Party is supposed to be the party that looks out for poor black kids, yet the kind of rhetoric they spew about...[how the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind law is] sucking the life out of our teachers”—come on. Get real. I believe that until the Democratic Party breaks ties with the teachers union, we are not going to see the true reform in this country that we need.

“We do not have a nation right now where every child has an equal chance in life, because poor black kids don’t have an equal shot in life, because they go to crappy schools, and the Democratic Party is not tackling this issue, which I think is one of the biggest problems that exist.”

— DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, a Democrat, on what prevents education reform. Newsweek, September 1, 2008

“Creating New Interest

Rodriguez-Elkins noted a public backlash has generated positive momentum for charter schools in the state, with backing from Republicans and Democrats.

“What came out of this moratorium was a huge public outcry and a surge of support from legislators who didn’t give us support before,” Rodriguez-Elkins said. In its August resolution, the State Board decided to use administrative fees to hire additional staff and agreed to institute more objective criteria for determining charter school approval.

In addition, an interim legislative committee approved a bill for consideration in Nevada’s 2009 session to create an independent charter authorizer. Modeled after similar institutions in Colorado and Utah, the proposed “charter school institute” would essentially serve as Nevada’s 18th school district. Applicants would have the opportunity to bypass local school districts and appeals to the State Board in the approval process.

Rodriguez-Elkins said the governor’s office is working on a similar proposal that may be brought into conference with the interim committee’s bill in 2009.

Enthusiastic Support for Charters

Cegavske said she believes the idea of a new authorizer “will be embraced” by her fellow legislators and would be a boon for the growing numbers of her constituents who have opted for the charter public education alternative.

“They love the schools, the opportunities to interview staff, to choose school sites, to decide where they want their kids to go, and to learn about different instructional programs,” Cegavske said. “I just really want charter schools to be successful, and this institute will be a way to help them do that.”

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

INTERNET INFO

CHOICE AND EDUCATION: WHERE DOES YOUR STATE RANK?

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

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

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

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Schools Find Creative Ways to Address Rising Gas Prices

By Dan Lips

As students headed back to school this fall, schools nationwide faced a new challenge: high gas prices. A new Congressional report finds the price hikes are having an impact on public schools around the country.

In September, members of the House Education and Labor Committee released a report presenting the findings of a survey of nearly 1,000 different stakeholders in American education, including parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Ninety percent of respondents reported high gas prices are affecting schools in their community.

House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) said the report highlighted another example of how gas prices are affecting the American economy.

“This report found that schools are in the same position as families, seniors, and small businesses—they are being squeezed by high energy costs,” Boehner said. “It’s forcing them to alter bus routes, cancel field trips, scale back sporting events and extracurricular activities, and raise lunch prices. And they want real action from this Congress to do something about it.”

“[S]chools are ... being squeezed by high energy costs. It’s forcing them to alter bus routes, cancel field trips, scale back sporting events and extracurricular activities, and raise lunch prices.”

JOHN BOEHNER
U.S. HOUSE MINORITY LEADER

Rising Costs

Half of the survey respondents reported schools in their community had been forced to cut back on field trips and after-school activities. A quarter of the survey’s respondents reported higher school lunch prices. A third said high costs had forced school systems to alter bus routes.

The new report presents more evidence energy prices have affected schools. In July, the National School Boards Association reported 86 school districts around the country had recently transitioned to four-day weeks. In many districts, schools have responded to gas-price hikes by altering bus routes, requiring students to walk farther to access their transportation.

Possible Solution

Allison Kasic, an analyst at the Independent Women’s Forum in Washington, DC, says energy prices are a concern for families.

“It’s no surprise that parents are concerned about rising energy prices and its impacts on their families,” Kasic said. “It’s not just schools that are affected—the rising cost of energy has rippled through the economy. Families are seeing a growing part of their budgets going to necessities like food and gas, so I think it’s natural to be concerned about that.”

The solution, Kasic said, is to increase energy supplies.

“Demand for energy is up worldwide, but supply hasn’t increased. That has resulted in higher prices,” Kasic explained. “So if we want prices to go down, we must focus on expanding our energy supply. Congress needs to reverse its destructive policies that prevent the exploration and refining of fossil fuels, in order to increase our domestic energy supply.”

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

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situation is that the city could be getting more charter schools.

As long as Detroit Public Schools enrolls at least 100,000 children, it maintains “first-class” status in the state, a designation giving the district unique financial powers and board structure and limiting how many charter schools can be founded. Section 502 of the school code, which has been in place since 1976, forbids community colleges to authorize charter schools in a first-class district.

But DPS estimates only 97,000 students are currently enrolled this year, which is expected to be confirmed in a September audit due later this fall.

As soon as the district’s first-class status is lost, qualified community colleges could open up as many charter schools in Detroit as they please, said Kathryn Summers-Coty, chief analyst of the Michigan Community College—could foster community colleges in Detroit as they please, said Kathryn Summers-Coty, chief analyst of the Michigan Community College—could foster community colleges in Detroit as they please, chief analyst of the Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency. Two colleges in Detroit—Bay Mills and Wayne County Community College—could foster the charter schools.

In response to the looming opportunity for charter schools, opponents introduced HB 5765 last February in the state legislature. The measure would reduce to 75,000 the minimum number of students required to maintain first-class status. The bill was still pending at press time.

Struggles Ahead

Although no new charter schools would likely open within the next academic year, Michigan’s urban Democrats are still planning to fight any expansions, said Michigan Association of Public School Academies spokesman Gary Naeyaere.

“If we could remove 100 percent from the public schools, that would increase Detroit’s chance of removing itself from poverty.”

BURTON FOLSOM
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST

“It’s going to be an exciting time in the Lansing legislature,” Naeyaere said. “I think you’re going to see a rather healthy discussion this fall about what should be the right approach in response to this.”

The debate is heightened because of the failure of many of Detroit’s schools. The city’s high school graduation rate was just 37.5 percent in 2005—the most recent year for which records were available at press time—according to a report from the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, released in June.

The children’s education is compromised by the school district’s financial instability and political struggles within its bureaucracy, analysts say. Crime, drugs, and violence are rampant in many of the schools. Currently 47 percent of Metro Detroit residents are functionally illiterate, according to the Detroit Literacy Coalition Web site.

The competition charter schools provide could be the turning point for some students’ experience, said Burton Folsom, an education expert and former analyst for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan.

“It’s obvious Detroit is not doing a good job in the public school system,” Folsom said. “Any student who is removed from a public school into a charter school has a better chance of learning to read and write. In other words, if we could remove 100 percent from the public schools, that would increase Detroit’s chance of removing itself from poverty.”

Competitive Market

Critics, however, worry charter schools would lock the most challenged students in the worst schools because charters can choose their students from a long waiting list, disqualifying special-needs children or those with behavioral problems if they want, said Detroit Federation of Teachers spokeswoman Margaret Weertz.

“I am not against choice, but I am against schools that come in for monetary reasons and don’t produce, don’t take all the students like we take,” Weertz said. “If it’s not an even playing field ... well, it’s not real competition, is it?”

Weertz argued. “Obviously, parents should have more choice. No one would argue that’s a bad thing. But how are we rating schools? How do we know if schools that come in for an advantageous reason are really producing a better product?”

Folsom said too much money has already been wasted in failing public schools.

“If charter schools fail, parents have the option of removing their kids from that charter school and putting them in a charter school that does better,” Folsom said. “A lot of the people in Detroit have no way out, so the more alternatives they can get in there, the better.”

Jillian Melchior (jilliankaym@gmail.com) writes from Michigan.

INTERNET INFO


Michigan Parents Consider Home the Best School of Choice for Them

More Bay State parents opt to teach kids at home for growing list of reasons

By Candice Williams and Karen Bouffard

Lake Orion resident Sydney Forsythe wasn’t pleased with how her son Noah, 8, who is developmentally delayed, was moved between mainstream and special education classes in public school. So she brought him home to teach him herself.

“He doesn’t fit into the special-ed cookie cutter, but at the same time he certainly doesn’t fit into the mainstream cookie cutter,” Forsythe said. “There’s no in-between, and he started regressing. The teachers do what they can, within reason, but with budget restrictions in the district there is only so much they can provide.”

While experts say most parents who homeschool do so for religious reasons, an increasing number of Metro Detroit families are making the same choice for reasons beyond the stereotype.

Popular Option

Homeschooling has emerged as a growing option for families of children like Noah who have special learning needs; are academically or athletically gifted; suffer from health problems; or just don’t fit the mold of traditional public schools, experts say.

And with the growth of cooperative learning groups as well as support groups on the Internet, homeschooling has become a less isolating endeavor, some say.

Severe food allergies are among the reasons Macomb Township resident Kimberly Fanelli homeschools daughters Sofia, 8, and Emilia, 6. The girls have celiac disease, which affects the small intestine. They have to avoid products with wheat, rye, barley, and oats—even crumbs.

“It’s more difficult to control in the traditional school setting,” Fanelli said. “It’s scary because their health is in someone else’s hands. At the school they were at they were doing everything they could, but there’s only so much you can do.”

“Homeschooling has emerged as a growing option for families of children ... who have special learning needs; are academically or athletically gifted; suffer from health problems; or just don’t fit the mold of traditional public schools, experts say.”

Better Education

Nationally, there is broad agreement across the homeschool community that there are more and more people coming into the homeschool movement without a religious motivation,” said Ian Slatter, director of media relations for Per Cleveland, Virginia-based Home School Legal Defense Association.

The association is Christian-based, but “we’re seeing people who simply want to give their children a better education. They may have a religious faith, but that’s not their driving reason.”

Still, the homeschool movement remains dominated by evangelical Christians, Slatter believes. He said it’s nearly impossible to accurately assess how many children are homeschooled, because people tend to pull their children in and out of homeschooling—leaving the number constantly in flux. But he estimates about 55 percent of homeschoolers are from evangelical Christian homes, compared with about 60 percent five years ago.

In Michigan, homeschoolers are not officially tracked—although some state lawmakers want to require parents to register their homeschooled students with the state to allow for a clearer count.

Reasons of Faith

For the Ouellette family of Madison Heights, religion does play a major role in their decision to homeschool. But Tricia Ouellette, who homeschools her children, Jeremy, 12, Jacob, 9, Joseph, 7, and Julia, 5, says she’s found other benefits to teaching her children at home, including tailoring education for each of her children. She can also be mindful of their penicillin and latex allergies.

Jacob Ouellette, 9, relaxes for a bit before eating breakfast with his three siblings and then it’s time for school—taught by his mom, around the dining room table.

“I like it better than going to school,” said Jacob Ouellette. “The only thing I don’t like is the homework.”

Interactive Communities

Web-based classes make it possible for competitive gymnast Caitlyn Ciokajlo, of Brooklyn, Michigan, near Jackson, to study at home—or on the road—via computer.

Caitlyn has her eyes set on a full athletic scholarship to a Division I university, said her mom, Stacy Ciokajlo.

“This is as close as you can be to an actual school, without the building,” Stacy Ciokajlo said.

Homeschooling is not without its challenges, said Karen Selby, associate professor and chairwoman of the Department of Education at University of Detroit Mercy.

“The number one issue that faces parents on homeschooling is figuring out what’s worth teaching, what’s worth my student understanding,” Selby said. To help ease the transition to homeschooling, many parents are turning to the Internet and support groups to share experiences and offer guidance.

Some groups work together to teach some of the tougher classes based on a parent’s strong suit, Selby said. Other groups hire out instructors with specialties. Programs like the Enrichment Hub in Troy offer classes including American Sign Language, karate, guitar, science lab, ballet, and Spanish.

The private Clonlara School in Ann Arbor operates both a private campus school that children attend daily and a homeschooling program that offers guidance, record-keeping, and documentation for about 1,000 homeschoolers.

Admissions associate Karen Thurman said the number of families who homeschool their children has “exploded” in recent years.

“They’re not [all] homeschooling because they have a deep commitment to a religious belief,” said Chandra Montgomery-Nicol, Clonlara’s executive director. “A lot feel they want the support of the school without the interference of the school.”

Candice Williams and Karen Bouffard are staff writers at The Detroit News, where this article originally appeared on September 10. Reprinted with permission from The Detroit News.

In Other Words

“It drives me nuts when people say that two-thirds of a kid’s academic achievement is based on their environment. That is B.S. Those kids, where they lived didn’t change. Their parents didn’t change. Their diets didn’t change. The violence in the community didn’t change. The only thing that changed for those 70 kids was the adults who were in front of them every single day teaching them.”

— DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, on taking a second-grade class in one of Baltimore’s lowest-performing schools from the bottom to the top on standardized tests when she began her career with Teach for America in 1992. NewswEEK, September 1, 2008
Cash-for-Grades Is Latest Misdirection Play

By Dan Proft

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats once wrote, “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.”

The city education establishments in Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, beg to differ. The leaders of these abysmally performing systems believe education is indeed the filling of a pail—with money.

Their latest gambit is not aimed at funneling taxpayer dollars into bureaucracies, but instead involves raising private funds to pay students for good grades.

The ‘A’ in ‘Pay’

In September Chicago Public Schools (CPS) became the latest to adopt the “Green for Grade$” test program whereby a control group of 5,000 freshmen at 20 CPS high schools will get cash payments for academic performance: $50 for an A, $35 for a B, and $20 for a C.

In defending the experimental program, CPS Superintendent Arne Duncan cranked up the propaganda machine, telling the Chicago Tribune, “I’m always trying to level the playing field. This is the kind of incentive middle-class families have had for decades.”

Duncan, like others in charge of government monopolies, is defiantly unashamed of his own hypocrisy. For it is Duncan and his friends running the teacher unions who oppose pay-for-performance reforms such as merit pay for teachers who produce real results in the classroom.

Ascribing the best of intentions to this contradiction, one is left to conclude they believe performance incentives stop mattering at some point in a person’s development. My best guess is that this occurs shortly after their National Education Association or American Federation of Teachers union membership card arrives in the mail.

Reasons to Flee

A more reflective person might contemplate why middle-income families, who make up a significant portion of the three million people living in Chicago, have abandoned CPS, as Duncan correctly implies. A system in which only six in 100 students will go on to earn a bachelor’s degree by the age of 25 is a system from which parents will flee if they have the ability to do so.

There are not enough charter schools and magnet schools citywide to meet the demands of families who do not want their children relegated to the failing schools in their neighborhoods. Less than 5 percent of CPS students have the opportunity to attend a charter school.

Underfunded Families

As to Duncan’s feeble “leveling the playing field” contention, most of those who have opted out of CPS now attend schools that spend considerably less than the $11,500 per pupil per year CPS spends. They’ve opted out of the public schools for private and parochial schools, willingly stretching their household budgets to pay the property taxes that fund CPS and the private school tuition so their children will receive a good education.

Those families have chosen to be decisively “underfunded” relative to their options within CPS. That too should be cause for reflection.

Some critics of the “Green for Grade$” program have said payments for grades get students to do the right things for the wrong reasons and thus will fail to cultivate a real interest in learning. Others have been more pointed, saying the payments amount to bribes.

My criticisms of Duncan’s strained logic aside, I am not philosophically opposed to the idea of welcoming children to the real world of performance-based incentives at an early age. However, I think it counterproductive to pay for mediocrity, and thus I would not attach compensation for Cs.

Real Reform

I agree programs like these do not teach children to be intellectually curious or properly set them on a path to be lifelong learners. Still, though not every child is going to develop an enduring affinity for scholarship, every child must learn to read, write, and develop basic quantitative skills in order to be a productive member of society in the digital age.

“[I]t is [Chicago Public Schools Superintendent Arne] Duncan and his friends running the teacher unions who oppose pay-for-performance reforms such as merit pay for teachers who produce real results in the classroom.”

The fundamental problem with cash-for-grades programs is that they are yet another bail-out-the-Titanic-with-a-teaspoon approach to education reform. As these programs gain traction in our nation’s worst-performing city school systems, we must recognize them for the misdirection plays they are and not allow ourselves to be lured away from a discussion of necessary long-term, systemic school reform.

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In Other Words

“Campaigning at town halls across America, I am often asked about my plans to reform our public schools. And the answer begins with two points on which most everyone agrees: Every public school child deserves a first-rate education. And too many of our schools are producing second-rate results.

“Beyond that, the education debate divides quickly into two camps. Some say all that’s needed is more taxpayer money, along with more pre-kindergarten and after-school programs. Others believe that the basic structure of the education system is flawed, and that fundamental reform is needed. You can put me squarely on the side of major reform.

“These days, the cause of education reform crosses all boundaries of party, race, and financial means. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein have taken up the cause of reform, as have many others, including the Rev. Al Sharpton. These men are strong supporters of the Education Equality Project, a group dedicated to finally changing the status quo in our education system.

“This group of leaders is no longer willing to accept a public school system in which many students never even graduate or learn the basics of math, science, and English. As Chancellor Klein puts it, ‘In large urban areas the culture of public education is broken. If you don’t fix this culture, then you are not going to be able to make the kind of changes that are needed.’”

Presidential Candidates Offer Differing Plans

More money vs. targeted spending

By Ralph W. Conner

There are some essential differences between presidential candidates Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) on education policy. Obama, who advocates charter schools as the only true alternative for flawed public schools, flies from the voucher alternative that has succeeded in Cleveland, Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and other cities nationwide. McCain, by contrast, accepts school choice as the way to inject real competition into the education equation.

Teachers or Parents?

What else do McCain and Obama offer as “change agents” for American education policy in the post-Bush era?

On early childhood education, Obama would like to spend new billions on a “children first” agenda to provide “care, learning, and support” to families with children from birth through age five. McCain believes there is already enough federal funding to leverage universal early childhood education by focusing on existing early child care and preschool resources on the neediest children.

Change: Obama advocates expanded federal government spending, while McCain calls for means-tested targeting of existing funds with no increase.

Obama considers teachers key to the education process. He stated in a campaign appearance before a teachers union earlier this year, “new evidence shows that from the moment our children step into a classroom, the single most important factor in determining their achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from, it’s not who their parents are or how much money they have. It’s who their teacher is. It’s you.”

McCain, by contrast, wants to “place parents and children at the center of the education process, empowering parents by greatly expanding parental school choice and mobility for students electing to move out of failing public schools.”

Payment Plans

Obama would raise teacher salaries across the board and recruit teachers from other professions. He would pay bonuses to “fully trained and tenured” instructors who “mentor” newer teachers in need of further training.

Obama says he would institute merit pay, as long as the teachers and not the principals or school administrators control who merits an increase. Bonuses would be available for teachers willing to serve in more challenging (poor, urban) school districts.

McCain would likewise reward inner-city teachers with merit pay, but he wants it distributed and evaluated by the principals who supervise and evaluate teachers, for greater accountability. Instead of new teacher-training programs and payoffs of student loans, McCain offers “alternative teacher certification” to “open the door for highly motivated teachers to enter the field” from other professions.

McCain would devote 5 percent of federal Title II funding to pay bonuses to recruit college students who graduate in the top 25 percent of their college class—not education colleges, but universities—to become public school teachers. He would redirect 60 percent of Title II funding to provide incentives for high-performing teachers taking inner-city assignments or those who teach math and science, and performance bonuses for those who demonstrate student improvement.

Change: Obama favors more spending, with merit pay under union control. McCain favors redirecting existing spending, with principals managing merit pay, and alternative teacher certification.

Teachers’ Pay

Obama bases his spending and teacher reward incentive programs on the premise that current public school teacher salaries “are morally unacceptable.” Yet as Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay P. Greene has pointed out, “public school teachers in America, on average, are paid 36 percent more per hour than the average white-collar worker and 11 percent more than the average professional specialty or technical worker.”

In Obama’s home state of Illinois during the 2002-03 school year, the average salary for K-12 public school teachers was $51,496 per year, The Heritage Foundation has documented.

Mc Cain’s approach is to direct more money to the best teachers, which over time will lead to lower relative salaries for inferior teachers and incentives to perform better on the job.


NCLB Reauthorization

According to a September 9 article in The New York Times, both candidates acknowledge No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has resulted in improved performance of poor and minority children. Obama offers to “fully fund” NCLB.

That means Obama agrees with teachers and various state government officials who say that when the federal government began requiring hard proof of student achievement, teachers and school districts should have received additional compensation to cover the costs of “teaching to the test” and “administering and grading” exams. Obama would address this “unfunded mandate” by ramping up the NCLB budget.

McCain, by contrast, would concentrate on enabling parents to access “taxpayer-funded after-school tutoring by private companies.” NCLB already provides for such tutoring, but McCain believes the public school system has done an abysmal job orchestrating such efforts. Public schools impose cumbersome rules for local certification of private tutors and routinely fail to inform parents about the availability of tutoring services.

Neither candidate has directly addressed the NCLB requirement that “all students be proficient in reading and math by 2014.”

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‘Grinch’ Provides Valuable Guide to Improving Nation’s Schools

Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America’s Schools Back to Reality
by Charles Murray
219 pages, hardcover, ISBN 9780307405388, $24.95

Review by Neal McCluskey

No one wants to be education’s Grinch, writes Charles Murray in Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America’s Schools Back to Reality. Don’t believe it: Murray clearly loves the role, and we should be thankful for it.

Murray grabbed the Grinch mantle in 1994 with the hugely controversial—and best-selling—book The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life, a 912-page tome coauthored with Harvard University psychologist Richard Herrnstein. Herrnstein died a week before the book’s release, leaving Murray to fend on its own.

In Real Education, Murray ... [notes] different people are endowed with different levels of intelligence, and [argues] many aren’t equipped to handle tough academic work. It’s ... a reality our education system ignores to the detriment of both students and society.”

Wasted Efforts

Using nonacademic components of the very education system he critiques, Murray illustrates the illogic of acting as if everyone should be William F. Buckley when some haven’t the academic potential of Bluto Blutarsky.

Children with below-average bodily-kinesthetic ability have to take P.E. ... but no one tries to make them into good athletes,” Murray writes. “Children with below-average musical ability are usually exposed to music classes in elementary school, but they are allowed to drop out thereafter. ... Only for linguistic and logical-mathematical ability are we told that we can expect everyone to do well.”

The results of our “educational romanticism,” Murray asserts, are too many kids being shoved onto academic tracks for which they are ill-suited, and countless hours wasted in college classrooms.

Remedial Classes

Some broad figures lend credence to Murray’s contentions. Federal data show roughly one-third of U.S. college freshmen take remedial courses, and those students have a low probability of completing degrees. Analysts often attribute this to a “broken pipeline” of schools through which students flow to higher education, and Murray acknowledges that many, especially urban, schools fail their students. But lots of products of “good” schools also take remedial courses, indicating the problem might not be only the pipes, but some of the water.

The oft-lamented high school dropout rate is another likely product of a system that tries to wedge every round, triangular, or dodecahedral peg into a square hole. Students drop out for myriad reasons, but no doubt two are that they either can’t master the academic material that’s forced on them or they have no interest in it.

Choice Solution

The problem, then, is how to get all children the education best suited to their abilities without imposing a specific fate upon them. The answer, Murray says, is school choice …

“[S]chool choice … would enable students to pursue studies that truly engage them while destroying the public schooling imperative to push everyone into ivy-ensconced institutions.”

Recognizing Differences

But the book is not perfect. Most aggravating is its documentation. Murray does not use traditional endnotes or footnotes, “to avoid cluttering a conversational presentation.” The effect, however, is worse than clutter. The curious—or suspicious—reader is forced to constantly interrupt the “conversation” for a trip to the book’s rear, page-numbered notes section, and he may not find what he’s looking for.

Normal endnotes, with superscript numbers in the text, would at least let readers know whether to bother with an excursion.

Murray is also guilty of making things a bit too black-and-white. He argues, for instance, people planning to become lawyers, corporate heads, or other elites should intensively study the liberal arts in order to develop “wisdom,” and he deems a liberal-arts infused college education “ridiculous” for future accountants, software designers, or farmers. But can’t software designers become community leaders in need of wisdom?

Despite these flaws, by directing attention to the nearly unmentionable possibility that only so many people can master tough academic material, the Grinch has done American education a valuable service. People simply aren’t all the same, and we help no one by acting as if they were.

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

“The problem, then, is how to get all children the education best suited to their abilities without imposing a specific fate upon them. The answer, Murray says, is school choice …”

“Good things can happen in thousands of individual schools where parents have chosen to send their children and where the school has authority over the way it educates its students,” Murray explains. “On the other hand, none of these good things will be implemented by a large, centrally administered public school system. All of them are too politically sensitive for one reason or another.”

Arguments like these make Real Education logically sound, and the book anticipates many of the objections that have been lodged against it.

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School Choice Is a Human Right

By Karla Dial

The National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education has made a public appeal for all members of the Jewish community to support federal school choice legislation, the Civil Rights Act for Equal Educational Opportunity.

The bill would require every state to provide equal educational funding for children in both public and private schools, while respecting the schools’ autonomy in hiring and providing services. It also would require states to allow homeschooling families to run schools that meet their needs and would leave all matters of funding and educational standards to states and voters.

Transcends Other Concerns

The NCJFE made its appeal at a September 18 press conference. The issue transcends all religious, racial, and party lines: School choice is a human right, and most countries other than the United States already recognize it as such.

Since the advent of the government-run public education system we take for granted as the norm, wealthy families have always exercised school choice. Those who believe their local government-run public school is inadequate and who can afford to do so either send their children to private school or move to a district with a better-performing public school.

“School choice is a human right. This truth is self-evident.”

But millions of American families cannot afford to pay private tuition or move to neighborhoods with better schools. Inner-city parents who are forced to send their children into public schools where they are more likely to become victims of violent crime than high school graduates want options. Many of the leaders of the school choice movement—in Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and in New Orleans, for example—are African-American Democrats.

More Money Isn’t Answer

They know throwing more money at public education—which already accounts for 7 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product, more than any other sector besides health care—isn’t the answer, no matter how many pundits claim it is.

“What many [people] don’t know is how little correlation there is between spending and success,” said Bob Bowden, a documentary filmmaker who spoke at the NCJFE press conference. “New Jersey is number one in spending in the United States and number 37 in SAT scores—showing the disconnect between what we spend and what we get from public schools. There is no amount of dollars that would be enough for these people to sufficiently address this problem. It’s about jobs. It’s about adults. It’s not about children. It’s about protecting the educational establishment, which is a multi-billion-dollar corporation in this state and around the country.

“I interviewed a kid, just a regular kid in a Camden public school—not learning disabled,” Bowden continued. “By the 10th grade he still did not know his alphabet, and in math he got to four times four. That’s how far he got in the public school there. This is about the needs of kids even more than it is about the money.”

Human Right Denied

About 150 years ago the U.S. government recognized another essential human right—the right to be free from slavery. We have an all-too-similar situation in our schools today, as a handful of people determine the course of others’ lives without their consent in order to maintain their own power.

Condemning an entire generation of children to lives of quiet desperation while the rest of the world passes them by so teacher unions can retain their political power is a form of tyranny. School choice is a human right. This truth is self-evident.

Karla Dial (kdial@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.

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