North Carolinians Rally Behind School Choice

By Jillian Melchior

More than 850 parents, children, community leaders, and politicians from across North Carolina congregated in Charlotte just before Election Day when a school choice advocacy group held a rally to allow gubernatorial candidates to speak with citizens and listen to voters’ opinions on the issue.

The rally, organized by Parents for Educational Freedom (PEF), an advocacy group based in Raleigh, drew a predominantly black audience on October 28.

“I will say this: I have not attended a better event in the school choice movement than the one in North Carolina,” said Andrew Campanella, director of communications for the Alliance for School Choice, a national advocacy group based in Washington, DC.

“Parents for Educational Freedom did an absolutely phenomenal job of bringing together the most diverse and compelling coalition of parents, legislators, children, clergy, and politicians,” Campanella continued. “It was filled to the brim with people. They had children speaking with stories that were really, really compel-

Montanans Want Choice

By Ben DeGrow

A new survey has raised awareness of public support for school choice in Montana—but lawmakers say legislative success is not likely to come in the near future.

The October 2008 survey, sponsored by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a national advocacy group
Was it ever really a crisis?

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Congress Contemplates Future of DC Vouchers

By Lindsey Burke

The arrival of a new Congress and administration is casting doubt over the future of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, the federally funded school choice program serving disadvantaged students in the nation’s capital.

The scholarship program—administered by the nonprofit Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF)—served more than 1,900 children from low-income families during the 2007-08 school year, its fourth year of operation. Families accepted into the program can send their children to the private schools of their choice, using scholarships worth up to $7,500 per student.

Since its inception, approximately 7,200 students have applied to participate, representing about four applicants for every available scholarship.

Poor Public School Performance

The high demand for school choice in the District should come as no surprise to those familiar with the DC public school system, home to some of the worst-performing public schools in the country. Poor performance in the public school system has created a natural constituency of parents pushing for the Opportunity Scholarship Program and the better circumstances it creates for their children.

In 2008, Congress voted to provide funding for the program for another school year, despite strong opposition from some leading voices on Capitol Hill. DC Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D), who strongly opposes the program, said in a June 9, 2008 Washington Post op-ed, “I can tell you that the Democratic Congress is not about to extend this program.”

Empowered Parents

Poor performance in the public school system has created a natural constituency of parents pushing for the Opportunity Scholarship Program and the better circumstances it creates for their children.

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With expanded liberal majorities in Congress and a new, Democratic administration, Norton’s warning could come true, analysts say. Congress must reauthorize the program this session in order for funding to continue beyond the 2009-10 school year.

Failure to extend the program would result in many participating children returning to DC public schools. Since the average income of participating scholarship families is $22,736 for a family of four, few will be able to afford the tuition costs without the benefits of a scholarship.

Scary Prospect

According to Virginia Walden Ford, a school choice advocate and head of DC Parents for School Choice, the Opportunity Scholarship Program is providing hope and opportunity for families throughout the District.

“The Opportunity Scholarship Program has empowered parents by giving them the chance to get their children out of low-performing schools and send them to schools that meet their individual needs,” Walden Ford said. “We have seen that, when children are placed in nurturing educational environments, they succeed and their parents become active and involved. We’ve heard over and over that it would be devastating if this program were to end and parents would have to look for new schools for their children who are doing so well in the schools they are currently attending.

“The high demand for school choice in the District should come as no surprise to those familiar with the DC public school system, home to some of the worst-performing public schools in the country."

“The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program has changed the educational direction of all the children involved,” Walden Ford continued. “When children are doing well in educational environments, because of expanded options for the families who have had no choice, we see happy endings—not only for the children but also their families and their communities.”

Satisfaction High

Ending the program would be unwelcome news to participating parents. Surveys have shown scholarship families have high levels of satisfaction with their children’s schools and increased feelings of student safety.

Sheila Jackson, whose daughter is in the program, told DC Parents for School Choice in November, “For the last two years my daughter has been in the scholarship program at a school I chose, and I see the transformation in my child. At 13, she is becoming a disciplined young lady who likes school. She feels safe. I feel relieved.”

Lindsey Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is a research assistant in domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
By Evelyn Stacey

A Los Angeles charter middle school is moving into new digs thanks to a court ruling on equal treatment that has national implications. One of the largest obstacles charters nationwide face is finding adequate facilities.

Across the United States, only 26 of the 41 states with charter laws include procedures for providing space. California law requires districts to make unused facilities available to local charters, yet receiving the facilities continues to be a rough road.

“California law requires districts to make unused facilities available to local charters, yet receiving the facilities continues to be a rough road.”

Proposition 39, passed in 2000, requires school districts in California to treat charter schools the same as they do other public schools. Wayne Johnson, then-president of the California Teachers Association, told the San Francisco Chronicle charter schools were getting the leftovers and should be entitled to adequate facilities.

New West Charter Case

In the 2007-08 school year, New West Charter Middle School in Los Angeles was looking for a new facility to house its 285 students. The school’s contract on its location was up for renewal in June 2008 and would require $1.5 million in rent. Fairfax Senior High School, just 15 minutes away in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), had unused classrooms that could accommodate the middle schoolers at far less expense.

In October 2007, New West requested the vacant Fairfax classrooms from LAUSD. In April 2008, Fairfax made New West an offer, which the charter school accepted the next day. But only a few hours later, New West received a faxed notice saying LAUSD would not provide the facilities.

New Precedent Set

New West had little choice but to sign the $1.5 million contract for its current space. Administrators took the case to court, arguing the charter had been denied the equal treatment mandated by Proposition 39.

On October 3, 2008 the Los Angeles Superior Court ruled in New West’s favor, ordering Fairfax Senior High to provide 13 classrooms. The transition will take place at the beginning of 2009. New West hopes to sublease its current site in order to recoup the money spent on the legal process.

“This has far-reaching implications for charters nationwide” said Gary Larson, a spokesman for the California Charter School Association. “This and other cases will have ramifications as to whether or not charter school students will be afforded the same treatment as any other public school students.”

Battles for Support

Charter schools have always faced an uphill battle for support from sponsoring districts. Over the past two years, two similar cases have been brought to California courts by groups denied facility requests by LAUSD.

“Districts do not seem to want to comply with the law,” said Sharon Weir, executive director and principal of New West Charter Middle School. “Now there is a precedent for districts to be held accountable to the law.”

Evelyn Stacey (estacey@pacificresearch.org) is a research associate in education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, a nonprofit free-market research group in California.

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By Elisha Maldonado

After the Nevada Board of Education ended an eight-month moratorium on new charter schools in early August, the state’s Department of Education is now proposing the legislature create an independent charter school authorizing group in 2009.

The Nevada Charter School Institute would oversee, sponsor, and regulate all charter schools statewide. Under current law, charter schools can be sponsored by local school districts, the state Board of Education, or public colleges and universities, said Tom McCormack, spokesman for the Nevada Department of Education.

The state board is the only entity that can make regulations regarding charter schools. If the institute is approved, it will take on those responsibilities.

According to a Nevada work session document, the proposal is to establish a statewide charter school board with the authority to “approve or deny applications for state-sponsored charter schools, and to sponsor charter schools, including the authority to revoke a charter school that it has sponsored.”

The new institute could be up and running by 2010, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Keith Rheault told the Las Vegas Review-Journal for an October 8 story. The plan, he said, is to make the institute self-supporting within five years by charging administrative fees to charter schools. Rheault estimates the institute would cost $326,000 the first year and $390,000 in the second.

The institute would have its own board of directors, appointed by various government officials. According to the work session document, it will consist of seven members appointed for staggered terms:

• two members (not to be legislators) appointed by the Senate majority leader;
• two members (not to be legislators) appointed by the speaker of the Assembly;
• two members appointed by the governor; and
• one member appointed by a state charter school association.

Elisha Maldonado (elishamaldonado@gmail.com) writes from California.

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California Courts Rule for Charter Schools Again

Although California’s Prop 39 requires school districts to treat charter schools the same as other public schools, the lesson often seems lost on district officials.

Nevada Pushes for Single Charter School Authorizer
Competition Improves Performance

By Hilary Masell Oswald

A new study released by the C. D. Howe Institute in Toronto shows when schools have to fight for funding, students—and taxpayers—get more for their money in the form of improved scores on standardized tests.

“The study shows that when schools have to fight for public funding by attracting students, those schools compete and students perform better,” said Ben Dachis, a policy analyst at C. D. Howe, which released the study in October.

Canada is a ripe arena for this type of research, as each province oversees its own education system, and four provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan) each offer two distinct, publicly funded school systems, one secular and the other containing Catholic schools, also known as “separate schools,” which are open almost strictly to children of Catholic families. Both systems receive equal government funding per student.

Measuring Impact

Researchers first determined whether Catholic parents—the only ones with choices about where to send their children to school—are willing to move their students between schools. If they weren’t, school leaders wouldn’t have an incentive to keep or attract students and funding.

Instead of tracking individual students through the school systems, researchers examined how school openings and closings in one system affect the other within a defined geographic area.

They discovered that every time a new public school opens, the impact is felt in the separate school system in the form of decreased enrollment, and vice versa. The effect is magnified in neighborhoods that have a 50 percent or greater increase in new homes from one year to the next or where there is a high proportion of Catholic families.

In such neighborhoods, when a new Catholic school opens, neighboring public school enrollments drop 9.6 percent and neighboring Catholic school enrollments drop by 9.7 percent. When a new secular school opens, by contrast, the enrollments at nearby Catholic schools decline by about 3.9 percent while secular schools lose 9.3 percent of their students.

Better Grades

The study also measured the effects of choice on student achievement, by comparing third- and sixth-grade students’ standardized test scores in reading, math, and writing between 1998 and 2005.

In neighborhoods with few Catholic families, the changes in students’ average test scores were minimal—less than .5 percent in all three subjects. But in areas heavily populated by Catholic families where new housing is being built, students’ scores improved between 4 and 9 percent.

“The results suggest that if all families—rather than just Catholic families—could exercise choice between school systems, the incentives for public school administrators to improve quality would be stronger yet, with potentially significant impacts on student outcomes,” the authors wrote.

“One thing that distinguished this study from many others is the scope,” Dachis said. “A lot of school choice systems are limited; you can’t extrapolate the results of limited programs the way you can with this large of a study.”

Exporting Results

The study also notes fully private schools aren’t a necessary condition for choice to make a difference.

“School choice can exist within a fully publicly funded and operated school system,” the authors wrote.

Since U.S. systems don’t include publicly funded religious schools, the authors’ conclusion supports the expansion of charter schools, says Andrew Campanella, spokesman for the Alliance for School Choice, an advocacy group based in Washington, DC.

“Ideally, parents would have a whole menu of educational options: vouchers and tax-credit scholarships, charter schools, great traditional public schools, homeschooling, virtual schools,” Campanella said.

“This study is a great example not only of how choice works, but it also shows that choice isn’t an American idea,” Campanella continued. “Other nations are finding success, and if our kids are going to compete in the global economy, we need to find it, too.”

Hilary Masell Oswald (hilary_oswald@comcast.net) writes from Denver.
Poll: 90 Percent of Montanans Want School Choice

Continued from page 1

based in Indianapolis, found widespread support for a variety of schooling options. Currently, Montana parents have very limited options: They are permitted to send their children only to their assigned neighborhood school, or they may homeschool or pay full tuition for a private education while simultaneously paying taxes to support public schools.

“People are in favor of looking for new and exciting ways to educate children,” said Jeff Laszloffy, president of the Montana Family Foundation.

Major Disconnect

When given the hypothetical free choice for the best educational setting for their child, only one in 10 respondents selected a regular public school. According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction, more than 145,000 students were enrolled in public school in 2005, with only about 12,000 in either private schools or homeschools.

“There is a disconnect between private preferences and public reality,” said Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s director of partner services and author of the survey. “The implication is that there are institutional and structural barriers that inhibit parents from choosing the schools they want.”

According to the survey, private schools were the most popular choice, with 38 percent choosing them. About half of those parents said they would prefer to send their children to a nonreligious school; an overwhelming majority of Montana’s private schools are sectarian. Other widespread selections were public charter schools (28 percent) and homeschooling (18 percent). Results were largely consistent among Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

If given a choice, only one in 10 respondents to a recent Montana poll would choose traditional public schools for their children.

“School choice has always been held up as a partisan issue in Montana,” Laszloffy said. “When you look at the results of the poll, it’s clearly nonpartisan.”

Consistent Support

One key lawmaker also was impressed by the very similar levels of support across different regions of the state.

“It’s not just a pocket area where there are good schools or proficient schools,” said state Rep. Elsie Arntzen (R-Billings), an elementary school teacher and member of the House Education Committee. “It’s all across the state that people are trying to look at different models.”

The choice reform most favored by Montanans is a tax-credit scholarship system. Sixty-four percent of respondents favor giving credits to individual and corporate taxpayers who donate to nonprofit private school scholarship organizations.

Far more respondents favored making tax-credit scholarships available to all families (63 percent) than wanted them targeted to those with financial need (45 percent). By comparison, 55 percent support introducing public charter schools to the state.

DiPerna said Montana has shown the most support for tax credits in any state the foundation has surveyed so far.

“There is a disconnect between private preferences and public reality. The implication is that there are institutional and structural barriers that inhibit parents from choosing the schools they want.”

PAUL DIPERNA
DIRECTOR OF PARTNER SERVICES
FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

Did You Know?

Failing your teaching certification test up to 20 times doesn’t indicate you aren’t cut out to be a teacher—just how badly you want to be one?

That’s the spin from the local teachers union in El Paso, Texas after KVIA, the local ABC-TV affiliate, reported in late November some teachers had failed the certification exam multiple times—and a few more than 20.

Lucy Clarke, the local teachers union president, said they might have had mitigating circumstances, such as “dyslexia, learning disabilities, and English proficiency.” She said failing the test 20 times meant those teachers “were determined to pass it.”

Offensive Strategy

After devoting much effort in recent legislative sessions to defending homeschooling freedoms, state Sen. Dan McGee (R-Laurel) believes it’s time to adopt an offensive strategy in education reform. He favors introducing either tax credit or public charter school legislation in 2009.

“I think it’s something that must be done, and it should be done in this session,” McGee said.

If a school choice bill were to pass Montana’s Senate, an evenly divided House would make it difficult to pass such a contentious issue over partisan objections, McGee noted. He also pointed out a veto would be nearly certain from Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D), a union ally.

“But a statement needs to be made,” McGee said.

Tired Arguments

Laszloffy said the time has come to expand parents’ options.

“A lot of the arguments against school choice that have been raised don’t hold up anymore,” Laszloffy said. “It becomes harder for the other side to say that it will hurt public schools.”

Sixty-four percent of Montana respondents said they don’t fear public schools will close as a result of enacting tax credits.

“Montanans think improvement could come from a tax-credit scholarship that could lift all boats,” DiPerna said. “The other side isn’t really going to be able to go too far, because people won’t believe it. Montanans believe this is for the good of all students.”

Broad Appeal

Laszloffy agrees the state’s school choice supporters should ground their case in broad appeal as they look to rally behind a specific proposal.

“The premise we begin with is: Do no harm,” Laszloffy said. “We don’t want to strengthen homeschools or private schools at the expense of public schools.”

As a related strategy, Arntzen said her constituents support not only expanding choices but also raising expectations.

“People want to see accountability in our education system,” Arntzen said. “As a teacher, I have no problem with that accountability.”

Montana is the seventh state Friedman has surveyed using its current model. The results of its most recent survey, in Vermont, were scheduled for December 2008 release and were not available at press time.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Louisville Groups Unite to Close Gaps in Achievement and Graduation Rates

By Jim Waters

A coalition of black pastors, civil rights leaders, and school choice activists is combining research and grassroots action to promote school choice as a catalyst for reforms in Kentucky.

In this economy, a student who never graduates is virtually unemployable—something that’s been verified in growing youth-unemployment rates.”

RICHARD G. INNES
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
BLUEGRASS INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SOLUTIONS

“Graduation should be a central focus for educators. In this economy, a student who never graduates is virtually unemployable—something that’s been verified in growing youth-unemployment rates.”

Jerry Stephenson, minister of Midway Church of Christ and leader of the Kentucky Alliance for Restoring Education (KARE), a coalition that includes the Bluegrass Institute. “The escalation of teenage crime and violence and juvenile detention centers that are running over is a crisis that has its roots in the failing public education system all over this country—and Jefferson County is no exception.”

According to Innes’s study, only 38 percent of Shawnee High School’s black males graduated in 2007. Only six of the 19 high schools in the study escaped the dropout factory designation for black males.

At two high schools—Iroquois and Valley high schools—none of the student groups’ graduation rates was above 60 percent, meaning the entire schools were dropout factories.

“Surprising Find”

Innes says the poor performance trends of white students means even closing the gaps may not be enough to bring minority academic and graduation levels to acceptable levels.

“Most surprising thing in the report is that white female graduation rates are decaying faster than either white male or African-American rates for either sex,” Innes said. “Even though the white female graduation rates are still higher than for the other groups, it doesn’t do much good to show gaps are closing if that happens only because less-disadvantaged students constantly face a lower target to shoot at.”

“Dismissed by Educators”

The unprecedented media coverage forced a response from local officials who had previously rejected the Bluegrass Institute’s invitation to engage in public debate about choice. JCPS Superintendent Robert Rodosky issued a terse response, telling reporters the study contained nothing new and aimed to paint the district in the “worst light possible.”

Stephenson disagrees, saying the needed sense of urgency was missing from the district’s responses.

“It took us over 30 years to make corrections without seeing thousands of children end up in our jails and prisons,” Stephenson said. “This injustice must no longer take place in our village. The village must come together, rise up, and declare that this is unacceptable and demand that changes be made.”

“The escalation of teenage crime and violence and juvenile detention centers that are running over is a crisis that has its roots in the failing public education system all over this country—and Jefferson County is no exception.”

PASTOR JERRY STEPHENSON
MIDWAY CHURCH OF CHRIST

Union Sues

KARE’s leaders praised new JCPS Superintendent Sheldon Berman for refusing to renew the contracts of 18 teachers who had performance and disciplinary problems. The Jefferson County Teachers Association, regarded as one of the most powerful local labor groups in the nation, sued Berman and the school district in May.

One of the teachers whose contract was not renewed failed to show up for class for 30 days without an excused absence.

Stephenson’s group backs the superintendent’s action and wants the district to conduct an audit of all employees.

“The teachers union will fight this change, but it must take place,” Stephenson said. “School employees that cannot meet the twenty-first century challenges of educating our children must be removed.”

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

INTERNET INFO

“State of the School District: How Whites and Blacks Perform in Jefferson County Public Schools,” by Richard G. Innes, Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, October 20, 2008:
Maine Parents United for School Choice

By Elisha Maldonado

Parents and voters in Orland, a small rural town in northeastern Maine, have decided to preserve their right to school choice through a narrow 671-644 vote.

The November vote is a victory for school choice proponents, who believe all parents should have the right to decide where their children will attend school.

For the past 135 years, rural Maine towns that are too small to run their own school districts have benefited from the state’s Town Tuitioning Program, which allows parents to send their children to the public or private school of their choice in a nearby town. But as Maine undergoes a statewide consolidation effort, tuitioning towns find themselves merging with others that don’t offer school choice, explained Stephen Bowen, director of education policy at the Maine Heritage Policy Center, a research group based in Portland.

That is the case in Orland, where the district is consolidating with three neighboring towns—Bucksport, Prospect, and Verona Island, none of which offers school choice. All districts with fewer than 100 students are being forced to merge with districts in neighboring towns. That means the state’s existing 300 districts will condense into 80 ...

“All districts with fewer than 100 students are being forced to merge with districts in neighboring towns. That means the state’s existing 300 districts will condense into 80 ...”

“[That is one of the success stories],” Bowen said. “The parents in Orland put out an e-mail campaign, created Web sites, made signs and postcards—and they put it together in three or four weeks. They narrowly won.”

The same, however, can’t be said for every town. Bowen said eight have lost school choice in the mergers, though there are still choice communities statewide that, at press time, had yet to vote on a consolidation plan. All decisions must be approved by voters by the end of January, Bowen said, or the towns in question will face financial penalties from the state.

“The consolidation plans are developed by regional panels, and are then put to a vote to all of the people in the school districts to be included in each new regional district,” Bowen explained.

Ongoing Struggle

School choice exists only in small pockets in the state because the only towns with choice are those too small to run their own high schools. School choice advocates want to preserve choice for those who have it, but public school officials say their own interests should take precedence, Bowen explained. District officials say they need to build big school systems and direct all the money to them.

Jim Rier, director of finance and operations for the Maine Department of Education, did not return calls, but told Orland’s weekly newspaper, The Ellsworth American, for an October 9 story, “The unit would benefit from the dollars staying in the unit. That, to me, isn’t a cost. It’s a missed opportunity.”

In order to bring in the money needed to improve public schools, Bowen said, the district wants to eliminate school choice and force students to attend the schools. But he and other school choice activists say if you make public schools better, the students will come, Bowen said.

Not only does the public not buy the district officials’ argument, Bowen said, but “real estate people tell us, anecdotally, that it is more attractive to homebuyers when you have school choice.”

Elisha Maldonado (elishamaldonado@gmail.com) writes from California.

Bay-Area Students Awarded Scholarships by Think Tank

By Jillian Melchior

The Independent Institute, a nonpartisan public policy think tank with offices in Oakland, California and Washington, DC, has announced its Independent Scholarship Fund will award $315,000 in need- and merit-based scholarships for 212 East Bay Students to attend private schools in the 2008-09 school year.

Since the fund’s founding in 1999, it has awarded more than $2.4 million, funded primarily by Bay-area foundations, donors, and grants. Since 1999 the group has given 1,737 scholarships to send students to private schools. The current awards were announced October 10.

“California is kind of the poster child for failed public schools,” said Independent Institute Vice President Mary Theroux. “We get wonderful stories of complete attitude changes from children. You get things like a mother saying, ‘My daughter was failing, didn’t want to go to school every day, she was crying, and now she’s excited and challenged. I’m a high school dropout, and here, she wants to become a doctor.’”

Nearly two-thirds of all California public K-12 schools failed to meet their performance targets in 2008, according to the California Department of Education’s Academic Performance Index. Theroux said the Independent Institute tries to make parents realize their children do not necessarily have to attend the schools assigned to them by the government—they have a choice.

“We do a lot of outreach and communication and advertising, just hoping to plant a seed of, hey, maybe it’s possible that you can aspire to a different educational opportunity for your child,” Theroux said.

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

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Germany’s Education System

The German education system is known for its high standards and comprehensive approach. It is divided into three levels: primary education (primary school), secondary education (secondary school), and higher education (university and college). Education is mandatory from ages 6 to 16. The curriculum is geared towards preparing students for either a career or further education.

In primary education, children attend elementary schools where they learn basic skills and subjects such as mathematics, language, science, and art. Secondary education consists of Gymnasium (academic secondary school) and Realschule (technical secondary school). Gymnasium students follow a more rigorous curriculum, preparing them for university, while Realschule students receive a technical and vocational education.

Higher education includes universities, technical colleges, and vocational schools. Universities offer a broad range of courses in various fields, while technical colleges focus on specific careers. Vocational schools prepare students for specific trades and professions.

Germany's education system is also noted for its emphasis on individualized learning and student performance. Teachers are highly respected, and the curriculum is designed to meet the needs of each student. The system is highly structured, with standardized testing and certification. Despite these features, the system faces criticism for being too rigid and not providing enough flexibility for students to explore their interests.

Conclusion

Germany's education system is complex and multifaceted, with a strong emphasis on academic performance and structured learning. While it prepares students well for careers in various fields, it also faces criticism for being too rigid and not providing enough flexibility for students to explore their interests. Overall, the system offers a strong foundation for students to pursue their academic and professional goals.
Los Angeles Teachers Create Choice Group for Students

By Jillian Melchior

Sara Hernandez, a first-year teacher at a public school in Los Angeles, realized three of her students could excel at private schools, where they would receive a more-comprehensive curriculum and a more-rigorous college preparatory experience.

So last year she banded together with other teachers at Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Middle School to create the Independent Schools Support System of Los Angeles (ISSSLA), which sends bright students from the school to challenging private high schools in the city with the help of scholarships.

The three students were placed in private schools, where they are now excelling and making friends. Although Hernandez has since left to attend law school, other Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. teachers are continuing and expanding ISSSLA.

“I think it’s just availability of another opportunity, an exposure to a different type of school and a different atmosphere,” said Stephanie Carter, ISSSLA spokesperson and student advisor. “Of course, all the teachers involved are strong believers in public school. But people can go beyond what’s in front of them.

“This is another resource,” Carter continued. “It’s just an expanded opportunity. It’s not that the thing that’s in front of them is bad. We don’t feel that at all. We just want to expand it.”

Union Opposition

A.J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA)—the union the teachers belong to—said while he admired the teachers’ spirit, he could not agree with the work they are doing. Teacher unions, without exception, oppose most forms of school choice, and none more so than scholarship or voucher programs sending students to private or religious schools.

“My constituents would say that we represent teachers who are strong believers in public schools,” Duffy said.

“I think it’s just availability of another opportunity, an exposure to a different type of school and a different atmosphere,” said Stephanie Carter, ISSSLA spokesperson and student advisor. “Of course, all the teachers involved are strong believers in public school. But people can go beyond what’s in front of them.

“This is another resource,” Carter continued. “It’s just an expanded opportunity. It’s not that the thing that’s in front of them is bad. We don’t feel that at all. We just want to expand it.”

In Other Words

“It’s the opposite of what everybody says. It’s easier to do it with the poor kids and the minority kids because they have nothing, so they should be the highest [scores on state tests].”

“Asked why most educational researchers say the opposite, he said: ‘They’re liberal and lazy … and they see these kids as victims.’”

— Ben Chavis, principal of American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, California, which scored 967 on the state Academic Performance Index, on why more choice and greater concentration—not more money—are needed to improve the academic performance of low-income students.

Los Angeles Times, November 11, 2008

Benefiting Children, Schools

The children placed in the private schools benefit from the rigorous curriculum, classes in arts and humanities, and college preparation. In exchange, they enrich the private schools with their presence, adding a perspective that would otherwise be lost, Tangalin said.

Previous ISAMA students say they graduated ready and excited to go to college, Tangalin explained.

“I think students in independent schools get an incredible amount of doors opened for them,” Tangalin said. “Our kids get what they’re capable of doing, and they go off, and they’re successful. They do really well.”

Growth Chart

Carter said the teachers in her group devote much time and energy outside the classroom to help their students, but it’s an extension of what they do every day. All feel the extra work is worth it, she said.

“This is something we all want to be involved in for years to come,” Carter said.

The ISSSLA teachers are working to grow and extend the program beyond Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Middle School to other area schools, hoping to provide assistance and advice to other students in the near future.

“You start small and you work your way up,” Carter said, “but we can definitely see the potential.”

Jillian Melchior (jmelchior@hillsdale.edu) writes from Michigan.
Vouchers Gain Legislative Momentum in Georgia

By Jim Waters

Buoyed by growing participation in his state’s existing school choice programs and with public opinion surveys showing vast support for vouchers, Georgia state Sen. Eric Johnson hopes to convince fellow lawmakers to pass the nation’s first statewide universal voucher bill during the 2009 legislative session.

“I know you think this is radical—and it is,” Johnson (R-Savannah) said at a July event hosted by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation honoring the late Milton Friedman, an early proponent of universal vouchers. “But let me offer some comfort and hope: The people of Georgia want this!”

Johnson is leading the charge for school choice in the Georgia Senate. Last year, he and state Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn) successfully sponsored legislation creating a voucher program giving the state’s 200,000 special-needs students an opportunity to attend private schools. With that, Georgia became the nation’s 13th state to offer a program allowing parents to use public dollars to send their children to the public or private school of their choice.

Parents Respond

Of the special-needs students who applied for the scholarship this academic year, the state’s education board deemed 1,600 eligible—80 percent more than the number of students using the scholarships last year.

In 2007-08—the program’s first year of operation—117 schools and 907 children participated, mostly in the Atlanta metro area. This year, 145 schools statewide are participating. “Hopefully the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship is bringing some sense of normalcy to children and their parents who are finding hope in smaller classrooms, different schools, and happier educational environments,” Casas wrote in an October 22 Atlanta Journal-Constitution op-ed.

Expanding Choices

School choice program participation is likely to continue growing with the approval of a new tuition tax-credit policy and several changes in Georgia’s charter school laws.

A bill Casas successfully sponsored during the 2008 legislative session fixed financial flaws to ensure state-chartered schools are funded proportionately to traditional public schools and created a Charter School Commission that can overrule a local district’s decision to deny a charter school application.

Such action was needed, advocates said, because too many school districts were failing to approve charter school applications.

“Around 80 percent of the districts in Georgia have never approved them, and I would venture to say most are opposed,” said Kelly McCutcheon, executive vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.

Funding equity should encourage a closer working relationship between start-up charters and local school systems, McCutcheon said.

“I know you think this is radical—and it is. But let me offer some comfort and hope: The people of Georgia want this!”

ERIC JOHNSON
STATE SENATOR
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

10,000 Children Benefit

Johnson also helped steer legislation in 2008 creating Georgia’s new $50 million tax-credit program—the nation’s second-largest after Florida’s ($88 million).

Corporations receive a 100 percent tax credit for donations—up to 75 percent of their total state tax liability—to scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs). Individuals and married couples who donate up to $1,000 and $2,500, respectively, also receive a 100 percent credit on their state tax returns.

The Alliance for School Choice estimates more than 10,000 children could benefit from the scholarships that will be administered by the seven SGOs approved during the 2008 legislative session.

“Georgia’s is the broadest law in the whole country,” McCutcheon said.

“The only restriction is the $50 million [statewide total] cap on individual and corporate contributions to school choice scholarship organizations,” McCutcheon continued. “There’s no income limit. Anyone is eligible.”

Long Odds

Johnson’s universal voucher bill will face an uphill battle when he introduces it this year.

Sixty-two percent of Utah voters showing overwhelming support for the idea among Peach State residents as a reason to believe it will succeed there. A Public Opinion Strategies poll focusing on metro Atlanta found 70 percent of citizens in Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Dekalb, Fayette, Forsyth, and Gwinnett counties support vouchers for children in failing schools.

Support for choice was found among urban and suburban voters of all political persuasions and races. Even a majority of teachers (55 percent to 43 percent) and public school employees (two to one) support vouchers.

Good Deal

The state teachers union says Johnson’s plan is untenable with the state facing a $2 billion deficit. Supporters say the plan could actually reap savings for public schools.

“It depends on how the bill is structured,” McCutcheon said. “Right now, the tuition tax bill is unlimited—scholarships can be $20,000. But if you give a partial tax scholarship—say, $4,000—a lot of middle-class families could pay the other $4,000 or whatever it costs to send their children to a private school while also saving taxpayers a whole lot of money.”

“Around 80 percent of the districts in Georgia have never approved [a charter school application], and I would venture to say most are opposed.”

KELLY MCCUTCHEON
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
GEORGIA PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

The average public school in Georgia spends $10,500 per student. The average private school in Georgia charges about $4,000 less in tuition—a fact Johnson cites as proof that choice actually leaves “more money behind to educate fewer students.”

Johnson’s universal voucher proposal will likely offer a debit card similar to the “E-card” many now use to pay for health care. The card would have $10,500 on it in the form of a personalized budget parents could use to purchase tuition, tutoring, books, and computers that best fit their children’s educational needs.

“That’s not how we do it now,” Johnson said. “Today, the state funds the local systems and the systems fund programs. We do not fund children! What a revolution—a personalization revolution.”

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

INTERNET INFO

National Grassroots Campaign Begins

By Jillian Melchior

The Alliance for School Choice has launched its School Choice Works campaign, aimed at recruiting 10,000 school choice supporters in key battleground states across the nation.

In the first two days, 1,600 people registered on the campaign Web site, said Andrew Campanella, School Choice Works’ national campaign director.

“School choice is a movement, but it’s also a highly personal issue,” Campanella said. “The reason we need to get parents involved and speak to them directly is, when a parent chooses a school for the child, they’re not just doing it because it’s a movement. They want their children to have a better life. I can’t think of something more important for a parent.”

Rallying Cry

The School Choice Works Web site will feature families’ stories about school choice. The alliance is using information gathered on the site since its November 11 launch to create a campaign that works on both the state and national level.

Supporters receive a booklet, a bumper sticker, and frequent information from the alliance and its state partners about how they can promote and defend school choice, Campanella said.

Supporters also will get e-mails or mailings about events or actions they can take and will be urged to write to legislators or the media.

The School Choice Works campaign recruits supporters through radio, television, and newspaper interviews. It also launched an Internet advertising campaign targeting 11 states. In addition, state organizations are helping point parents toward School Choice Works.

“This is providing an avenue for ordinary citizens who want to get involved to do so,” Campanella said.

State Strategies

Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, is helping rally supporters to the group. He said once his staff heard about the national movement, they were excited to participate. No one has ever organized people nationally for school choice, he said.

“Often, school choice is very much about individual families, so unfortunately, the parents have not always pulled together as a unified group,” Aldis said. “Having something to get them all on the same page with this effort will make it easier.”

Aldis said he anticipates 1,000 to 2,000 Ohioans will join the campaign.

Grassroots Units

In Pennsylvania, the school choice advocacy group Road to Educational Freedom through Choice (REACH) is participating. Executive Director Andrew LeFevre said he hopes it will help school choice supporters across the country take a larger view of the issues and help state organizations share ideas and effective strategies.

“National campaigns kind of act as connectors, help folks not have to reinvent the wheel,” LeFevre said. “We’re trying to find ways to help parents who don’t have the economic means to find ways to find the best choice for their children.

“What we are hoping to get out of this is a couple more thousand people in Pennsylvania who have a better understanding of how they can get plugged into REACH and as a bigger, national movement, help bring school choice to everyone in the nation,” LeFevre added.

“[P]arents have not always pulled together as a unified group. Having something to get them all on the same page with this effort will make it easier.”

CHAD ALDIS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SCHOOL CHOICE OHIO

Campanella said grassroots involvement on the local or state level is crucial in the fight for school choice.

“We cannot effectively communicate the need for school choice and the want for school choice from the tenth floor of a building in Washington,” Campanella said. “The message needs to come from the parents.”

Jillian Melchior (jmelchior@hillsdale.com) writes from Michigan.

In Other Words

“A typical teacher in Southern California, where I teach, pays $922 every year to his or her local, which then sends $611 of that amount to the state affiliate, the California Teachers Association, and $140 to the national affiliate, the National Education Association. (One has to wonder, if the unions are so beneficial, why do teachers need to be forced to join and to fork over such hefty dues in most states?)

“Untold millions go to political causes, whether a teacher agrees with the cause or not. According to Reg Weaver, the recently retired NEA president, his union’s rank-and-file teachers are about one-third Democrat, one-third Republican, and one-third independent. Yet more than 90% of NEA political spending goes to Democratic causes, according to OpenSecrets.org. Thus, if you are a Republican and have conservative values, your dues are being used to support causes and candidates you oppose.”

— Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, Los Angeles Times, October 18, 2008

Did You Know?

The average annual salary for one of the Ohio Education Association’s 234 workers is $88,000.

Most teachers—the rank-and-file union members, whose salaries are garnished to pay mandatory dues—don’t know that, according to the Columbus Dispatch.

The paper reported in late November the average union worker’s salary, noting 102 of those 234 employees make six-figure salaries—including 34 who made more than $120,000 last fiscal year.

Executive Director Dennis Reardon is the union’s highest-paid employee at $176,317. President Patricia Frost-Brooks was paid $172,574, and the union’s vice president and treasurer each were paid about $151,400.

The average Ohio public school teacher makes $53,410 a year—less than 75 percent of OEA staffers.
A groundbreaking new international study provides strong evidence greater competition from the private education sector increases the academic performance of public school students.

Martin West, Ph.D. of Brown University and Ludger Woessmann, Ph.D. of the University of Munich reported the finding in their article, “School Choice International,” in the Hoover Institution’s Education Next Winter 2009 edition.

“It’s the first effort to establish whether the relationship between private school competition and academic performance is causal,” said West.

“The effect was strongest in math, followed by science and reading literacy. West noted such a finding is common in education research, because reading achievement tends to be affected more than math achievement by factors outside the school setting.

In addition to academic performance, the authors found a 10 percent increase in the size of a nation’s private education sector is associated with a 5.6 percent reduction in the amount of money spent per student over the course of their educational career. That means increasing private education lowers overall education costs.

Long-Term Effects
West and Woessmann’s findings are set apart from much contemporary school choice research by the duration of the effect on academic outputs.

“I do think it’s the only study that’s ever looked at the impact of competition between public and private schools on a country’s overall educational achievement over a very long period of time,” said Paul Peterson, Ph.D., a Harvard University professor and executive editor of Education Next. “We want to know if school choice works over time. Of all the studies of school choice out there, most of them are short-term.”

West believes the study meshes well with the findings of other studies conducted on existing school choice programs in the United States.

“We have a handful suggesting favorable response to the competition, and a handful that find no significant response, something that may reflect the limited scope of these programs,” West said. “We don’t have any evidence that new forms of competition have undermined public school performance, so I think our study is consistent with this body of research.”

Instructing Policymakers
Peterson said the study can be instructive for policymakers wrestling with the possibility of introducing a voucher or tax credit scholarship program to their state or city.

“I think it gives one greater confidence that moving in the direction of greater school choice will have positive impacts in the long run,” Peterson said. “Countries that have given more choice in the long run have benefited thereby.”

West agreed the findings should reassure legislative supporters of school choice they’re on the right track.

“There is nothing to fear with the experience of other countries to think that private school sectors will undermine the performance of public school systems,” West said. “In fact, quite the opposite.”

West also noted the positive effects of competition on academic performance are real and significant, but he cautioned the estimate may be overstated because of the limited number of countries examined.

Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Online K-12 Schooling Gaining Popularity

By Aricka Flowers

Online learning is picking up steam as a viable option for public school students nationwide.

According to a report by seven sponsor agencies, including the Colorado Department of Education and Illinois Virtual High Schools, “Keeping the Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice,” online schooling is experiencing continued growth and is now an option for students in 44 states.

Making Progress

From late 2007 through June 2008, new online learning programs were created, current programs expanded, and legislation passed to encourage the growth of such schooling. The annual report, released in November, also identified some challenges facing online learning programs, the largest being funding.

“One of the great fallacies about online learning is that it should be a quarter of the cost of traditional programs,” said Mickey Revenaugh, vice president of Connections Academy, a Baltimore-based national online K-12 public school. “The cost of a high-quality online learning program is almost as much as a traditional school, with a bulk of the expense coming from technology and human resources.

“The real dilemma is the way online schools are funded,” Revenaugh continued. “They are often funded like charter schools, which we know are not funded as well as public schools. In addition, supplementary online courses are typically funded as a line item in the budget, which makes them susceptible to the whims of legislators and budget constraints.”

Protecting Virtual Schools

One state has passed legislation that helps protect the funding of online learning programs within its borders. In Florida, school districts are required to provide virtual learning programs to students in kindergarten through eighth grade by the 2009-10 school year, making funding mandatory.

The survey reported other states are making similar legislative decisions to ensure growth of online schooling options.

“There have been a couple of notable changes in the past year, said John Watson, founder of Evergreen Consulting Services, which conducts the annual survey. “For instance, Alabama became the second state to require that schools provide students with an online learning experience before graduation. The only other state that does that is Michigan.”

“The cost of a high-quality online learning program is almost as much as a traditional school, with a bulk of the expense coming from technology and human resources.”

MICKEY REVENAUGH
VICE PRESIDENT
CONNECTIONS ACADEMY

Best Programs

In addition to funding challenges, other barriers include varying definitions of online learning and fears about virtual students’ ability to develop appropriate socialization skills. Revenaugh said parents must be highly involved when their child attends an online school and should make sure their children are involved in social activities such as sports.

Revenaugh also pointed out children already actively take part in online socialization tools such as MySpace and Facebook, and she said virtual administrators should be sure to provide similar modes of communication for online students.

“Only six or seven states in the nation have no online programs whatsoever,” said Revenaugh. “It’s safe to predict that additional states will look at how to give this option to their students. Online learning must be part of the educational experience in this country. If we want our students to be competitive, online programs need to be available so students can have access to the best classes and teachers available, which may not always be found at their local school.”

Aricka Flowers (attflowers2@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.

In Other Words

“People like choices. This simple aphorism is the basis of South Carolina’s most popular and far-reaching educational reform in the last four decades: state scholarships for higher education. ...”

“These scholarships are an excellent example of school choice. Parents, educators, and lawmakers have praised them. Which begs the question: Why aren’t we offering similar choices to students in grades K through 12? ...”

“The big difference with K-12 schools is political. The K-12 public school system is a $7.9 billion-per-year institution that believes it has the sole civic and moral authority to educate children in South Carolina. It has raised protection of the organizational status quo above the instructional needs of children.

“This is a shame.”

— Randy Page, president of South Carolinians for Responsible Government, The State, November 1, 2008
New Jersey Considers Dropout Reduction Program

By Aricka Flowers

At 2 percent in 2007, New Jersey has one of the nation’s lowest high school dropout rates, according to the state’s education department.

Nevertheless, the state is undertaking a new effort to reduce its high school dropout rate further through the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign.

A steering committee of educators and legislators met regularly with more than 1,000 school officials, stakeholders, and members of the public from 2006 to 2008 to brainstorm about methods to raise graduation rates among the state’s students.

“We believe that in order to truly get a handle on the dropout crisis in this country, the entire community must wrap its arms around this issue and get involved to help solve it.”

COLLEEN WILBER
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF MEDIA RELATIONS
AMERICA’S PROMISE ALLIANCE

Significant Changes

The recommendations include improving teacher preparation programs and establishing personalized learning plans and new testing standards for students. These will include a Language Arts Proficiency Assessment and requiring all students to take algebra 1 and 2, geometry, biology, chemistry, and economics to graduate.

The recommendations also include redesigning high schools as “learning communities” that focus on personalized teaching and provide educators with increased technical assistance.

The plan calls for a P-16 Council—covering all students from preschool through college—to “ensure a seamless and aligned system of public education,” according to the press release. The council would consist of leaders from the education, business, and government communities as well as parents.

National Initiative

New Jersey’s plan is part of a national initiative by America’s Promise Alliance, a Washington, DC-based organization founded by former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

“America’s Promise Alliance is approaching the dropout crisis in a way that hasn’t been done before,” said Colleen Wilber, the group’s senior director of media relations. “In previous efforts to reduce the nation’s dropout rate, the focus has been solely on schools or the parents. Although those are critical elements, we believe that in order to truly get a handle on the dropout crisis in this country, the entire community must wrap its arms around this issue and get involved to help solve it.”

“That is why the centerpiece of our Dropout Prevention Campaign is engaging all the sectors of a community—from schools, parents, and the young people themselves to the business and faith sectors and nonprofit organizations,” Wilber continued. “We believe the business community has just as important a role to play as schools.”

Early Prevention

But some experts say mentoring programs are not an effective way to address the issue. Instead, they say, dropout prevention begins in elementary and middle school.

“When students realize as freshmen that they can’t do ninth-grade work, are barely literate, and can’t do basic math, let alone advanced math, they quickly lose interest in school” said Derrell Bradford, deputy director of Excellent Education for Everyone (E3), a Newark-based school choice advocacy group. “That’s the real issue. Dropout reforms like mentoring … do not address the real problem of students being overwhelmingly under-equipped to do the work in high school.

“Before they get to high school, we tell them it’s fine that they do not know certain things and pass them along to the next grade, but when they get to high school, we say, ‘OK, now it’s serious, we expect you to get good grades,’” Bradford continued.

Strengthening Connections

Officials at America’s Promise Alliance say that’s true. Wilber said the group is targeting middle schoolers to help stave off the desire to drop out once they reach high school.

“We have an initiative called ‘Ready for the Real World’ that is targeting that vulnerable middle-school population,” Wilber said, citing a study released in March 2006 by Civic Enterprises, a Washington DC-based organization that spearheads innovative public policies. It documented many dropouts were achieving passing grades when they left school.

“When asked why they dropped out, a good number of them said they felt disconnected to the curriculum and could not understand the connection [between] what they were learning inside the classroom [and] what was happening in the real world,” Wilber said.

“This is where our initiative comes in.

We are working with business leaders and our Alliance partners to expand curriculum-based ‘service-learning’ opportunities for youth in those critical middle-school years,” Wilber continued. “If young people can make that connection through a service learning or career exploration activity, they are more likely to stay in school, succeed, and become more engaged on a volunteer level in their communities.”

“I am enormously frustrated by this discussion because the people in our education institutions think that graduation is more important than education.”

DERREL BRADFORD
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Harder Work

But Bradford remains unconvinced New Jersey’s plan will succeed, especially if the initiative is to make high school curriculum more rigorous.

“I’m not optimistic about any of the solutions they have or will come up with to reduce the dropout rate or make the curriculum more rigorous,” said Bradford. “I’m all for raising standards. It’s actually crucial that we do so in this state, but they don’t guarantee that a student is getting a better teacher or learning environment.

“I am enormously frustrated by this discussion because the people in our education institutions think that graduation is more important than education,” Bradford added.

Aricka Flowers (atflowers2@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
Obama’s Most Telling Choice

By Dan Proft

The most telling choice Barack Obama has made since becoming the nation’s president-elect has nothing to do with his Cabinet or senior advisors. It was the choice of Sidwell Friends School, a private grammar school in Washington, DC, to which Obama and his wife Michelle have decided to send their two daughters.

I applaud Obama’s commitment to his daughters’ education, choosing to send them to the best schools.

It’s just too bad he opposes extending that same choice to families whose children are relegated by geography and income to schools he and everyone else already know will fail them.

Failed His Constituents

Obama knows something about this problem. During his time as an Illinois state senator, he represented a district with more than 12,000 students in failing elementary schools, according to 2004 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) data.

During that time, while Obama’s daughters attended the prestigious—and private and expensive—University of Chicago Lab School, thousands of other children Obama was elected to represent were warehoused at Chicago Public School facilities, where most are stored for eight to 12 years until they are mature enough either to enter the penal system or to go off into the real world having mastered the phrase, “Would you like to try one of our combo meals today?”

What did Obama do then? The same thing he’s been doing since beginning his campaign for the Oval Office: Backslapping the teacher unions for their good intentions while generations of children from low-income families are ushered into society’s underclass, the direct result of not being taught to read or do simple math.

Obama told the Chicago Daily Herald: “Backslapping the teacher unions is all the audacity Obama could muster at that time or since. One has to wonder whether CPS teachers know something the rest of us don’t.

This is not an indictment of the decisions of public school teachers or U.S. presidents who want the best for their children, but it does bring up an important question. If CPS was not good enough for the children of four in 10 CPS teachers, then exactly whose children is CPS good enough for? The same goes for the Obama children and is not good enough for the children of four in 10 CPS teachers, but it does bring up an important question. If CPS was not good enough for the children of four in 10 CPS teachers, then exactly whose children is CPS good enough for? The same goes for the Obama children and is not good enough for the children of four in 10 CPS teachers.

Captive of Teacher Unions

Like most parents, president-elect Barack Obama and his wife Michelle want the best for their children. The Obamas, who send their daughters to private schools, nevertheless oppose choice for other parents.

The Journal of School Choice will provide those insights in one of six forms:

• News and Vews (600 to 1,500 words)
• Commentary (5,000 words)
• Surveys (6,000 words)
• Methodological (6,000 words)
• Analysis (6,000 words)
• Book Reviews (1,200 words)

Recommended limit, but flexible at the editor’s discretion.

Since many potential school choice programs do not exist anywhere, there is no way to empirically analyze their performance. Therefore, the Journal of School Choice seeks forward-looking articles using theory and indirect evidence to derive insights or highlight key questions to be addressed. The Journal of School Choice seeks manuscripts that examine what school choice could do, as well as what it has done. For what does exist, as well as what could be, authors must sharply define the scope of the alleged relevance of their findings. Even if which schools are not sent to the left, are relevant to. Authors have to carefully define key terms.

The most telling choice Barack Obama has made since becoming the nation’s president-elect ... was the choice of Sidwell Friends School, a private grammar school in Washington, DC, to which Obama and his wife Michelle have decided to send their two daughters.

The most telling choice Barack Obama has made since becoming the nation’s president-elect was the choice of Sidwell Friends School, a private grammar school in Washington, DC, to which Obama and his wife Michelle have decided to send their two daughters.

Captive of Teacher Unions

While running for Congress in 2004, Obama told the Daily Herald, a suburban Chicago newspaper, school choice “drains resources from public schools, and I think that we have to make a commitment to providing resources to schools that are educating the vast majority of children in this country.”

More money for our urban public school systems? That talking point, straight from a teachers union memo, is all the audacity Obama could muster at that time or since.

This point, in particular, is countered by decades of reality. Increased public school funding has not improved public schools, while school choice programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and other cities and states have—and they actually are leaving more money in the till for public schools to work with, not draining resources from them.

While elementary and secondary public education is most decidedly a state and local issue, its federalization by President George W. Bush under NCLB and the federally subsidized scholarship program in the District of Columbia make Obama’s obsolete views on public education more salient now than at any other time in our nation’s history.

Internet Info

To Cut Waste, Ban Teachers Strikes

By Bill Zettler

One of the more common myths circulated by teacher unions is the need to pay teachers higher salaries if we want to be able to hire enough of them to meet our needs.

This is simply not true. Illinois, for example, is producing about 18,000 more certified teachers every year than the state needs. That is because Illinois public schools have a 92.5 percent teacher retention rate—of the 160,000 certified employees statewide, only about 12,000 leave in any particular year, including about 5,000 retirees.

In 2007, Illinois handed out some 30,000 teaching certificates, leaving 18,000 people unable to teach in the state even though they are certified to do so. Over the past five years, Illinois has racked up 75,000 qualified but unemployed teachers.

"Illinois ... is producing about 18,000 more certified teachers every year than the state needs."

The teachers' strike at Huntley's District 158 is the latest example of how completely the teachers union controls the public education system.

In a democratic society, of course, public schools should be controlled by parents and taxpayers, not by unelected public employees. In Illinois, however, the system is held hostage by a political process that has allowed teacher unions to make political contributions in excess of $35 million since 1995, thus ensuring themselves guaranteed jobs, via tenure, at above-market compensation.

They can't lose their jobs by striking, so why not do it? Better for parents and taxpayers to suffer than for teachers not to get what they want.

You Better Shop Around

One of the union's complaints is that other districts pay teachers more, and therefore District 158 should match or exceed them. I would suggest a different solution: Teachers should apply for jobs in any school district they perceive would be a better place to work.

Of course, the teachers know every suburban school district has hundreds of resumes from those 75,000 unemployed teachers, and they would have little or no chance of getting hired. It's easier to strike than it is to apply at another school. Better yet, why don't teachers who think they are underpaid go into the private sector and make all those big bucks they are clamoring for? Then they would be just like the rest of us—being paid on merit based upon our ability and production. If it doesn't work out, unemployment pays $375 a week to hold them over until the next tenured job opens up.

Of course, the teachers union is not interested in the sensible principle of job competition, the system taxpayers work in every day. They are interested in society being forced to give to each teacher according to his perceived needs, from each taxpayer according to his ability to pay.

Outrageous Expenditures

If you are a teacher and are not willing to give up tenure, a nine-month work year, and a multimillion-dollar pension at age 56, then you are overpaid. You should either be grateful for what you have, or exercise your constitutional right to leave your job and find employment somewhere else. Your employer—the taxpayers of Illinois—will easily find someone else to do your job and almost certainly for a lot less money. After all, 75,000 are people eager to replace you.

In 2007, Illinois paid an art teacher $196,000, handed out $100,000 annual salary increases for superintendents, and retained 40 administrators whose salaries increased in one year by more than the median income of a full-time Illinois worker.

That $196,000 was a 22 percent increase over the teacher's 2006 salary of $161,000, which was an 18 percent increase over 2005's $136,000, which was a 16 percent increase over 2004's $117,000, for a total of $81,000 in increases over three years. This teacher's pension will start at $114,000 per year, and over the 27 years of his expected post-retirement lifetime he will collect more than $4.4 million in pension payments.

How do those numbers compare to your salary increases over the past three years? And how does that $4 million pension stack up to your 401k?

"Illinois public schools have a 92.5 percent teacher retention rate—of the 160,000 certified employees statewide, only about 12,000 leave in any particular year, including about 5,000 retirees."

Take it Back

Why should taxpayers have to pay a premium for a service that is available elsewhere for a fraction of the cost at which the government supplies it? If taxation's purpose is to provide for the common good, what common good ensures from overpaying for a public service?

The obvious answer is to ban teachers from striking. If an agreement cannot be reached, then each side puts its best offer on the table and we have a referendum in which the taxpayers decide which offer is best.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan successfully fired 13,000 air-traffic controllers for striking illegally. He took air-traffic control back from the unions. Now it's time for taxpayers to do the same—take public schools back from the teacher unions.

Bill Zettler (zettler.bill@gmail.com) writes from Prospect Heights, Illinois.

INTERNET INFO


Flunked Shows Pressing Need for Choice

By Aricka Flowers

Narrated by actor Joe Mantegna, the new documentary film Flunked takes a cold, hard look at the problems plaguing the American education system.

In just 45 minutes the film offers in-depth information on how the nation got into its current academic pit, how to start crawling out of it, and why it is imperative that we do so.

“This has been the story of every education reform effort since 1957. Big promises, massive budgets, and no improvements to speak of.”

JOE MANTEGNA
ACTOR AND NARRATOR
FLUNKED

The award-winning film highlights the nation’s academic downward spiral over the past 50 years. It was produced by EFF Productions with the help of the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, an organization based in Washington that advocates free enterprise and limited government. Flunked won the “Best Film” award at the San Fernando Valley International Film Festival in October.

Citing data from the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment, in which the United States ranked 24th of 29 nations, the film illustrates just how low America’s education system ranks on the global totem pole in terms of academic performance.

“This has been the story of every education reform effort since 1957,” Mantegna said. “Big promises, massive budgets, and no improvements to speak of.”

Success Stories
The film features educators from across the country who are using innovative tactics to improve their students’ academic achievement. From the Bronx to the Bay Area, administrators from charter schools and other alternative forms of education explain how a new, personalized approach better serves their students in measurable ways such as much-improved test scores.

One of those is Ben Chavis, principal of the American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, California. Facing a 68 percent attendance rate when he took over the school in 2001, Chavis said he used “good ol’ capitalism” to get the students back in school: At graduation, he stacked a large amount of money on a table and handed it out to those who had good attendance.

Once students started attending, Chavis eliminated the traditional middle-school model of rotating classrooms and created self-contained classes that change teachers only for physical education classes.

“It creates stability,” Chavis said in the documentary. “I think you cannot create a better system to destroy kids than the middle-school concept that we have today of the rotating [classes]. A middle-school child is constantly changing; ... that’s what the research says. So what [we say], ‘Let’s give them seven classes, that will really screw them up.’ I did away with that rotating system.”

It worked. A year later, American Indian Public School had the most-improved standardized test scores in the city.

Problems, Solutions
Big budgets for ineffective and failing schools that use out-of-date teaching techniques and materials are highlighted in the film as major problems for the nation’s education system.

The filmmakers also note some possible solutions. For example, the film shows successful schools seem to have four things in common: strong leaders, good teachers, the best curricula possible, and high standards of excellence.

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

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James M. Taylor is managing editor of Environment & Climate News, a senior fellow with The Heartland Institute, and one of the nation’s most sought-after speakers on climate change. He has addressed elected officials, civic organizations, and church groups – always to applause and praise for his knowledge and accessible speaking style.

Taylor is author of What Climate Scientists Think about Global Warming (Heartland Institute, 2007) and other Heartland publications. He has appeared on CNN’s Glenn Beck show, the Fox News Channel, and the “Good Morning America” and “Newsmakers” national radio programs. His writing on environmental issues has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Houston Chronicle, Detroit News, Boston Globe, Tampa Tribune, and elsewhere.

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