CALIFORNIA CONSIDERS DEEP EDUCATION CUTS

By Ben DeGrow

California school officials and education reformers are wrestling with the specter of multibillion-dollar education budget cuts in 2009.

But as Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democrat-controlled state legislature look for spending reductions to cover the budget shortfall, leading state educators are pleading for leniency. Early proposals floated by lawmakers call for a $2.5 billion, or 4 percent, reduction in education spending for California’s current budget year and in future years.

“We know education is going to take a hit, but the magnitude of the hit is too great,” said State Superintendent Jack O’Connell. “If you want to invest in the future, you invest in education.”

The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) expressed similar sentiments in an official statement in January.

“The level of mid-year education cuts currently under consideration will impose reductions so unthinkable that they will significantly undermine our ability to continue essential programs and will seri-

We know education is going to take a hit, but the magnitude of the hit is too great. If you want to invest in the future, you invest in education.”

JACK O’CONNELL
STATE SUPERINTENDENT
STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Court: Only School Districts Can Authorize Charters in Fla.

By Elisha Maldonado

A Florida state appellate court has stripped an independent charter school authorizer of its power, meaning the only course charter schools in the state have for approval is once again through the local school districts, whose administrators often view them as threats.

In response, a bill filed in the state Senate would create a new third-party authorizing agency to work with school
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OREGON SCHOOL CHOICE VIDEO CONTEST

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Visit www.OregonSchoolChoiceContest.com
ENTRY DEADLINE IS MARCH 25, 2020

Are you a student, or a parent of a student, who attends a K-12 Oregon school of your choosing (private, charter, virtual, non-local public or home school) or a public school (but you’d prefer another choice)?

All Oregon parents and K-12 students: Make up to a two-minute video about how school choice has, or could, change your life. Tell your story and stand up for school choice.

Twenty finalists will win $250 each, based on how persuasively their videos make the case for school choice. A random drawing among finalists attending the awards ceremony in mid-April will determine the grand prize winner, who will receive up to $10,000 for qualified educational expenses.

Visit www.OregonSchoolChoiceContest.com for complete details and to enter the contest. Make your school choice dreams come true!

The Oregon School Choice Video Contest is a project of Cascade Policy Institute, a non-profit think tank in Portland, Oregon. Funding provided through a generous Innovation Grant from the Rhodes Foundation for Educational Change.
Federal Stimulus Bill Considered Unlikely to Improve Education

By Lindsey Burke

In February, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The $787 billion bill dedicates more than $100 billion for education over the next two years—a spending increase greater than the entire annual budget of the U.S. Department of Education in 2007.

The bill includes significant increases in federal spending on programs such as the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs and creates a State Fiscal Stabilization Fund at a cost of $53.6 billion.

Some analysts worry the spending increases outlined in the bill will not improve economic growth or educational performance. Others warn the funding will not help states overcome their economic troubles, and that such measures could in fact harm states in the long run.

Deeper Holes

Edmund McMahon, director of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, explained. “Given our very high overall level of spending [more than $13,000 per pupil, rivaled only by New Jersey], K-12 education should be able to absorb the modest 3 percent nominal cut our governor proposed,” he said.

“Instead, the stimulus bill will prop up school aid at an unsustainable level for two more years, during which [time] our financial condition, in particular, is unlikely to improve. In short, it just digs the hole deeper,” McMahon said.

The State Fiscal Stabilization Fund was of particular concern to McMahon. “Title XIII—the so-called ‘State Fiscal Stabilization Fund’—is testimony to the power of the K-12 lobby in general and of teacher unions in particular,” McMahon noted.

Greater Flexibility

Some lawmakers would prefer to be given flexibility in how education dollars are spent. Such flexibility, they say, would help them get through fiscal hardships by allowing them to direct funding to best meet students’ needs.

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“State leadership should be free of federal mandates when determining how to respond to a contracting economy. ... Leaders need the freedom to think creatively in times of economic distress.”

PETE HOEKSTRA
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE

IN OTHER WORDS

“Regarding high school graduation rates, my sense is that they are improving for virtually every group. Our governor and state school superintendent sure think so.”

— Tim Callahan, spokesperson for the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, the state’s biggest teachers union, disputing the findings of a January 26 report released by a school choice group, the Center for an Educated Georgia, showing graduation rates are lower now than in the 1980s while per-pupil spending more than doubled since 1979. Augusta Chronicle, January 26, 2009

“State leadership should be free of federal mandates when determining how to respond to a contracting economy,” Hoekstra said in a 2008 press release. “They should have the ability to direct resources to their highest-needs areas when there have been two consecutive quarters of economic contraction nationally. During such times, states would be allowed to direct how certain transportation, education, and workforce grants are used.

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Lindsey Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is a research assistant in domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Survey: Va. Parents Back All Forms of School Choice

By Evelyn B. Stacey

Voters throughout Virginia’s lowest-income neighborhoods are strong supporters of school choice, a new poll reports.

In mid-January the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy and the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) announced the results of their Parental Choice Survey, given to residents throughout Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond, Virginia. At Petersburg High School, 99.9 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged, and Norfolk’s median household income is $15,779.

Overwhelmingly, parents in all three locales support a variety of school choice options, including tax credits, special-needs scholarships, and charter schools. They are equally dissatisfied with the government-run schools they are currently being offered.

According to the survey, 69 percent of the 2,200 respondents favor a tax-credit scholarship program.

Choice Plan Offered
State Del. Christopher Saxman (R-Staunton) has sponsored three times a bill that would allow businesses and individuals to receive tax credits for contributions given to public schools, which then would use the money for extracurricular activities and capital projects. The bill also would create organizations authorized to give scholarships to eligible students to transfer from their district public school to another public or private school.

The most recent version of Saxman’s measure was defeated in the Senate Finance Committee last year.

“Competition makes schools better. Look at higher education in Virginia. It’s diverse, accessible, and affordable,” said Saxman. “Everyone supports choice in higher education, but not in K-12.”

Saxman and state Sen. Mark Obenshain (R-Harrisonburg) will reintroduce the bill in the current legislative session.

Special-Needs Scholarships
Parents in the places surveyed demonstrated extremely strong support—90 percent—for a special-needs scholarship program giving families with disabled students the means to send those children to the school that best meets their needs.

According to the Mackinac Center for Public Policy’s 1997 study, “Do Private Schools Serve Difficult-to-Educate Students?” public schools don’t accept all special-needs students and instead decide to send them to private schools, at public expense. “Special-needs students are being sent to private schools through district funds. A special-needs scholarship program is more beneficial to both students and the public school,” by allowing parents to make the choice, the report authors note.

Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Utah operate successful special-needs scholarship programs.

Parents participating in Florida’s McKay Disability Scholarship Program said the private schools in the program offered reduced class sizes and greater accountability in services for their children when compared with their previous, public schools. The parents also reported their children were teased by fellow students nearly 50 percent less often than when they had been in public schools, according to a study released by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in 2003.

Charter Schools
In a region with only one existing charter school, 70 percent of respondents said they support more charters. Virginia has only five statewide.

While state law in Virginia allows anyone to start a charter school, the regulatory burden makes doing so unattractive.

“Opponents of school choice often raise the specter of segregation in opposing choice, and it is true that choice was once used as a weapon to oppose integration,” said BAEO President Gerard Robinson. “But what I think we’re seeing now is a new generation whose focus is on educational excellence for their children, rather than re-fighting battles that have largely been won.”

Evelyn B. Stacey (estacey@pacificresearch.org) is a research assistant at the Pacific Research Institute in Sacramento, California.

INTERNET INFO


Poll: Oregonians Are Hungry for School Choice

By Aricka Flowers

The people of Oregon want more choice among educational opportunities for the state’s K-12 students, a new poll reports.

According to the report, issued jointly in January by the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and the Portland-based Cascade Policy Institute, more than half of the 1,200 respondents approved of school vouchers, tax credit scholarships, charter and virtual schools, and merit pay for teachers.

“63 percent of respondents said they would be in favor of the school voucher approach. ... Oregon absolutely has an appetite for school choice.”

PAUL DIPERNA
STUDY AUTHOR

Nearly nine of 10 respondents stated they would use some form of school choice if given the option. Less than a third rated public schools “good” or “excellent.”

“Frankly, we were surprised the findings in support of school choice were so high,” said Steve Buckstein, Cascade’s founder and senior policy analyst. “We knew anecdotally there was a lot of interest, but according to the survey, 87 percent would opt for something other than a regular public school if they could. We found that to be quite high—especially since 83 percent of them had children in K-12 schools.

“These people were mainly parents, and an overwhelming majority of them want more choices,” Buckstein said.

‘Appetite for Choice’

Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they favor financially rewarding teachers for students’ academic performance, although 61 percent of voters defeated a proposition to do so in a state referendum last November, according to study author Paul DiPerna. He was unsure what caused the discrepancy.

The study found Oregon respondents strongly favor school vouchers, even more than in the other 10 states surveyed by the Friedman Foundation.

“Even though constitutionally in the state there would be some issues in terms of having a voucher system, 63 percent of respondents said they would be in favor of the school voucher approach. In Maryland that number was 42 percent, and in Oklahoma it was 53 percent,” DiPerna said. “The next closest to Oregon was Idaho at 60 percent—so Oregon absolutely has an appetite for school choice.”

Pending Legislation

A bill scheduled for consideration this legislative session—the Oregon Education Tax Credit Bill—would give taxpayers a $1,000 credit per child for educational expenses and a $1,000 credit for donating money to scholarship programs for low-income and special-needs students. It also would give corporations up to $8,000 in credits for donating to the programs.

The poll results spurred the Cascade Policy Institute to launch the Oregon School Choice Video Contest. Any Oregon K-12 student and his or her parent can enter a two-minute video explaining why they want school choice or how choice has benefitted them. Twenty finalists will win $250 each, and the grand prize winner will receive $10,000 for educational purposes.

“We chose $10,000 for the grand prize because Oregon spends more than that per student in public schools,” Buckstein said. “Yet only 8 percent of the people surveyed thought that much was spent per student.”

The video submission deadline is March 25, and the winner will be announced April 15.

Aricka Flowers (atflowers@hotmail.com) writes from Chicago.

New Hampshire Paves Way for Early Graduation

By Georgia Geis

New Hampshire policymakers are rethinking the traditional four-year high school model in hopes of creating a more-rigorous curriculum.

Last autumn the state announced plans to design a new high school curriculum and a battery of state board exams to allow students to graduate after completing 10th grade. Those who do not pass the exam may stay enrolled and try again.

“We should have a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for college and/or the workforce in two years rather than four,” said Lyonel Tracy, commissioner for the New Hampshire Department of Education.

Lewis Andrews, executive director of the Yankee Institute, a think tank based in Hartford, Connecticut, has written policy briefs suggesting states attend community colleges.

“High school is much more than a learning institution—it is a fantasy about a certain lifestyle,” said Andrews. “There is nothing magical about four years [of high school].”

Better Education, Savings

The new assessment plan, linked to a new, tougher curriculum, is one of 10 sweeping changes suggested in “Tough Choices or Tough Times,” released in 2006 by the Washington, DC-based American Workforce New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce.

The report calls for a complete overhaul of the U.S. educational system, which the authors declare was built “for another era.” Two other states—Utah and Massachusetts—also have announced plans to implement some of the commission’s proposals.

“We have over 3,000 enrollments already in that Running Start program. So this is expanding on what we are already doing,” said Tracy.

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

New Hampshire Department of Education will begin by looking at international board examination reviews that assess students’ understanding of core subjects. Commissioner Tracy said the process will begin with a pilot program in a few high schools.

In addition to providing better education and lowering the state dropout rate, Tracy said the new program should save New Hampshire taxpayers money, but he would not speculate about how much that might be. According to “Tough Choices or Tough Times,” early graduation plans could save the nation $60 billion a year.

Small Program in Place

New Hampshire students currently have access to the dual-enrollment program Running Start, which allows them to take classes for college credit at a reduced tuition rate while still in high school.

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Ohio Narrowly Rejects Voucher Expansion

By Phillip J. Britt

By just one vote, the Ohio General Assembly rejected a bill to create a new special-needs school voucher program that would have helped parents of students with disabilities pay for private school tuition.

The proposed Special Education Scholarship Pilot Program would have provided up to $20,000 annually for deaf, blind, and otherwise-disabled students. The proposal received a plurality of votes, 49-44, in December, but state law requires a majority of the chamber, 50 votes, for approval.

Some disabled Ohio students already benefit from the state's five-year-old Ohio Autism Scholarship Program.

Not Meeting Needs

Too many public schools aren't adapting to the circumstances of special-needs students, said Tisha Brady, communications director for School Choice Ohio. Other schools are so interested in mainstreaming they don't do what special-needs students need.

"[Parents] felt it was better to have them attend a private school where the special needs would be met," Brady explained. "For example, in one [public] school, they had the students use worksheet, but students with certain kinds of disabilities weren't learning anything. In another [public] school, one student had Crohn's disease and was out of school more than in it. The parent wasn't always able to pick up the work, meaning the student fell further behind."

Choices for Many

While some private schools don't always do a better job than public schools helping special-needs students, Brady said, there are private schools that cater to specific types of disabilities. The voucher program, currently serving 1,000 students, helps parents place a child in the school best meeting his or her particular needs.

Thousands of students are eligible for the Ohio EdChoice Scholarship, a private school tuition voucher worth up to $6,000 per year for students currently attending a chronically failing public school anywhere in the state.

Battle Ahead

Instead of taking another run at expanding the autism voucher program when the Ohio legislature meets again, Brady's organization and other choice advocates will likely be fighting to defend the program as it currently stands, to hold off budget cuts.

Last year, Gov. Ted Strickland (D) tried to cut special-needs funding. Brady has said he is likely to attempt a similar move again this year, as Ohio and other government entities are looking for ways to cut expenses to stay in line with declining tax revenues in a slumping economy.

But "I don't think they can justifiably cut it," Brady said.

Brady figures choice advocates will get help in the legislature's other chamber, where Senate President Bill Harris (R-Ashland) and Sen. Jon Husted (R-Kettering), the former House speaker, have both said they support school choice and will fight any attempts by Strickland to cut the voucher programs.

Phillip J. Britt (spenderprises@woweay.com) writes from Illinois.

Court: Only School Districts Can Authorize Charters in Florida

Continued from Page 1

boards in what charter school proponents hope the education establishment will view as a more-collaborative and less-threatening way.

According to the court's ruling, issued December 2, the Florida Schools of Excellence Commission was "facially unconstitutional."

The ruling further states the 2006 law establishing the commission, signed by then-Gov. Jeb Bush (R), "poses a total and fatal conflict with article IX, section 4 of the Florida Constitution," saying it "permits and encourages the creation of a parallel system of free public education escaping the operation and control of local elected school boards."

Different Direction

Bush signed the excellence commission into law as an independent statewide authority able to sponsor charter schools directly, said the group's chairwoman, Liza McFadden.

The commission also was given the power to authorize municipalities, state universities, and community colleges to co-sponsor charter schools in Florida in order to expand "educational opportunities to students," according to the commission’s Web site.

New Legislation

Though the commission will not appeal the ruling, McFadden said, “We have stuck together, and are working with the support of the Senate and House leadership, and would like to get a new charter school authorizer in place.”

On January 12 state Sen. Stephen Wise (R-Jacksonville) filed Senate Bill 610, which calls for the commission to be able to “support and participate as co-sponsors in developing and supporting charter schools.”

The proposed charter school authorizer, McFadden said, would work with local school boards in authorizing charter schools.

“One, we would involve the school districts, which hasn’t been done before, and two, a study would go out to the community that would find out which schools are needed,” McFadden said.

Innovative Solution

By employing a study to find out which type of school—specialized, traditional, or vocational—is most needed in each community, McFadden said, the proposed new authorizing commission would be no threat to district control “because the community would be dictating what charter school they would need and would be seeking out charter schools who want to set it up.”

McFadden added, “When you look at where education reform has made its greatest gains, it is when you take on the biggest things. When you do the right thing, and take on hard reform issues, the biggest changes are made. We hope these folks would see [this new approach] is the right thing.”

Elisha Maldonado (elishamaldonado@gmail.com) writes from California.
Vouchers Saving Florida Tax Dollars, State Reports

By Phillip J. Britt

Florida’s statewide voucher program for low-income students saved taxpayers $38.9 million in the 2007-08 school year, according to a study released by Florida’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability.

“While the program reduces the amount of corporate tax revenues received by the state, it produces a net fiscal benefit,” the report notes. “This occurs because state education spending for students who receive scholarships is reduced by more than the amount of revenue lost.”

The Florida Legislature established the Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program in 2001 to expand educational opportunities for low-income students. The program enables them to attend private schools using scholarship funding organizations (SFOs) and receive tax credits equal to the amount of corporate income tax credits.

Corporations participating in the scholarship program make contributions to scholarship funding organizations (SFOs) and receive tax credits equal to the amount of those contributions, not to exceed 75 percent of their state corporate taxes owed. The number of students receiving scholarships has nearly doubled in the past five years as the state has increased the overall statewide cap on the credits.

Helping Families

The program currently serves 23,234 students from households whose income meets federal guidelines for taxpayer-provided free and reduced-price lunches.

“A study that comes out saying a program can save the state $40 million a year is bound to get a lot of attention.”

JOHN KIRTLey, CHAIRMAN
FLORIDA SCHOOL CHOICE FUND

“While the [Florida tax-credit scholarship] program reduces the amount of corporate tax revenues received by the state, it produces a net fiscal benefit, … because state education spending for students who receive scholarships is reduced by more than the amount of revenue lost.”

OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY
STATE OF FLORIDA

More Evidence

“This is terrific news, but nothing that hadn’t already been looked at before, and already evidenced before,” said Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a national organization based in Indianapolis.

“In 2007 we released ‘Education by the Numbers: The Fiscal Effect of School Choice Programs, 1990-2006,’” Enlow noted. “We looked at every single state that had school choice programs and reviewed them for their savings and found a total of $444 million. More than $400 million of that was at the local level.

“What Florida proves is that school choice always saves money. I think this is very important, given all the budget crises in states today. … State legislators would be remiss in their job if they didn’t seriously consider these findings,” Enlow said.

Enlow says the study bodes well for school choice expansion efforts even though most people in traditional education have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Phillip J. Britt (spenterprises@wowway.com) writes from Illinois.

INTERNET INFO

California Considers Deep Cuts in Education

Continued from page 1

ously threaten the fiscal stability of our districts,” the statement read.

Slashing Bureaucracy
California last year spent $58 billion on K-12 and community education. The $40 billion spent from the general fund on schools is greater than the total general fund budget of every other state except New York.

Lisa Snell, director of education policy at the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation, said classrooms and students could be spared entirely if lawmakers were willing to eliminate duplicative bureaucratic programs.

“They’re not willing to do that, because each program has its own stakeholders and political backers,” Snell said.

She noted the state has 30 different teacher training programs alone.

Alluding to a more drastic figure, O’Connell contends “you can’t find $6 billion of efficiencies in the [California public education] system.”

Adjusting Class Size
Advocacy groups that want more education funding typically warn of massive teacher layoffs to elicit popular support, Snell observed. She said that happens because instead of allowing modest across-the-board reductions in instructional pay, unions and school officials agree to lay off teachers with the least seniority. The National Education Association in 2006-07 ranked California as the state with the highest average teacher salary, at $63,640.

Instead of tackling teacher pay, Schwarzenegger has called for a rollback of funding for class size reduction programs.

Citing the multiyear Tennessee STAR program study completed in 1999, O’Connell said the proposed cutback could have a devastating effect on student learning in the early elementary grades. But Snell highlighted a 2002 RAND study that found no connection between class size reduction and improved academic achievement.

Snell said the governor is right to propose ending the rigid mandates that accompany state categorical funding for class size reduction, because those mandates create irrational incentives to hire excess teachers.

“They always use the extreme argument that we’ll have 60 kids in one classroom,” Snell said. “But even if they brought up the flexibility to between 19 and 25 [per classroom] it would make a huge difference in budgeting.”

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“Cutting the Calendar
Another cost-saving measure the governor’s office has proposed is to shorten the school year from 180 days to 175.

White says the idea is unworkable because it would conflict with existing union contracts in many school districts.

“[Charter schools] focus all their money on the classroom and have very few program costs,” Snell said, citing the successful Green Dot program as an example.

Seeking Federal Help
O’Connell said his department suggested deferring maintenance projects and textbook and computer purchases to meet a significant share of the proposed cuts. But the state superintendent also hopes federal intervention will help fund class size reduction and technological infrastructure.

“The Obama administration is saying they can help,” O’Connell said.

Murray believes that would be counterproductive and would send the wrong message: “Having taxpayers across the country pay for California’s mismanagement hardly seems fair, especially in these tough economic times,” she said. “I would prefer California adopt education policies with a proven track record of success.”

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

INTERNET INFO
CSR Research Consortium, California class size reduction reform studies: http://www.classsize.org/
California Charters Among Best for Low-Income Kids

By Phillip J. Britt

Twelve of California’s 15 highest-performing schools serving primarily low-income children are charter schools, according to the 2008 Academic Performance Index (API), an annual state testing measurement.

Of the 12 top-performing charter schools, five are in Oakland, three in Los Angeles County, two in Santa Clara County, and one each in San Bernardino and San Diego counties.

“A lot of these schools are in some of the toughest areas of California,” said Gary Larson, spokesman for the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA). “The only traditional public schools on the list were elementary schools. The [charter] middle and high schools traditionally outperform their [conventional] public school counterparts. Charter schools have a lower dropout rate.”

Alan Bonsteel, president of California Parents for Educational Choice, said even though California charter schools serve a higher percentage of low-income students than do other public schools, “we’re just leaving [those] public schools in the dust.”

Best Practices

The two top-performing schools were Oakland’s American Indian Public Charter School and American Indian Public High School, also a charter. American Indian Public Charter School II ranked fifth on the report.

“Our model of success at American Indian is simple,” said founder Ben Chavis, who attributes the school’s success to an emphasis on fundamental reading and math instruction. “Our kids do a minimum of an hour and a half of math and language arts every day, along with two hours of homework. We have high expectations for our students and provide them with the structure and accountability they need to succeed.”

Disadvantages Overcome

The top public schools at each grade level for children in poverty were all charter schools, according to CCSA, the membership and professional organization serving California’s more-than 700 charter public schools. Together, charters serve more than 250,000 students statewide.

“These results show that charter schools are opening doors of opportunity for California’s most underserved students and are effectively advancing them on the path to academic success,” said CCSA Interim CEO Peter Thorp. “These exemplary charter schools should be studied and their best practices replicated in the broader public school system so that more underserved children can benefit.”

Faster Implementation

“Charter schools are funded at about 85 percent of the level of traditional public schools, but are still easily outperforming them,” Bonsteel said. Unlike other public schools, charters are accountable to parents and are more free to choose teachers without union red tape, he noted. That helps account for their greater success in raising academic achievement.

“They have a great deal of freedom in choosing their teachers,” Bonsteel said. “A lot of studies show that the most important thing in the success of a student is the quality of the teacher.”

Phillip J. Britt (spenterprises@woway.com) writes from Illinois.
**Michigan Virtual School Expands Students’ Choices**

By Georgia Geis

I imagine your local high school offering courses in forensic science, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, human space exploration, Web design, Latin, and film studies, plus advanced placement courses in science, English, math, and history.

Though not unthinkable, it’s certainly unlikely. Amanda Erwin, a high school junior who lives in a rural village in south central Michigan, thought so, too.

Erwin, an honor student who plans to pursue an education in medical research after graduation, said she went to her guidance counselor to find out how she could take advanced placement classes when none was available at her school in Nashville, a town of fewer than 2,000 residents. That’s how she discovered Michigan Virtual School (MVS).

“Online learning is an innovation that will greatly improve America’s educational system,” said Erwin, who took AP history and chemistry classes online last fall.

**Diverse Needs**

Erwin was by no means alone. More than 15,000 middle and high school students from across Michigan are taking courses this year through MVS, based in Lansing.

The reasons for enrolling in MVS classes vary as much as the students themselves. Some need to take a class a second time; some need to fulfill the state’s online experience requirement; and some are being homeschooled. Others, such as Erwin, are looking for opportunities not available at their own schools.

MVS was created in 1999 as a pilot program with 100 students. At the time, only six other states had online classes available for middle or high school students. MVS now offers more than 300 classes and works with 500 of the 700 schools in the state.

“In 1999 there was not a whole lot of online learning going on,” said Jamey Fitzpatrick, president and CEO of Michigan Virtual University, a nonprofit organization that runs the Michigan Virtual School. “Now, every six months a new state enacts an online learning platform.”

**Changing Minds**

When MVS launched, many legislators and educators did not know anything about online learning. Fitzpatrick said about 5 percent of the officials were supportive of the program and 5 percent were strongly opposed, while the other 90 percent did not have an opinion.

“People really didn’t know what to think,” said Fitzpatrick. “Now the support is overwhelming. Reaction has clearly changed as people have gained experience with the program.”

**Evolving Education**

Fitzpatrick, who spent 10 years as director of technology for the Michigan Department of Education, was involved in creating MVU in 1998. In the beginning, MVU focused on workforce development, but within a few years it began focusing on K-12 education. MVS is now one of the largest virtual schools in the country.

As advances have taken place in computer and Internet technology over the past 10 years, MVS has incorporated many different learning formats, such as chat rooms, discussion boards, live sessions, flash animation, newsgroups, and streaming audio and video.

Though many people think online learning runs the risk of being depersonalized, Fitzpatrick said he has been “pleasantly surprised” that this is not the case. Many of the teachers report to Fitzpatrick real one-on-one experiences with their students.

“They really get to know their students,” said Fitzpatrick. “I don’t know if we would have predicted that when we first started.”

**Individual Experiences**

Melanie Laber, who teaches a seventh-grade math class at a traditional school in addition to having taught pre-algebra, geometry, and trigonometry online for MVS over the past four years, said she first developed a passion for online learning while earning her master’s degree entirely online from the University of Phoenix.

“What I was learning I could apply in the classroom immediately,” said Laber, who has helped develop math classes for MVS.

Laber said she enjoys being able to customize the experience with the students she teaches online, based on their learning styles. She said she is amazed at the wide range of students who can be enrolled in the same class. For instance, a sixth grader enrolled in her high school geometry class was able to help many of the high school students who were taking the class a second time.

“My success depended on my own responsibility to meet deadlines with no teacher right in my face reminding me every day. I feel I’m a more responsible student because of it.”

**AMANDA ERWIN**

**ONLINE STUDENT**

“Online learning takes away many barriers. It takes away your age, your race, and your gender.”

— MELANIE LABER

**ONLINE TEACHER**

“Online learning takes away many barriers. It takes away your age, your race, and your gender.”

— MELANIE LABER

**ONLINE TEACHER**

Lifelong Learning

Erwin agrees.

“I felt this was the closest to a college-level class I have ever taken. My success depended on my own responsibility to meet deadlines with no teacher right in my face reminding me every day,” Erwin said. “I feel I’m a more responsible student because of it.”

Fitzpatrick believes teaching kids to be successful online learners is the most important contribution MVS has made for Michigan students. Michigan was the first state to require students to take an online course or have what educators call “a meaningful online experience.”

In November, the state was ranked second in the nation for online learning and policy by the Center for Digital Education. Later this year it may become possible for students in some districts across the state to take all their courses online.

“At the end of the day, the thing that people value the most [about MVS] is teaching students to be online learners,” Fitzpatrick said. “That is a skill that will serve them for the rest of their lives.”

Georgia Geis (georgia.geis@gmail.com) writes from Chicago.
Milwaukee Voucher School Is Founded on Diversity

By Jillian Metz

The notion that cultural differences are part of our national strength is the spark that conceived Atlas Preparatory Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin seven-and-a-half years ago.

Michelle Lukacs is one of three founders of the academy, which opened in 2001 with 23 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, with the goal of creating a truly multicultural setting. Lukacs, the school’s principal, has since led it through its expansion by one to two grade levels each year.

Atlas Preparatory now serves roughly 750 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, with 100 percent of the students benefiting from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP).

Created in 1990, MPCP is the nation’s oldest school choice program. It currently provides vouchers to more than 20,000 low-income Milwaukee students to attend any of the 127 participating private or religious schools located in the city at no charge.

“It is important to give parents and children choices,” Lukacs said. “The choice to choose a school for your child forces all schools to strengthen and become better.”

Deep Roots

Lukacs’ commitment to diversity runs deep. She was born in New York to a Hungarian father and Dutch mother, both of whom spoke French at home. By the time she was three years old she was fluent in English, French, and German, after her family moved to Wisconsin to live with German-speaking relatives.

Her multicultural upbringing, coupled with seven years as a public and private school teacher, guidance counselor, and principal, united in her vision of a school celebrating the multicultural heritage of its students and staff. The students come from African-American, Hispanic, Asian, interracial, white, and Native American families.

“We are very proud of our diversity,” Lukacs said. “We as adults learn to be racial, [but] through this learning environment at Atlas, these children appreciate each other’s differences, which will help prepare them for the real world, where they will work alongside people of assorted backgrounds and experiences.”

Atlas Preparatory Academy splits its school year into quarters, during which the students and staff celebrate the countries, customs, and languages of Hispanic, Asian, African, and European cultures.

New Hope

Atlas senior Carlos Gamble believes his school’s diversity makes it easier to learn than in the neighborhood public school he attended five years ago before receiving an MPCP voucher.

“I have been able to connect with classmates through the cultural diversity of the curriculum,” said Gamble, 18. “After the unit on Hispanic culture, I am better able to talk to my Spanish-speaking classmates.”

Gamble recalls his struggles at his previous school, where he remembers usually skipping two classes every day. He attributes his C/D grade-point average there in part to the challenges he faced in English class and the overwhelming task of writing reports.

During his five years at Atlas, Gamble has been on the A/B Honor Roll and a member of the basketball team.

As a single mother of three, Bridgett Gamble needed to find a school that could help her son with his speech skills and ultimately equip him for a college education. After touring multiple Milwaukee schools, she selected Atlas as her top choice for him.

“I was excited for my first day at Atlas Prep,” Carlos said. “It was a fresh start with [new] teachers and students, and you can talk to the teachers here—they really care about the students.”

Communication Praised

At Atlas, the grade levels are divided between three campuses, and the average classroom hosts about 20 to 30 students. Atlas offers special education, Title 1, and English Language Learners programs to help meet students’ unique learning needs.

“I can take a child from a rough neighborhood, and with my staff we can work wonders if we have the support and involvement of the parents—we can move mountains,” Lukacs said. “I am very proud of how much the teachers care about the kids and how much they do beyond the eight-hour workday.”

Bridgett Gamble raves about the parent-teacher communication, which is part of the Academy’s “Parents As Partners” campaign. She said she usually hears from her son’s teachers once a week to discuss his progress.

“I’m always proud to hear how he’s doing,” Bridgett said. “It’s great to hear he got an A on a test. The teachers also tell me how we can work as a team and ways I can get involved.”

Moving On

Gamble will don a cap and gown this spring and join 26 classmates as part of the 2009 graduating class. Atlas graduated its first class of 16 students in 2008. After high school, Gamble would like to attend Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee and become a math teacher.

“I get chills,” Lukacs said as she reflected on the 2008 graduation ceremony. “I shed a lot of tears of happiness on that day. I wish my students all the success, and hope that Atlas has provided them with the values and academics to be responsible citizens.”

As the school’s name suggests, Atlas Preparatory Academy works to equip each student with a compass of promise and map of opportunity—a promise that Atlas will provide a safe, multicultural environment and challenging curriculum that will help point out a path to a brighter and more promising future for each child.

Jillian Metz (jillian.metz@gmail.com) writes from Florida.
Milwaukee Voucher Program Facing Headwinds

By Phillip J. Britt

Wisconsin lawmakers are expected this legislative session, once again, to take up the question of funding for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Proposals made last session to change the nation’s longest-running voucher program were defeated. Now, however, the makeup of the state legislature has changed—and those seeking to change the MPCP may have a better chance of pushing through a proposal, said Mike Ford, vice president of operations for School Choice Wisconsin, a reform group based in Milwaukee.

The voucher program’s funding is likely to be questioned in the wake of a 14.6 percent increase in Milwaukee property taxes this year, Ford explained. The tax increase is unpopular, so some legislators are looking for ways they feel the increase can be eased. School choice has been a popular program to blame.

Majority Tactics

In the last session the legislature narrowly defeated a bill that would have prevented participating schools from allowing more than 49 percent of their student body to be MPCP students.

If the law had taken effect last year, participating schools would have been required to cut 7,659 low-income students from their enrollments for the current school year. More than 100 schools serving more than 17,000 students would have had to make deep enrollment cuts.

Bill co-sponsors state Rep. Christine Sinicki (D-Milwaukee) and state Sen. John Lehman (D-Racine), who chairs the Senate Education Committee, are expected to reintroduce the bill now that Democrats have a majority in the Wisconsin legislature, Ford said.

Choice Saves Money

The recent property tax increase shouldn’t be pinned on MPCP, Ford said, because the program costs taxpayers less than Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) do. Cutting the voucher program to save taxpayers from further tax hikes would be counterproductive.

When federal and other public support is included, total MPCP costs of $6,607 per pupil are about 51 percent less than the $13,486 per pupil MPS spends every year, according to a 2008-09 analysis released by the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau in December.

In addition, Milwaukee residents don’t benefit as much from taxes as others statewide, according to an article by University of Arkansas Professor Robert M. Costrell in the Winter 2009 edition of Education Next: A Journal of Opinion and Research.

“Professor Costrell demonstrates that the MPCP saves money for state taxpayers and property taxpayers outside of Milwaukee,” Susan Mitchell, president of School Choice Wisconsin, said. “Based on the new Fiscal Bureau report, we also know that Milwaukee property taxpayers now pay less for a student in the MPCP than for a student in MPS.

“As the state prepares to deal with a multibillion-dollar deficit, citizens need to understand that restrictions or cutbacks in Milwaukee’s choice program would come at the expense of taxpayers throughout Wisconsin,” Mitchell noted.

Phillip J. Britt (spenerprises@wow way.com) writes from Illinois.

INTERNET INFO


Mass. Charter Schools Outperform Their Peers

By Jillian Melchior

Massachusetts charter schools are outperforming traditional public schools in both math and English, a new study shows.

The study was sponsored by the state’s education commissioner and the Boston Foundation, a community organization devoted to bettering the city and region. The work was conducted by researchers from Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The team will soon probe the issue more deeply, as the current study was only preliminary. The next study will try to identify what caused the difference between charter schools and their traditional school counterparts, said J.C. Considine, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The results of the study, released in January, sparked discussion throughout Massachusetts, with some calling for a statewide cap on the number of charter schools—currently limited to 120—to be lifted.

“We need to do a better job of understanding the lessons from charter schools and sharing the lessons with traditional public schools,” Considine said. “To date, we really haven’t seen that take place as often or as much as we’d like.”

New Collaboration

Considine said the state education commissioner, school superintendents, and charter school association will likely expect to work to develop stronger communication between charter schools and traditional schools, he said.

“Some of the ideas are conferences where we can share ideas, visits to the right decision about how to get them kids the education they need,” Considine said. “Traditional schools have been very successful; so have pilot schools; so have charter schools. It’s good to have sort of a basket of choices.”


We’d like to see the cap removed, and we’d like to see more charters.”

Multiple Choices

Massachusetts parents are clamoring for more charter schools. Approximately 21,000 students statewide are on waiting lists to get into one.

“Hopefully, some day there will be no waiting list,” Trueblood said.

The study also has captured attention because of its unique, comprehensive approach toward comparing the schools—always difficult to do, Considine said.

Much of the report is devoted to explaining the research techniques employed.

“I think there was a lot of interest in this report,” Considine said. “We haven’t to date really been able to answer the question [of whether] charter schools [are] living up to their promise.”

Trueblood said the Boston Foundation hopes the study will result in more choice for parents.

“Every family should have as many options, as many opportunities as it takes for them to feel that they’re making the right decision about how to get their kids the education they need,” Trueblood said. “Traditional schools have been very successful; so have pilot schools; so have charter schools. It’s good to have sort of a basket of choices.”

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

Ala. Students Must Take Virtual Class to Graduate

By Elisha Maldonado

Alabama has a new requirement for graduating seniors: Take an online distance-learning course.

The requirement, passed last spring and scheduled to take effect this fall, means every high school freshman statewide will be enrolled in an advanced academic diploma option, which automatically enters them into a graduation program that includes the online requirements, said Mitch Edwards, the Alabama Department of Education’s communications director.

“Through the distance-learning initiative, since we are such a rural state, we are able to give all students equal access to different teachers or curricula.”

Equal Opportunity

On January 23, correspondents for The Fox Report on the Fox News Channel hailed Alabama as a “trailblazer in the future of distance learning,” according to a release from the Alabama Department of Education. The segment also “touted Alabama’s use of technology as [an] efficient means to deliver quality instruction in lean fiscal times,” according to the release.

“By this fall, every high school in Alabama will be equipped with the ability to provide virtual instruction regardless of how rural the school system might be,” State Superintendent of Education Joe Morton told Fox News. “The Internet is the great ‘equalizer’ in that regard, as it gives students from all different walks of life an even playing field on which to learn, grow, and discover.”

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

“[The study] has partisans and opponents all over the place talking. It hasn’t moved the markers either way, but it has sparked an enormous amount of conversations.”

David Trueblood

Boston Foundation

said. “We’d like to see the cap removed, and we’d like to see more charters.”
Mississippi Bill Would Expand Charter Schools

By Karla Dial

Mississippi—home to exactly one charter school and one of the nation’s most restrictive charter school laws—may soon expand its stable of options.

That will happen if a bill passed on a 37-11 vote by the state Senate in late January is approved by the House of Representatives. The House deadline for the vote is the end of February.

Mississippi’s current law allows only six existing public schools to convert to charters. In the 11 years since that law was passed, only one—a magnet school—has done so. “So in essence, we have no charter schools in the state,” said Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy, a research group fighting for school choice in the state.

Overcoming Resistance

The current bill, sponsored by state Sen. Michael Watson (R-Pascagoula), would allow up to 20 charter schools run by proven operators to open new facilities throughout the state. Local school boards would be given the first look at proposals, but authorization power would rest solely with the state board of education.

Previous attempts to expand charter schools in Mississippi were shot down by fears of racial segregation. Though Thigpen noted Watson’s bill has more support from the legislature’s Black Caucus than previous versions, opposition remains from some caucus members and from teacher unions.

“One of the things that frustrated me the most [during the Senate debate] was one of the senators kept saying the research is still out there; there’s no proof [that charter schools work],” Watson said. “But where the research is consistent is when you have a strong piece of law and a tough standard to allow charter schools on the front end, that’s when you get good charter schools.”

“There’s been some resistance from the Mississippi Association of Educators and other groups that say you’re taking money from public education,” Watson continued. “That’s an absolute falsity—this is public education.”

Greater Accountability

To help tell Black Caucus members about the need for charter schools, the Mississippi Center for Public Policy produced an 18-minute video, “A Stone’s Throw,” contrasting interviews with Mississippi residents who want more school choice with the words of people living just across the state line who have access to effective charter schools in Arkansas and Tennessee.

“There are parents who have choices in the South that Mississippi parents just don’t have,” Thigpen said.

Under Watson’s bill, no local tax revenues would be used for charter schools; funding would come only from state and federal coffers and the schools’ own fundraising efforts. The bill also would require open enrollment.

“When you have a public school that’s failing, you pump more money into it. When you have a charter school that fails, you close it,” Watson said. “That kind of accountability is a great thing, and that’s why we wanted to bring it to Mississippi.”

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

INTERNET INFO

“A Stone’s Throw,” Mississippi Center for Public Policy: http://www.astonesthrowthemovie.com
Michigan Union Misrepresented Illegal Strike Goals

By Ben DeGrow

H aving uncovered a local union leader’s use of public emails to organize an illegal walkout, a Michigan taxpayer activist group says the record exposes a campaign of deception.

The Wayne-Westland Education Association (W-WEA), a suburban Detroit chapter of the Michigan Education Association (MEA), went on strike for four days last October. It was the first MEA-backed work stoppage in 14 years.

Union leaders garnered public support by insisting their aim was to reduce class sizes.

But the Muskegon-based Education Action Group (EAG) says it obtained email messages and attached documents they say show the union was much more interested in protecting school district contributions to MESSA, the MEA-controlled health insurance provider.

“I think the union needs to come clean about what was truly behind the strike,” said EAG Vice President Kyle Olson.

Comming Clean

A local school official agrees.

“Don’t be trying to tell the community you’re doing something for the children when you really are trying to improve your health benefits,” said Bill Gabriel, an elected trustee of the Wayne-Westland Board of Education.

The email messages at the heart of the controversy either were sent or received by W-WEA President Nancy Strachan. MEA officials declined to comment.

Under Michigan law, public employee strikes are illegal and can carry penalties for participating employees and for labor organizations. On October 9 a district court judge enjoined the action and ordered teachers back to work but waived the penalties. At press time the district’s bargaining negotiations remained open.

Revealing Motives

On November 11, EAG submitted an initial Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the school district for Strachan’s publicly administered emails.

“The district said they had no problems, and agreed they were public records,” Olson said.

The union responded by filing suit against the school district, claiming release of the requested information would irreparably harm contract negotiations by exposing draft bargaining proposals.

A judge issued a restraining order preventing the district from fulfilling the request. The school district granted a second FOIA request by Olson in January, specifically exempting the items cited in the union’s legal objections.

The email communications EAG posted online exposed the focus of union bargaining strategy. In an email sent less than three weeks before the strike, Strachan admitted, “Our goal is to drop all the HMO’s [sic] and have only MESSA Choices.”

EAG says districts that have switched from MESSA to private health insurance providers have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Sizing Up the Public

The emails also show numerous instances of Strachan soliciting teachers for fact-finding session testimony on “the effects of increased class sizes.” Responding to one teacher who asked if the fact she “never had a class size that was overloaded” would disqualify her testimony, the W-WEA president made a startling admission.

“She admitted they bargained to raise class sizes before, and now it’s the earth-stopping issue,” said Olson.

In a November 2008 speech to the MEA Fall Representative Assembly, Strachan boasted of active support from community businesses, students, and their family members during the strike.

But Olson says these community residents just served as the MEA’s public face during the walkout.

“It’s not just some outraged group of parents who want the best for their kids,” Olson said. “It’s the union trying to put the union’s economic situation first.”

Teaching Opportunity

Since the work stoppage, union leaders have worked with some community members to organize a recall election against two school board members. At press time, no petition signatures had been submitted.

Gabriel believes public awareness of the MEA’s agenda remains low. “I don’t think citizens know there’s an organization trying to control the schools,” he said.

Olson hopes the Wayne-Westland strike might offer another lesson to those who press for reforms affecting one of the nation’s most-powerful lobbying groups.

“The union will do anything it can to [put] its agenda first,” Olson said. “Reformers need to understand that the union will do anything to stop reform.”

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

By Dan Proft

Nominating Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan to head up the U.S. Department of Education was like selecting Exxon Valdez captain Joseph Hazelwood to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

The difference is that with $2.5 billion, Exxon was able to clean up Hazelwood’s mess when the Exxon Valdez crashed and spilled oil along the Alaska shoreline. The $4.5 billion a year spent by CPS during Duncan’s seven years at the helm accomplished nothing.

According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, only six of every 100 CPS high school freshmen earn a bachelor’s degree by age 25. That means if Chicago closed its 655 schools and returned the $4.5 billion to taxpayers, eliminating CPS altogether, schools and returned the $4.5 billion to taxpayers, eliminating CPS altogether, Chicago’s reforms consisted of closing old high schools and building new, smaller ones.

The results were predictable. According to a December 15, 2008 article in the news magazine Catalyst Chicago, only 31 percent of the city’s high school juniors meet the state’s academic achievement standards, and all but two of the 10 lowest-performing high schools in 2001 had lost ground by 2008.

In seven years, Duncan failed to improve matters because he chose the status quo over advancing “change we can believe in.” He saw the CPS challenge as a management problem, not a structural problem—which is saying the problem with the former Soviet Union was simply that they had the wrong guys on the Politburo.

Abysmal Record

The U.S. Secretary of Education wields power and influence over education policy nationwide, particularly concerning urban school reforms. Under Duncan, Chicago’s reforms consisted of closing old high schools and building new, smaller ones.

In New York City, by contrast, Superintendent Joel Klein has presided over a more than six-fold increase in the number of charter schools since 2002. The lack of charter school development under Duncan’s leadership is particularly deplorable because CPS’s charter schools are significantly outperforming their neighborhood counterparts in every significant measurement—attendance, graduation rates, and test scores.

Charter Expansion?

Duncan has been characterized as a strong charter school advocate, yet he made very little effort to expand them in Chicago. The city has only 30 charter schools, educating 4 percent of CPS students—and 15 of those schools were created by the Illinois General Assembly in 1997, four years before Duncan’s arrival. The other 15 were created in 2003, shortly after his ascension to chief, and thus cannot be credited to any effort on his part.

Reform Choices Passed Over

In selecting Duncan, Obama chose to placate the teacher unions instead of sparking a serious national dialogue about how we educate our children.

There is a plethora of innovative educators, such as Klein, whom Obama could have tapped to pursue real reform. These include Arlene Ackerman, former chief of San Francisco’s public school system and current CEO of Philadelphia’s schools; Lisa Graham Keegan, former head of Arizona’s state school system; and Michelle Rhee, Washington, DC’s dynamic schools chancellor.

At the news conference announcing his selection, Duncan said education is “the civil rights issue of our generation.” He is correct. Unfortunately, Duncan is a modern-day Orval Faubus, standing between low-income children and a decent education.

Today’s segregationists do not use fire hoses and National Guardsmen—they use politicians like Duncan who strike the right rhetorical chords while preventing competition from flowering for the children most in need of its benefits.

Dan Proft, J.D. (dan@urquhartmedia.com) is a principal of the public affairs firm Urquhart Media, LLC and a political commentator for the Don Wade & Roma Morning Show on WLS-AM 890 in Chicago.
Kentucky Spending More, But Academic Results Lag

By Jim Waters

When the Kentucky Education Reform Act was passed in 1990, the law was hailed nationally as a model for closing funding and academic gaps in one of the nation’s poorest—and poorest-performing—states.

While KERA steeply increased education spending and closed gaps in per-pupil funding between metropolitan and rural schools, a huge chasm remains between the amount of state and local funding flowing to various school districts. A new report by University of Kentucky economists indicates poorer districts rely heavily on state funding while their wealthier counterparts tend to get more of their revenue from local sources.

Centralized Funding

Overall, Kentucky relies much more on non-local revenue than do other states. According to the report, “Educational Spending: Kentucky vs. Other States,” released December 15 by Kentucky’s Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions and the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, local revenues accounted for only 31 percent of school districts’ funding, while the national average is 43 percent.

“I knew Kentucky’s education system was pretty centralized. I was just surprised to find that so much money flows from the state,” said University of Kentucky economist Kenneth R. Troske, the report’s lead author.

Poorer, rural districts benefited greatly from KERA’s new funding formula. The law closed a $600 per-pupil spending gap that existed in 1987 between districts in the poverty-stricken Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky and the state’s metro areas to only $10 in 2006.

Yet while KERA led to greater overall uniformity in per-pupil expenditures, the sources from which individual school districts receive their funding continue to differ dramatically, with urban areas being forced to get a much-greater portion of their funding from local revenues.

According to the study, local revenues account for only 17 percent of eastern Kentucky school districts’ funding, while they contribute 40 percent in metropolitan areas. Overall, only 20 percent of rural districts’ funding comes from local revenue, while 66 percent comes from the state and 13 percent from the federal government.

More Funding, Less Control

Citing the Fayette County school district, where the University of Kentucky is located, Troske said the state wants to dictate equal control over metropolitan and non-metropolitan districts while supplying less funding to some.

“I was surprised at how much more reliant we are on our local resources in contrast to other districts,” Troske said. “The state isn’t giving us much support, but at the same time we are questioning how do we use our resources.”

KERA, which became law after Kentucky’s Supreme Court declared the state’s entire property tax-based education financing system unconstitutional, resulted in an additional $950 million being pumped into the state’s public schools during the next two years—a 32 percent increase over the previous biennium. The October 21, 1991 edition of Fortune magazine declared KERA “probably the most radical piece of educational engineering ever embraced by a state government.”

The spending boom also moved Kentucky from being the fifth-highest to No. 1 in per-pupil spending among the eight states comprising the federally designated South-Central region, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas—states to which Kentucky is traditionally compared in the areas of taxes, economic development, and education spending.

Kentucky also has significantly narrowed its per-pupil spending gaps with the rest of the nation—from $3,471 in 1989 to $1,113 in 2006.

Continuing Domination

The dramatic increases in education funding have not kept state politicians from continuing to make revenue the centerpiece of debates about Kentucky schools. Neither have they produced evidence of having solved the state’s student achievement problems.

Centralized funding formulas appear to have resulted in inefficient practices and no better academic results. According to a Bluegrass Institute report published on January 24 by John Garen, chairman of the University of Kentucky’s economics department, teacher salaries represented 46 percent of the state’s education budget before KERA was implemented, but only 41 percent after—raising a red flag about spending practices.

School choice, by contrast, provides incentives for more efficient spending, Garen said.

Other experts agree, pointing out school choice programs benefit parents who need alternatives and also help cash-strapped state budgets nationwide.

“There’s a great deal of evidence that school choice programs can save tax money and are an efficient use of resources,” said Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “Research conducted by the foundation found that school choice programs have saved a total of about $444 million from 1990 to 2006, including a total of $22 million saved in state budgets and $422 million in local public school districts.”

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


States’ Budget Crises Could Contain Silver Lining

By David J. Myslinski

As educators, parents, and leaders across the country increasingly accept that cuts will likely have to be made to public education because state budget shortfalls simply won’t allow business to continue as usual, a new report by a group representing thousands of state legislators suggests that might not be a bad thing.

The American Legislative Exchange Council’s (ALEC) 15th annual Report Card on American Education: A State-by-State Analysis details the “inputs” and “outputs” of each state’s public education system, outlines popular education reforms, and ranks the 50 states and District of Columbia on academic performance and spending.

Minnesota placed first in ALEC’s ranking, and Washington, DC last. The report card, released in February, is described as the organization’s “flagship publication.”

While some states have shown improvements in their education results, a majority of students across the country still fall well below proficiency levels in mathematics and reading, according to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. What has shown marked increases in public education, however, is spending.

“Years and years of increased expenditures for public education have gotten us practically nowhere,” said Andrew T. LeFevre, executive director of the REACH Foundation, a group overseeing Pennsylvania’s tax-credit scholarship program. “Now, states are in a crunch, trying to figure out how to do more with what they have been doing all along.”

Bottomless Pit

For decades, Americans have been encouraged to support ever-greater public school spending, LeFevre said. The report card corroborates this in great detail. Since 1982, it notes, U.S. per-pupil expenditures have increased 90 percent. In 20 states per-pupil spending increased more than 100 percent. New Jersey saw a 327 percent increase.

From 1987 to 2007, student enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide increased 28 percent, while spending for those schools increased almost 70 percent. In 1986, federal funding accounted for 6 percent of public schools’ total revenue; today it is 9 percent.

Little Improvement

Despite these investments, student test results have not shown appreciable gains, according to the ALEC study and government data. Although fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics scores have improved over the past 10 years, reading levels remain largely stagnant. A majority of states still test below proficiency levels in both subjects. From 1998 to 2008, SAT and ACT test scores saw almost no change.

Worse yet, the ALEC study notes, the nation still lags behind other countries’ education standards.

“The status quo in confronting education’s stagnant, in some cases declining, results simply cannot continue,” said Jeffrey W. Reed, director of ALEC’s Education Task Force. “While it’s not only costing children their futures, if you look at current state budgets we just can’t afford it.”

The report recommends popular school choice reforms such as vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and charter schools as cost-efficient alternatives to funding continual failure. “Because the states can’t spend their way out of problems like they have tried to do in the past, this current crisis may force them to look at such reforms,” said LeFevre.

Preventing Reform

LeFevre and Reed say while reforms are growing in popularity among parents, students, Republicans, and Democrats, the new president and his administration will play a part in setting the tone … and may well prevent states from facing tough choices.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 45 states face budget shortfalls in 2009, and the situation for 2010 looks worse. Although this should force states to economize, manage operations more efficiently, and consider popular reforms, the new Congress and President Barack Obama’s administration could allow business to go on as usual.

In late 2008 Democrat governors from Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin asked Obama for a $1 trillion bailout to states facing budget shortfalls, part of which would be used to fund education.

“States are not facing budget deficits because they don’t tax enough. The real problem is the fundamental issue of overspending taxpayer dollars,” said Jonathan Williams, director of ALEC’s Tax and Fiscal Policy Tax Force. “Federal bailout dollars for education are not free, since we all know federal funds will be accompanied by costly mandates from Washington. Embracing real education reform is a necessity for states to solve long-term budget problems.”

Status Quo

But governors seeking bailouts could have a new friend in the White House. On top of the $47 billion the federal government provided for public education in 2006-07, Obama campaigned on $18 billion in new spending—including quadrupling the number of Early Head Start participants, budgeting more for Head Start, creating “Early Learning Challenge Grants,” and “encouraging” universal preschool.

Obama also proposed increasing funding for middle-school “intervention strategies,” doubling funding for after-school programs, and recruiting and supporting hundreds of thousands of new K-12 teachers.

“She can cut and expand an unaffordable, and in many cases, an unsuccessful system, when all data show that strategy does not work?” asked Reed. “Unfortunately, the likelihood of this question being asked at the federal level is slim.

“That is why now, more than ever, state legislators must take up the fight if they want to ensure their students’ success and save their taxpayers some money,” Reed said.

David J. Myslinski (dmyslinski@alec.org) is the legislative assistant for the Education and Health and Human Services Task Force for the American Legislative Exchange Council in Washington, DC.

INTERNET INFO

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HERE’S HOW THE 15TH ANNUAL REPORT CARD ON AMERICAN EDUCATION RANKS THE 50 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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Oregon 15
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Rhode Island 40
South Carolina 39
South Dakota 5
Tennessee 37
Texas 29
Utah 26
Vermont 2
Virginia 11
Washington 12
West Virginia 43
Wisconsin 13
Wyoming 18
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