Virginia, New Jersey Governors Tap School Reformers for Top Positions

By Joy Pavelski

School reform advocates were thrilled in January when two new GOP governors in New Jersey and Virginia tapped school choice advocates for the top education jobs in their respective states.

After a pair of hotly contested campaigns that generated headlines nationwide, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie appointed former Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler as education commissioner, and in Virginia, Gov. Bob McDonnell appointed Black Alliance for Educational Options President Gerard Robinson as secretary of education. The state legislatures will likely confirm their nominations, and soon.

“These are good, great leaders who have a lot of gravitas,” said Robert By Jim Waters

Making it easier for Virginia’s parents to place their special-needs children in private school would not only help families faced with the daunting task of paying for the private education and unique services their children’s disabilities demand, but also would benefit school districts, a new study reports.

The study, released December 30 by the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, notes Florida has experienced a significant drop in requests for and actual number of due-process hearings since it implemented the McKay Scholarship Program, which began as a pilot program for special-needs students in Sarasota and has grown to include more than 19,000 students statewide.

Between the 2003-04 and 2007-08
Bipartisan Support for Reform

New Jersey spends more to educate one pupil per year—$15,691—than any state except New York, which spends $15,981 per student. For the money, taxpayers see only 20 to 30 percent of students scoring “proficient” on statewide exams, according to New Jersey Department of Education statistics.

Though New Jersey has long lacked education reforms because of union opposition, Bradford said, Schundler’s experience working across the aisle in Jersey City, coupled with existing bipartisan support for reforms such as the business tax credit and teacher accountability, will boost his effectiveness.

“This is not a position where Democrats want to find themselves, where the president and a Republican governor in New Jersey are on the same page [on school reform measures],” Bradford said. “There’s a lot of opportunity. That doesn’t mean it won’t be hard-fought, but it certainly means that things look good.”

‘Lancing the Boil’

As president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options since 2007, Robinson is a nationally known advocate of school choice. Since graduating with a master’s degree in the mid-1990s from Harvard University, he’s helped fine-tune Milwaukee’s charter school program and has traveled the country advising state and national charter school initiatives.

“I think it’s an outstanding appointment,” said Chris Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy in Virginia. “His personal narrative and experience in school choice will have a tremendously positive impact.”

But Robinson apparently faces more obstacles than Schundler does. The word “vouchers” has an evil history in Virginia, dating from the Civil Rights era, Braunlich said, when vouchers allowed white students to attend private schools instead of sitting beside black students in newly integrated public schools.

“[Robinson is] someone who understands that issue, someone who says, ‘Look I graduated high school with a 1.8 GPA, went to a community college, and ended up with a master’s [degree] from Harvard,’” Braunlich said. “[That] goes a long way toward lancing the boil for a lot of folks.”
Special-Needs Scholarships Save Money

Continued from page 1

school years, requests for due-process hearings concerning tuition assistance grants (TAGs) in the Sunshine State dropped by nearly one-fourth, and “fully adjudicated due process hearings” fell by 87 percent during the same period, said report author William Hurd.

“One of the great advantages of this grant program is that it allows parents and school systems to do away with all that dissension and to use more money for education and less money on litigation,” Hurd said in a conference call with reporters on his report. “Legal Consequences of a Tuition Assistance Grant Program for Students with Disabilities.”

Enhancing Parental Rights

Five states—Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Utah—have implemented state scholarship programs that make it easier for parents to get access to funds that, while often not paying the entire amount of a private education and services, give them access to schools that meet their children’s needs.

In his report, Hurd, a former Virginia solicitor general who devotes much of his current legal practice to representing families of special-needs children, seeks to bolster the case for bills proposed in Virginia over the past few years that would allow parents a $10,000 grant to obtain the education and services that best fit their families’ needs.

Hurd argues in his report a state-funded program offers easier access to—a more limited amount of—funds than the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Plus, “parental rights are enhanced” by offering parents a choice between a state-run program or the IDEA.

Bringing Legislation

A leading legislative proponent for such grants in Virginia has been state Sen. Walter Stosch (R-Henrico), who since 2006 has repeatedly filed bills to create them. Some of his bills would include all children, others restricted TAGs to children diagnosed with autism. The economic arguments offered in opposition to Stosch’s legislation—such as that it would drain much-needed funds from public schools—were countered in a 2007 study by the institute, which concluded that not only would a special-needs scholarship program not harm public schools, it actually would give them a small windfall for each student.

Even though local districts would lose about $5,000 in state funding per child, they also would lose the expenses associated with providing services for the child while retaining other federal and local revenue streams.

Answering Objections

Hurd uses rigorous data and offers common-sense resolutions to counter a strategy by public school officials and the Virginia Education Association intended to sway lawmakers against Stosch’s bills.

Opponents claim, for example, parents could abuse the system by deciding midway through the school year to switch their child from the private school, which has already received the grant funding, back to a public school that would be obligated to accept the child and provide services.

That’s easy to solve, Hurd said, by requiring parents that choose this route to repay the grant on a prorated basis, or divide the grant payments into installments between the two semesters. If TAG opponents were really concerned about midyear transfers back to the public school system, he said, they would seek to amend Stosch’s bill, not kill it altogether.

“I’ve gone through the legal objections to this program,” Hurd said. “All are really without merit.”

Losing Parents

The federal IDEA, created 35 years ago, was meant to give parents of special-needs students more access to schools and services. But its bureaucratic hurdles have made appealing schools’ decisions concerning placement of special-needs children a foreboding process.

Many parents—even those unhappy with their child’s circumstances—are apprehensive about wading into the quagmire.

“Life has given these parents an extra set of challenges. The school system shouldn’t add more to it,” said Judith “Tessie” Wilson, a member of the Board of Education of Fairfax County, Virginia since 2000, who has the unique perspective of being both the parent of a special-needs child and a school board member.

In the forward to Hurd’s report, Wilson wrote no one looks forward to a “clash of wills—from local [Individual Educational Placement] meetings to due process and even to the courtroom” that can sometimes occur when parents and schools disagree. Parents who request IEP hearings usually lose to the school districts, which have significant resources, experts, and attorneys.

According to the Virginia Department of Education, hearing officers ruled against parents in 82 percent of cases between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2009. Some Virginia school districts have even shown a willingness to spend profligately to defend themselves against parents’ claims. The Hanover County district recently was ordered to pay parents of an autistic child more than $330,000 in tuition reimbursement and attorneys’ fees in a four-year-old case that ended up costing the district more than 20 times the tuition in question.

That sort of decision in favor of parents happens rarely. More often, participating in a fully adjudicated hearing means parents must risk losing and recouping none of their costs.

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

By Karla Dial

When the Oklahoma Legislature convened on February 1, a bill creating a voucher program for autistic and other special-needs students was on the agenda.

The bill, sponsored by state Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City) and state Sen. Patrick Anderson (R-Enid), will redirect existing funds instead of raising taxes. Special-needs students with individualized education programs would be eligible for state-funded scholarships to attend schools accredited by the State Board of Education.

State Rep. Anastasia Pittman (D-Oklahoma City) told The Associated Press for a January 19 story the program could save the state a considerable, though unknown, amount of money by allowing tax dollars to follow students.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is director of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Wisconsin Reforms Miss 1st Race to the Top Deadline

By Joy Paveslki

The Wisconsin Legislature failed to approve two of several education reforms Gov. Jim Doyle (D) urged to boost the state’s application for $254 million in federal funds by the January 19 deadline.

Warring factions divide states nationwide as they compete for a slice of $4 billion in Race to the Top, a pot of federal money from the 2009 stimulus bill the U.S. Department of Education will divide among winning states in April and September. States will receive money for committing to reforms meeting federal criteria and recommendations. The program has intensified continuing disagreements among districts, unions, teachers, and parents on exactly which policies help kids learn.

Wisconsin is no exception. In December, Doyle called a special session of the legislature to consider two bills granting Milwaukee’s mayor and the state superintendent more power over the city’s desperately failing, leadership-strangled public schools. On January 5 more than 100 people testified during 12-hour hearings on bills in Milwaukee.

“One thing is very clear. There is not unanimity on how to proceed to help the Milwaukee public schools,” said state Sen. John Lehman (D-Racine), chairman of the Senate Education Committee. “Secondly, we heard strongly the status quo with the Milwaukee public schools is not acceptable. We heard that from everybody.”

Governor Switched Strategies

The governor decided to ignore the stalled legislation in Wisconsin’s Race to the Top application. Instead, his 664-page proposal said the state will create and administer more broad-based tests, spend more on training teachers and principals, increase financing for Milwaukee schools (including charter schools), and develop more resources for math and science education.

The governor also floated the idea of removing caps on property taxes and increasing aid to school districts if they commit to reducing costs and improving student performance. However, that proposal did not appear on the state’s Race to the Top application, and it had not been introduced as a bill in the legislature at press time.

Lehman said he expects little action on statewide education reform until the legislature has had more time to hammer out compromises among the various factions.

“We have a lot of energy here,” Lehman said. “We just need to direct it in a way that the two houses of the legislature and the governor can agree with.”

Unions Prefer Delay

The factions appear very far apart, however. The state’s strong teachers unions resisted entreaties to implement reforms quickly to increase Wisconsin’s chances of receiving Race to the Top funds, saying the state needs “collaborative” and “sustainable” school reform.

“Any one-time influx of money may start some good programs and do some good things, but we really think Wisconsin needs some comprehensive school funding reform,” said Christina Brey, spokesperson for the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state’s largest teachers union.

Rather than looking to strengthen the state’s application, Brey and Lehman both noted states can reaply later this year for a second round of awards. The deadline for second-round grants is midyear, and the U.S. Department of Education will announce the winners in September.

Wisconsin’s first-round application stressed early childhood development, efforts to close racial achievement and high school graduation gaps, collecting and analyzing more student and district data, and developing good teachers and principals. Doyle requested $254 million from Race to the Top coffers.

Budget Woes Worsen

Federal stimulus funds staved off a deficit in the state’s budget in 2009 and 2010, but they won’t prevent a $2.2 billion deficit next year without drastic changes, says a January report by the nonprofit Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

Schools across the state have cut budgets, getting less state money this year while still bearing to raise property taxes, said Dan Rossmiller, director of government relations for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

“If the state is not meeting its commitment, you’re putting more pressure on property taxes,” Rossmiller said. “Without state money, you have to be able to control costs, not just revenues. The current system is not sustainable. There’s a misalignment between costs and revenues.”

Joy Paveslki (joy.paveslki@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.
Charter Schools Could Be Coming to South Dakota

By Ben DeGrow

A proposal to add South Dakota to the ranks of states allowing charter schools experienced a setback in late January when its sponsor said the plan needed another year of study.

Introduced by State Education Secretary Tom Oster, Senate Bill 63 would empower South Dakota’s local school boards to authorize public charter schools in their districts. Charters are independent, publicly funded schools of choice that often provide alternative programs not available in traditional public schools.

But when individual school districts asked for permission to set up their own charter schools, Oster altered his own bill to cap the number and asked the state Senate for time to set up a study group before revisiting the idea next session.

“I should have known better,” Oster told the Senate Education Committee. “Charter schools in South Dakota is a huge leap.”

Little Demand

Oster acknowledges demand for charters has not been widespread in South Dakota because academic performance has been strong in the state’s traditional public schools. Of the state’s 152 school districts, Oster believes the only real initial interest in charter authorizing would be in Sioux Falls (20,870 students) and Rapid City (13,199 students). Approximately 140 districts are small enough to be considered “quasi-charter schools” in their own right, he notes.

“Our [public school] students do very well nationally. This would be more of an opportunity for innovation than to correct a wrong.”

TOM OSTER
EDUCATION SECRETARY
STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Native Needs

Achieving far below their white peers, however, nearly two-thirds of the state’s Native American students drop out before completing high school. The minority group represents about 12 percent of the state’s 123,000 public school students.

State Rep. Kevin Killer (D-Pine Ridge) sees charter schools as an important means of improving the prospects of Native American youth, a fast-growing segment of the population in South Dakota.

“We need to see how we can develop that into a workforce so they can contribute back to the state,” said Killer.

In February 2009, Killer sponsored House Bill 1295 to introduce charter schools to South Dakota. The bill was defeated in committee on a 10-5 vote.

“I think it was a learning process for my colleagues in the legislature,” Killer said.

Racing Motivation

Though some of the technical aspects are different, this year’s SB 63 would accomplish the same purposes Killer sought with HB 1295. Oster says the state’s application for Race to the Top grant funds from the U.S. Department of Education includes a proposal for a residential charter school that would serve Native Americans from grades 9 to 14, partnering with institutions of higher education to offer an underserved student population greater access to community college degrees.

The Race to the Top process has renewed South Dakota’s interest in charter schools. The U.S. Department of Education has stressed a charter-friendly atmosphere as a requirement to collect a portion of the grant.

“The feds are certainly looking for states that have enabling legislation,” said Oster. “We’ve tried to let the feds and our Congressional delegation know that one size does not fit all.”

Expanding Opportunities

Oster warns there is little support in the state for extending charter school authorizing power beyond district boards of education.

 “[SB 63] wouldn’t even get out of the gate if it didn’t allow the local school board to say yea or nay,” Oster said.

“Even with that provision, it will be very controversial, and it faces a very big uphill battle.”

South Dakota’s veto deadline for 2010 legislation to be approved is March 29. SB 63 would have had to clear committee hearings and floor votes in both houses before it could reach Gov. Mike Rounds’ (R) desk for signature.

Killer believes adopting the bill would be a victory for some underprivileged South Dakota communities.

“It’s just going to provide more opportunities,” Killer said. “It’s going to provide kids more resources and a chance to be more competitive.”

By Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a free-market think tank in Golden, Colorado.
Missouri Reform Debate Pits Urban vs. Rural Districts

By Rick Docksai

The expression “all politics is local” is holding true in current Missouri discussions about school reform.

Two bills the Missouri General Assembly took up in January—one allowing open enrollment across public school districts, and another permitting charter schools to operate statewide—are getting most of their support from cities and most of their opposition from rural communities.

“It breaks down to more of a rural versus big city debate than a Republican versus Democrat one,” said state Rep. Shane Schoeller (R-Willard), sponsor of the open-enrollment bill.

Schoeller represents a portion of Springfield, the state’s third-largest city. The Springfield School District is the only district statewide that permits its students to enroll in other districts’ schools. That policy is a path for students in underperforming schools to attain better educations elsewhere, Schoeller says.

“When you give parents the opportunity to choose what school their children go to, that doesn’t necessarily cure the school system,” Schoeller said, “but it does improve the opportunities for the parents to help out their children.”

Move Less, Learn More

It might also be easier on the students, says James Shuls, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. Students’ academic achievement typically drops the first year or two after moving to a new school, he notes. Students who change residences but keep attending their old school might avoid that drop.

“With the high mobility rate among inner-city students, the option of staying in the same school may offer stability they may otherwise be lacking,” Shuls said.

“Whose money is it? Is it the school district’s money? Are they entitled to it? Or is it the families’ money, because they’re going to a better school district that’s better for their children?”

JAMES SHULS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REFORM
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS-FAYETTEVILLE

Schoeller said rural teachers and school administrators fear his bill would spark mass departures from their already-small schools. That’s why he’s mandating class-size limits for each school district and barring schools from admitting more students once those limits are reached.

“There are a lot of people opposed to the bill because they don’t know the details of it,” Schoeller said. “They may live in an area where they hear from superintendents, from teachers, from parents that are worried it might hurt their school districts.”

Specialized Learning

State Sen. Robert Mayer (R-Butler) is having an equally hard time gaining support for his bill to allow charter schools to operate in all school districts. They are currently permitted only in St. Louis and Kansas City. Many of Mayer’s Senate colleagues would rather see smaller districts save their funds for traditional public schools.

“The resources for rural schools are already limited, and they argue that to bring in another school would wreak havoc on the resources,” said Mayer. “To what extent that it’s true, though, I don’t know. A lot of rural schools are dependent on state funding.”

Shuls agrees with Mayer on this issue. Charter schools could be great for rural districts, he argues, since the freedom they have in designing courses and curricula would enable them to tailor programs to the interests and needs of a small community’s students—more concentration, for instance, on technical skills applicable to farming, or computer skills that would enable students to find jobs in the city.

“It could teach in the sciences and work in agricultural training, but also teach technology and offer them a way out. It could serve either purpose,” Shuls said.

Countering Misinformation

First, however, charter school advocates will have to assuage the worries of many rural school boards, Shuls said. Fears about a new school taking resources from existing ones carry much more weight in small communities than in cities, he noted.

“In rural communities, oftentimes the biggest employer is the local school district,” Shuls said. “The local superintendents have more control, and people respect them more than they do in a big city.”

As a result, Shuls suggested, charter schools and their advocates must engage in more dialogue with rural communities and their stakeholders, because they have more misinformation to counter.

“There needs to be more communication about what charter schools are and the benefits they might have in a rural community,” Shuls said.

Legislative Gridlock

The same logic applies to open enroll-

DID YOU KNOW ...

... that a study released February 2 by School Choice Wisconsin shows students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program are 18 percent more likely than their peers in Milwaukee Public Schools to graduate from high school?

The finding is especially noteworthy because the MPCI—the nation’s oldest school voucher program—costs taxpayers less than half the amount per pupil MPS spends ($6,442 per year compared to $14,011 per year).

Visit the School Reform News Web site, www.schoolreform-news.org, for more information on this groundbreaking study.

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SHANE SCHOELLER
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
WILLARD, MISSOURI
Kentucky: Yes to Federal Money, No to Charter Schools

By Rick Docksai

If President Barack Obama visited Democratic lawmakers in Kentucky he would stand out, and not just because he’s the president. Most of the Democrats in that state’s governing body don’t share his support for charter schools.

“Is the president an anomaly on the issue? If he were a Kentucky Democrat, he certainly would be,” said state Rep. Stan Lee (R-Lexington). “There might be some support among Democrats here, but it’s not overwhelming support.”

Chicago, Obama’s adopted hometown, ranks fifth nationwide in the number of charter school students. During his 2008 campaign, Obama said what helped students in Chicago might help students elsewhere.

“I’ve been very clear about the fact—and sometimes I’ve gotten in trouble with the teachers unions on this—that we should be experimenting with charter schools,” Obama told Fox News in April 2008.

Charter-Like Schools

But Kentucky Democrats hold a different point of view, turning back a charter proposal already this year.

In the first two weeks of the year, the two chambers of the Kentucky General Assembly put together a school reform bill authorizing the state to fire or reassign the teachers and school administrators at critically below-average schools, or even close the schools and reopen them under private management. Currently 11 schools are candidates for intervention, according to state Rep. Carl Rollins (D-Midway), sponsor of the House version.

Gov. Steve Beshear (D) signed the bill on January 14. Kentucky is applying for a share of the federal government’s Race to the Top funds, which the U.S. Department of Education will distribute to states whose school systems score enough points on a 500-point system.

States earn extra points if they support charter schools. All applications had to be in by January 19, according to the Department of Education—hence the Kentucky lawmakers’ rush. States missing the deadline must wait for the second round of application approvals in midyear.

Beshear and the Assembly reached agreement on the package only after the House struck proposals by Lee and state Rep. Brad Montell (R-Shelbyville) to take the bill a step further and allow charter schools.

The measure’s provision for private takeovers of failing schools may sound like charters, but it isn’t. The private firms would have to run their schools in accordance with all existing laws and requirements in effect for any other public schools. Charter schools, by contrast, have some operational autonomy.

Against Charters

Rollins acknowledged the state won’t win any points on the charter school criterion, but he hopes the bill might be an acceptable compromise.

“It’s as close as we get to charter schools,” Rollins said.

Rollins opposed the charter school amendments, as did most of his Democratic colleagues. With a 65-35 majority in the House and a large minority (17 of 38 seats) in the Senate, they had more than enough votes to prevent the amendments’ passage.

“I don’t think charter schools work everywhere. I don’t think they work well in rural districts. And we have a lot of rural districts,” Rollins said. He says in a rural setting, where resources and people are few, it’s better to consolidate eggs in the public school basket.

“I think in rural districts, to take resources away from the public schools would be fairly harmful,” Rollins said.

Rollins also questions whether the greater autonomy of charter schools necessarily leads to better results. “We also have concern they don’t have to follow all the same certification for teachers,” he said.

‘Turned a Deaf Ear’

Few things about the state’s Jefferson County, however, are rural. With 713,877 people, the capital city of Frankfort, according to the Census Bureau, is as metropolitan as Baltimore or the District of Columbia—two places charter schools have yielded impressive results.

And with 11.2 percent of its families living at or below the federal poverty line, the county clearly has a lot of young people in need.

“In Jefferson County there are a number of very low-performing schools. Most of those are inner-city schools, and a lot of those are populated with minority students,” said Lee. “But the Jefferson County legislators, who should be most affected by these voters, have turned a deaf ear to them.”

Union Power, No Options

Lee says those legislators were listening instead to teachers unions, many of which actively oppose charter schools.

“The unions might not have the control over the teachers as much if they’re in a charter school. That’s the rub,” Lee said. “Teachers who have collective bargaining now would not have it in a charter school. Teachers would be held to a different standard.”

However, Lee notes, less power for teachers unions potentially means more power for parents who have a way out of subpar public school systems.

“There are a lot of children who are stuck in a low-performing public school. Their parents have no other option,” Lee said.

Try Again

The U.S. Department of Education will have to decide whether to approve Kentucky’s reforms. Lee hopes it does not.

“I think at that point charter schools [would] have a better chance to be considered for the second round of applications,” Lee said. “I hope we haven’t missed an opportunity.”

That’s the one way the state could get some real reform that helps students, parents, and teachers alike, Lee says. “Public schools are failing. Let’s try something different.”

Rick Docksai (rick.docksai@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.
Head Start Has No Lasting Impact From $167 Bil. Spent, Report Says

By Lindsey Burke

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has released the results of a long-overdue evaluation of the federal Head Start program, four years after it was completed.

Data collection for the federally mandated Head Start Impact Study, which began in 2002, was completed in 2006. The randomized experiment measured the program’s impact on a nationally representative sample of 5,000 children. The national evaluation was the first scientifically rigorous study to examine the program’s long-term impacts on children.

The federal Head Start program, created in 1965, provides comprehensive preschool services, including health and nutrition services, to more than 900,000 low-income children nationwide. With more than $9 billion in annual funding, Head Start has received more than $167 billion from taxpayers since 1965.

Feather Touch

The study found the program’s few benefits—a small, positive impact on vocabulary—dissolved by the time participants reached first grade.

“In sum, this report finds that providing access to Head Start has benefits for both 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds. ... However, the benefits of access to Head Start at age four are largely absent by first grade for the program population as a whole.”

Dr. Jay P. Greene, endowed chair and head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, said the evaluation revealed children who participated in Head Start sustained virtually no lasting results.

“The study used a gold-standard, random-assignment design and had a very large, nationally representative sample. ... Of 41 measures [of cognitive impact], only one was significant and positive. The remaining 40 showed no statistically significant difference.”

Dr. Jay P. Greene

ENDOWED CHAIR AND HEAD
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REFORM
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

“In sum, this report finds that providing access to Head Start has benefits for both 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds. ... However, the benefits of access to Head Start at age four are largely absent by first grade for the program population as a whole.”

HEAD START IMPACT STUDY

DID YOU KNOW ...

... that more than 88,000 children in 205 public school districts across Ohio are now eligible to receive vouchers to attend the private school of their parents’ choice next year?

State-funded EdChoice scholarships provide an option for children stuck in the worst public schools statewide—those rated by the state as being on academic watch or in academic emergency in at least two of the past three years. The program has grown increasingly popular since its inception in 2006-07, when it served just 3,000 students statewide. More than 11,500 students currently use the scholarships.

The program provides scholarships worth $4,250 per year to elementary and junior high students and $5,000 per year to high school students. Enrollment for the EdChoice scholarship program began on February 1 and continues through April 16.

Lindsey Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is a research assistant in domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
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Sixth-Grader Raises Awareness, Funds, for Homeless

By Sarah McIntosh

Zachary Bonner is only in sixth grade, but he’s already casting a big shadow.

For the past four years—since the ripe old age of 7—Bonner has been working to help underprivileged kids through a nonprofit organization he created, the Little Red Wagon Foundation (LRWF).

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2004, the Florida Virtual Academy student started looking for ways to help students his age who were suddenly homeless.

“I had decided I wanted to make backpacks for homeless kids, and started reaching out to corporations for donations,” Bonner explained. “I found out I needed to have a 501(c)3 organization in order to be more effective with the backpack program, so I founded the LRWF, went to the IRS, and received my tax status.”

Since then, Bonner—who lives in Tampa with his mother Laurie, a mortgage broker—has branched out to help not just homeless children but disadvantaged children in general. One of the LRWF’s outreach projects is making sure the children have school supplies.

Mature Beyond His Years

So far Bonner—who says he wants to be an Ivy League-educated attorney when he grows up—has distributed more than 2,000 backpacks, filled with food and supplies, to homeless kids nationwide. Bonner also provides supplies, books, and even candy to help teachers inspire student participation in schools with large populations of low-income students. The supplies are distributed by Teaching Tools for Hillsborough Schools, a foundation dedicated to serving Title I schools in Hillsborough County, Florida, and other organizations nationwide.

Bonner estimates he’s raised $200,000 to $300,000 worth of supplies and cash since 2005, “but it’s hard to put a number on it because a lot of what we raise is in-kind donations.”

In 2006 and 2007, Bonner helped kids in FEMA trailer parks in Louisiana by raising money for school supplies and hosting holiday parties. By working with other community service organizations and asking companies to donate items such as Christmas hams, he distributed toys and gift bags full of school supplies to approximately 1,500 families.

Four years ago, in an effort to inspire others, Bonner started a project called 24 Hours, in which kids all over Florida simulate being homeless for one day in order to raise funds and awareness. In 2006, approximately 50 children statewide participated in the event.

Walking for a Cause

Walking takes up much of Bonner’s time—something he started doing a few years ago to draw attention to the plight of homeless families. In 2007 he walked the 280 miles between Tampa and Tallahassee. Later, he completed a longer walk, from Tallahassee to Atlanta, to raise money for Habitat for Humanity. For his community service work he received a Presidential Service Award from former President George W. Bush in 2008.

Last summer Bonner walked from his home in Florida to the White House, gathering hundreds of homeless kids to walk the last mile with him.

“I want to keep doing the LRWF and helping kids,” Bonner says. “I am working on a group project with another organization called Fund a Field. They build soccer fields in Africa. So we are going to work together and do something for a school or orphanage in Africa. I am really looking forward to that.”

Bonner hopes to become the youngest person ever to walk the 2,225 miles from Florida to California, a journey he started on December 26 “to raise a lot of awareness of homeless youth and do a lot of projects along the way” by recruiting kids and adults to walk 10-mile portions with him. As part of his project he offers grants to groups he has chosen in cities along his walk, such as homeless shelters.

Community Service

Along the way, Bonner spends time talking to school assemblies about the importance of community service and youth volunteerism.

“I am collecting letters for President Obama, asking for his continued support for youth homelessness and youth volunteerism,” Bonner said, “and I hope when I complete my walk across America he will allow me to present him with the letters.”

A video journal detailing Bonner’s fundraising walks is available on his Web site, http://www.littleredwagonfoundation.com. Bonner would like to inspire other kids to get involved in their communities. His goal is “to do as much as I can to help underprivileged youth, to try and be a positive example of the power of kids, and to have fun doing it.”

Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) teaches constitutional law and American politics at Wichita State University in Kansas.
North Carolina Academies Offer Models for Success

By Sarah McIntosh

T

here’s no one way to educate children, say the people running Franklin Schools and Thales Schools in North Carolina.

Founded by Bob Luddy, president of kitchen ventilation system manufacturer CaptiveAire, both schools employ the Direct Instruction (DI) teaching method. DI employs repetition and regular assessment, and students progress to other lessons only when they have mastered the one at hand, ensuring there are no gaps in their education.

Franklin Academy was one of North Carolina’s first charter schools, established in 1998 to provide an educational option for parents with children in struggling public schools, says Dan Henson, director of special projects at the academies. In 2007 Luddy followed up by opening the first Thales Academy on a campus in North Raleigh, moving to a much larger facility in Wake Forest for its second year. Another Thales Academy opened in Apex, North Carolina, in 2008.

“Mr. Luddy saw the need for educational reform,” Henson said. “He wanted to give parents alternative routes for seeking a quality education.”

High Demand

While the Franklin Schools and Thales Schools share the same founder, “they have different funding sources and different administrative leadership,” Henson said. “Franklin Academy operates as a public charter school; Thales operates as an affordable private school. They are distinctly different schools that operate using the shared methods and similar objectives. They have the same founder but work independently of each other.”

Franklin Academy uses two sites—one serving students in kindergarten through fifth grade, and the other students in grades six through 12. A third site, slated to serve students in grades 9-12, was awaiting permit approval at press time. Both Thales Academies are currently K-6 schools, but Luddy plans to expand them to K-12. All the schools are in high demand.

“The Franklin Academy has approximately 1,200 students enrolled, with a waiting list of 2,000,” Henson said. “Thales Wake Forest, which began three years ago with 30 students, now has 300 students and a waiting list. Thales Apex, which began two years ago with 60 students, now has 200 students.”

“More time is spent learning in our schools than in conventional schools. This is achieved through more effective classroom management techniques, through effective curriculums that minimize distractions and tangents, and through maintaining high expectations for our students.”

DAN HENSON
DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL PROJECTS
FRANKLIN ACADEMY AND THALES ACADEMY

Differences from Public Schools

A few other things also set the academies apart from traditional government schools.

Kent Misegades, director of Thales Academy, explained, “The teacher to administrator ratio is very high compared to government schools. Nearly every adult is in the classroom. The government schools have a ratio of one administrator for every 2.5 to three teachers, whereas our schools have one administrator to every 10 teachers.

“Our teachers are not tenured; they receive a one-year contract only,” Misegades added, “another reason for their high motivation to reach excellence.”

The schools use the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to measure students’ progress and teachers’ efficacy.

“In North Carolina, where homegrown tests of a very low standard are used, and teachers are not tested in this manner, this is a major positive aspect of our schools,” Misegades said. “Since the Iowa tests are nationally normed, parents and teachers know how well each and every student is progressing against their peers in the same class, school, county, state, and even compared to other countries. This is not possible in our state’s government schools.

“We are achieving remarkable results here at a fraction of the cost of our local government schools,” Misegades concluded. “Our model should work equally well in any community, in particular in poor ones where families lack structure and the income for more expensive schools.”

“Thales was created to be a model school,” Henson agreed. “As the school develops, there are plans to widely distribute the model so that it may be implemented by other schools. The superior academic results coupled with affordability would make the Thales model an academically and fiscally sensible option for any school that is seeking to improve.”

Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) teaches constitutional law and American politics at Wichita State University in Kansas.
Review by Evelyn B. Stacey

Disrupting Class offers brilliant insights into the United States’ education woes—and their solutions—with impeccable timing.

Author Clayton M. Christensen, the Harvard University business professor who also wrote The Innovator’s Prescription (HarperBusiness, 2009), first saw the need for a new perspective on education more than a decade ago, when the charter school movement was in its infancy.

Disrupting Class begins by laying out what Christensen sees as the four common purposes of education: maximizing human potential, creating informed citizens through participatory democracy, strengthening skills and attitudes for a prosperous economy, and establishing understanding and respect for different perspectives.

With those purposes in mind, Christensen then gives examples of successful industries that could serve as models for education. Before personal computers came along, he notes, Digital Equipment Corporation was the top company producing minicomputers. But Apple attracted a new consumer base, expanding the demand—and a series of disruptions since then has continually improved the product through the free market.

But the free market currently doesn’t work in education—the government controls it as a monopoly. That means most schools still lack customized learning, which could ensure each child masters every concept before moving on. How can free-market disruptive technology improve education? Christensen argues the education industry must change from the inside out—because without that, changes in the consumer base are nearly impossible.

Despite technological advances, Christensen writes, teaching methods have changed little since the early 1800s—teach, memorize, test, move on. But using technology differently in the classroom could create a “modular, student-centric” teaching style. Like tutors, computers could tailor education to each particular child’s learning style. “Given that we all learn in different ways, one might assume that we would teach in different ways, too,” writes Christensen.

Apex Learning, established in 2003 by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen, is one example of how this can be done. Apex is a for-profit company that creates online Advanced Placement classes for public schools to purchase. More than 30,000 students in 4,000 districts have used the programs, often in schools too small or rural to offer the classes otherwise.

But computers alone are no magic bullet, Christensen notes. In the past 20 years, nearly $60 billion worth of computers have been installed in classrooms, yet the investment has brought little academic improvement. The reason, Christensen suggests, is that schools have crammed new technology into their old models instead of building a new model to fit this potentially productivity-enhancing technology.

Disrupting Class takes a refreshing look at America’s education system and ways to improve it, offering insights into how to restructure schooling through technology and free-market principles.

Evelyn B. Stacey (estacey@pacificresearch.org) is the education policy analyst for the Pacific Research Institute, a free-market think tank in Sacramento, California.

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns**
by Clayton M. Christensen with Michael B. Horn and Curtis W. Johnson
288 pages, hardcover, ISBN: 0071592067 / 9780071592062, $32.95

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High School Dropouts Cost Georgia Billions

By Elisha Maldonado

A new study released by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation and Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice reveals high school dropouts are costing Georgia taxpayers billions of dollars.

The high costs of incarceration, Medicaid, and other government programs mean the dropouts from Georgia’s class of 2007 will cost taxpayers $4.8 billion over their lifetimes, the study reports.

“The costs of having high school dropouts are tremendous,” said Kelly McCutcheon, president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a think tank based in Atlanta. “It is a critical, long-term problem with Georgia.”

The study reveals Georgia’s high school graduation rate is only 65 percent.

Spiraling Down

According to the study, “The Economic and Fiscal Costs of Failing to Reform K-12 Education in Georgia,” each new class of dropouts will cost taxpayers $95 million per year for the rest of their lives.

The study finds high school dropouts are more likely to end up in prison, have higher rates of substance abuse and addiction, rely on more government assistance, and have a higher percentage of children out of wedlock than their peers who graduate from high school.

For McCutcheon, the findings make two things blatantly clear about Georgia’s educational system.

“One, we do not do well compared to other states. We are toward the bottom,” McCutcheon said. “And, two, we are not anywhere near where we need to be.”

Choice-Friendly Atmosphere

One bright spot in Georgia’s educational landscape, however, is its attitude toward school choice, says Paul DiPerna, the Friedman Foundation’s research director.

“Among a handful of other states, Georgia continues to be a major leader for advancing school choice reforms,” DiPerna said.

DiPerna also said the state’s two relatively new school choice programs have been well-received by parents and students.

The three-year-old Special Needs Scholarship provides scholarships to private schools for special-needs students whose parents are unhappy with their assigned Georgia public schools.

The Tax Credits for Student Scholarship Organizations program, which began operating this academic year, provides income tax credits to individuals and corporations who donate money to student scholarship organizations. To date, that program has raised more than $8.3 million.

Incremental Change

While Georgia’s school choice forecast is promising, McCutcheon said it has been, and still is, an incremental process.

“We have moved slowly and deliberately, steadily moving toward more choice in education,” McCutcheon said. “Our hope is to continue down that path, to continue to provide opportunities for online education and more school choice for a larger segment of the population.”

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

New Jersey Seeking Permanent Interdistrict Choice

By Elisha Maldonado

The New Jersey Assembly’s Education Committee unanimously approved legislation to create a permanent public school choice program allowing students to move across district lines.

If the bill, passed on January 4, is signed into law, it would replace a pilot program that expired in 2005, though many participating school districts have kept it alive since then on an unofficial basis.

“The program gives parents choice within the public school system,” said state Assemblywoman Mila Jasey (D-Essex), the primary sponsor of Assembly Bill 3472. “And it gives the public school districts the opportunity to be creative. It also provides an opportunity to show crossing district lines can work.”

Parental Involvement Required

Not every school in New Jersey is included in the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program Act.

Under the bill, a proposed choice district must submit an application to the commissioner of education no later than April 30 of the school year prior to the one in which it would like to participate. The district must include in the application a description of its programs, schools, and number of student openings for each grade level.

Parents would be required to submit an application to the school district to which they want to transfer their children, said state Assemblywoman Joan Voss (D-Bergen), the bill’s second primary sponsor.

“Parents have to be very much involved in this process,” Voss said. “And a parent has to be really concerned about their child’s education to go through all of the hoops required.”

School Officials ‘Very Enthusiastic’

In order to be considered for acceptance into a particular school district, Voss explained, students must attend the school they desire to leave for at least a year. Parents must show they are seeking to move for primarily academic reasons, not social or athletic ones.

Jasey said AB 3472 would give school officials who have been “very enthusiastic” about the program the opportunity “to think outside the box. And that is a good thing.”

Voss agreed. “You are going to see a lot of new things happening in education in terms of choice [in New Jersey],” she said. “Because anything that is good for kids is good for me, as far as I’m concerned.”

AB 3472 was reported out of Assembly Committee with amendments and a second reading. On January 12 it was reintroduced and referred to the Education Committee as part of AB 355.

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

Charter school advocates—myself included—are often critical of the resistance local school boards offer these independent public schools designed to serve often under-educated student populations in systems trying to educate a broad range of children.

And because local school boards are the only entity empowered to authorize charter schools, Virginia is currently a vast wasteland for quality charter innovation that could help kids. School board members have made it clear to me that they would even refuse to authorize the nationally renowned KIPP Academies—even if it means the low-income and educationally at-risk students in their systems would continue to fail.

But while the criticism of school boards is well-founded, the Virginia School Boards Association is right on this: The quality of the charter applications received by local boards is often quite poor.

Poorly Written Guidelines

Let’s leave aside the KIPPs, Amistad Academies, and Harlem Democracy Preps of the world—all of which have helped poor students become good students and get into college. We’re not talking about them here. Too many charter applicants in Virginia have an amateur quality to them, almost like the old Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney films where they shout, “Oh boy, let’s put on a show,” and then throw up some old blankets in the barn for a curtain.

Garland and Rooney were able to produce Broadway-quality productions, but it doesn’t work that way in education. Folks might be well-intentioned in trying to open a school, but a poorly written application that ignores key educational requirements isn’t going to help kids.

A lot of the blame lands at the feet of local school boards and their staff. Scripted into the application process. Scripted into it doesn’t work that way in education. Folks might be well-intentioned in trying to open a school, but a poorly written application that ignores key educational requirements isn’t going to help kids.

Quality Information

Fortunately, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) has issued a new model law for high-quality public charter schools and an analysis of Virginia’s strengths and weaknesses. Whereas previous charter law reviews published by the Center for Education Reform focused on a school’s freedom from regulation, the NAPCS focuses on the elements likely to make a school successful in teaching kids: performance and accountability.

One of the application components it suggests Virginia’s law lacks is a thorough evaluation of each application, including an in-person interview. It also suggests charter contracts must define “academic and operational performance expectations by which the school will be judged, based on a performance framework that includes measures and metrics for, at minimum, student academic proficiency and growth, achievement gaps, attendance, recurrent enrollment, postsecondary readiness (high schools), financial performance and (charter school) board stewardship (including compliance).”

Sharing that’s a mouthful—but things like transparency, performance monitoring, and data collection are the sorts of things that divide quality charters from weakly conceived ones. The NAPCS language offers a pathway towards improving the chartering process in Virginia, and one that cries out for the governor and members of the General Assembly— even those who have sworn to oppose charter schools—to work together.

Mutual Goals

No school board or school system staff should have to waste time on a poorly devised charter application. And no charter applicant should have to play guessing games wondering how language is defined and what the intent of the law might be. Making application requirements clear up front would save time and effort for both parties, eliminating poor applications and applicants that lack the capacity to make a school work.

That ought to be a goal both sides can agree on in the charter school debate to come.

Chris Braunlich (c.braunlich@att.net) is a former member of the Fairfax County School Board and vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy. A previous version of this commentary appeared in the January 29 edition of The Jefferson Journal. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institute or its board of directors. Reprinted with permission.

Virginia Needs Stronger Charter School Standards

By Chris Braunlich

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North Carolina Charter Schools Face New Barriers

By Jim Stegall

The North Carolina State Board of Education just made it a lot harder for education reformers to create innovative new charter schools, and much easier for the board to close struggling ones.

An ad hoc task force that began studying charter school issues last August recommended the policy changes. According to information presented at its December 3 meeting, the new policies are intended “to improve the academic accountability of charter schools and to clarify existing procedures for charter applicants to follow.”

But critics say the new policies are in direct conflict with the charter school law, violate the state’s contracts with existing charters, and undermine one of charter schools’ main purposes by penalizing innovation and efforts to reach disadvantaged children.

Contradicts Charters’ Purpose

The tougher academic standards make it extremely risky for any group to start a charter school aimed at serving children from a high concentration of ethnic minorities or who are otherwise academically disadvantaged. As one critic with experience in the charter school arena put it, “With the new policy in place, I would not dare risk my time and treasure starting a charter for any group of at-risk kids—rural, inner-city, low-income, or whatever. I would only seek out higher-income areas where I could be assured of making the 60 percent threshold. And those kids would do OK without a charter.”

That’s exactly the opposite of what the state’s charter school law calls for. The law’s stated purpose is to “increase learning opportunities for all students with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students who are identified as at-risk of academic failure or academically gifted.”

“At-risk of academic failure” generally refers to students from poor families or areas with a high concentration of ethnic minorities or who are otherwise academically disadvantaged. These are precisely the students who would be left out in the cold by the board’s new academic standards policy, critics say.

‘It’s Profoundly Unfair’

Paul Norcross, who chairs the newly formed North Carolina Alliance for Public Charter Schools, thinks that’s just plain wrong.

“It’s not just a violation of the spirit of the charter school law, it’s profoundly unfair,” Norcross said. “The state has no business crafting policies that in effect exclude some of its neediest citizens from a chance at a better education.”

“The state has no business crafting policies that in effect exclude some of its neediest citizens from a chance at a better education.”

PAUL NORCROSS, CHAIRMAN NORTH CAROLINA ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

schools currently score at or above grade level. To meet the legal mandate of expanding opportunities for low-income students, any charter school not confident it can beat the state average by 12 percentage points might as well not try.

 Raises Additional Obstacles

For those willing to take the risk, the new policies raise other obstacles. The state board will now consider an applicant’s commitment to “a large, diverse, and locally based board” when deciding whether to grant a charter. It’s not clear whether that means nonlocals can serve on charter applicants’ boards, nor what type and degree of diversity is required.

The state board has been reluctant to answer questions about its new charter school policies. A request by Carolina Journal to the Department of Public Instruction’s Communications and Information Division for input on this story was acknowledged promptly, but two weeks elapsed before the division issued a statement.

The statement, in its entirety, read: “In looking at your materials, we do not feel that the State Board of Education is out of compliance with the charter school law. It is important to note that the State Board of Education has to operate within the 100 school cap that also is a part of state law.”

North Carolina’s charter school law, with its cap of 100 schools, was ranked 32nd of 40 states that have charter laws by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. And that was before the new policies went into effect.

Jim Stegall (jstegall@nclegislative.com) is a contributor to Carolina Journal, published by the John Locke Foundation in Raleigh, NC, where a previous version of this story appeared. Used with permission.
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Transforming Louisiana’s Education System: An Interview with Paul Pastorek

By Lisa Snell

Lisa Snell: What path have you taken to reform education and make schools better in Louisiana?

Paul Pastorek: We’re really proceeding through two focused approaches. One is through the Recovery School District, taking chronically failed schools and radically restructuring them. The second is a broader approach to the remainder of the schools in the state. We have about 1,300 schools that are in our accountability system, and we have about 113 schools in 14 districts that are currently under the direct jurisdiction or indirect oversight of the Recovery School District, stretching across the state.

We have two different approaches to those schools. We have a complete takeover where we take the money and the building. The second approach—the supervisory memorandum of understanding (MOU)—lets the district keep the money and the building, but we assume a level of control over the direction of the school. These agreements give us some control around decisions such as the school leader, faculty, academic strategy, and the use of financial resources. And if the district fails to consider and react appropriately to address our concerns, then the school can be placed under the direct oversight of the Recovery School District.

Generally, with urban schools we’ve exercised the authority to place schools in the Recovery School District. And in rural areas, we’ve relied heavily on the supervisory MOUs—because you have to have a different strategy in the rural communities for a lot of different reasons. The politics, finances, and economies of scale are very different in rural areas, so we’re taking a different approach there as we attempt to transform these chronically low-performing schools. The biggest challenge I think that we have is that a large percentage of our students live in poverty. We haven’t given our teachers the kind of training they need to effectively teach these children.

We’re looking at transforming the entire Department of Education into a capacity-building and a human capital pipeline enterprise. On the one hand, we can work to build capacity, but on the other hand, we need to find people who are willing to go into these challenged schools. The Department of Education has historically been an enterprise that focuses on bureaucratic tasks, in administering and administering funding, collecting reports—really just making sure everybody colors within the lines and keeps their head down while they’re coloring. If so many of our districts don’t really have the capacity to draw human capital into their schools, they’re going to constantly tell me what they have been telling me: “I’d like to get rid of these teachers, but I don’t have anybody to replace them.”

Snell: Did you have to do some kind of personnel reform to allow districts to discharge non-performing teachers?

Pastorek: In the Recovery School District, we are able to discharge the teachers, but the districts still have an obligation to retain them. So one of the real difficult parts of the Recovery School District that doesn’t work well is how we can deal with the teacher who is performing so poorly that we don’t want to hire them into the new school. We actually have a district right now that would like to convert all of its schools to charter schools. The problem is we can’t figure out how we’re going to deal with those teachers. So we have a fundamental flaw we’ve got to work through, and it’s going to require some legislation.

Snell: What role are charter schools playing in Louisiana and in New Orleans?

Pastorek: Up until this legislative session, there was a limit on the number of charters that could operate in the state outside the Recovery School District. There were also some financial restraints. But we’ve eliminated the cap and we’ve eliminated the financial restraints, so now charter schools can proliferate more in the external environment.

Within the Recovery School District, we’re unlimited. We’re unlimited by finances and we’re unlimited by numbers, so what you’ve seen is a strong preference from the perspective of the Recovery School District, which the state controls, to convert those schools to charter schools. And the reason is fairly obvious.

I think one of the interesting features of charter schools in New Orleans is that we’ve created an incubator for charter schools. And we’ve actually replicated that model and launched a incubator in Baton Rouge. This ensures that we’re not putting all our eggs into the national charter operator basket. We want to bring in small operators. We want to offer real opportunity for creativity and innovation, and so we’re trying to cultivate a charter landscape that involves a healthy mix of experienced charter providers as well as people who don’t have experience or a track record operating charters.

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Lisa Snell (lsnell@reason.org) is director of education at the Reason Foundation, a nonprofit think tank in Los Angeles. This interview was originally featured in Reason’s Innovators in Action 2009. Used with permission.
Tennessee Tells High Schools How to Teach the Bible

By Jaime Sarrio and Bob Smietana

Starting next fall, Tennessee high schools that want to teach students about Noah, Moses, and the Prodigal Son will have a state-approved road map for doing so.

On January 28 the Tennessee Board of Education approved guidelines on how to teach the Bible to public high school students. The curriculum is in response to 2008 legislation authorizing the state to create a course for a “non-sectarian, nonreligious academic study of the Bible.”

State officials said they tried to develop principles that are safe from court challenges, but others say a state-approved Bible course could violate church and state separation, depending on who teaches the course.

Reading, Writing, and Biblical History

Hedy Weinberg, director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee, said it appears the state was sensitive to concerns that the classes would be used to proselytize. But there are few details on how the classes will be run.

“We believe these classes are constitutional depending on who teaches them and how they are taught,” Weinberg said. “The devil is in the details.”

Board member Richard Ray voted in favor of the standards, but he said he is concerned that potential lawsuits could create a distraction for schools.

“We have so much that needs to be done to elevate our kids in math and science, the focus of education should be right there,” Ray said.

Confusing Legislation

The course is an elective, meaning high schools can choose whether to offer it to students as a social studies credit, and schools can choose whether to offer it to students. The curriculum is in response to 2008 legislation authorizing the state to create a course for a “non-sectarian, nonreligious academic study of the Bible.”

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The course is an elective, meaning high schools can choose whether to offer it to students as a social studies credit, and students can decide whether to take it. Before the state-approved curriculum, school districts could develop and offer their own courses on the Bible. According to state social studies specialist Brenda Ables, some of those classes have been offered for years.

Ables said the legislation actually complicates the issue because it doesn’t require districts with existing Bible courses to convert to the state’s curriculum.

“We think we’ve gotten this curriculum written to meet all guidelines that would uphold court challenges,” Ables said. “Those schools who had their own curriculum and were already teaching it will continue to do so until somebody tells them they can’t.”

The guidelines do not recommend a textbook, and they require that teachers make literature from other religions available to students. The course covers biblical readings, how historical figures such as President Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. used the Bible, and the timeline of biblical events, among other topics.

Other States’ Programs Studied

Ables said state officials looked to other states with Bible courses, including Alabama, Georgia, and Texas, when developing the curriculum. He believes learning about the Bible is important, even if classes are problem-free, Ables said, but she doesn’t expect to see a huge increase in the number of schools in Tennessee that will offer the course.

In the Nashville area, Rutherford County schools said there are no plans to teach the Bible, while other districts did not respond to questions by deadline. Wilson County was the first in the area to offer such a class, in 2007.

Kent Richards, Old Testament professor at Emory University and executive director of the Society for Biblical Literature, has spent the past five years developing guidelines for teaching the Bible in public schools. He worked with Tennessee on this course.

Richards and state officials agree the focus now must shift to properly training educators who will teach the course.

“One of the important things is that teachers are teaching about the Bible and not professing some religion or professing that the Bible is the only road to take,” Richards said. “That’s what every school and every school attorney is concerned about, not crossing that line.”

Widening Audiences

Students will learn the content of the Bible and its historical context. They’ll also learn that different traditions organize the Bible differently. In most modern English translations, the Old Testament ends with the prophet book of Malachi. But the Hebrew Bible, used by Jews, ends with the historical books Ezra and Nehemiah followed by First and Second Chronicles.

Sam Marshall, who teaches the Bible in the “Lads to Leaders” program at Hillsboro Church of Christ, said he was pleased to hear about the new curriculum. He believes learning about the Bible is important, even if classes are taught from a secular perspective.

“It’s a good thing to expose as wide an audience as possible to the Bible,” Marshall said.

Still, Marshall, whose children attend private Christian school, says there’s more to the Bible than history and literature.

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg,” Marshall said.

Jaime Sarrio (jsarrio@tennessean.com) and Bob Smietana (bsmietana@tennessean.com) are staff writers at The (Nashville) Tennessean, where a previous version of this article appeared on January 29. Copyright 2010. Reprinted with permission.

IN OTHER WORDS

“In the Southfield district, for instance, Ted Peters stopped teaching Social Studies a dozen years ago when he became the full-time union president representing that district’s teachers. Yet his pay still comes from the schools, every penny of his $109,000 in annual pay and benefits, as if he were still teaching students.”

— Detroit WXYZ-TV reporter Steve Wilson noting more than two dozen school districts in Michigan’s Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties pay teachers to be union presidents instead of teaching children, January 18, 2010.
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