Florida Earns High Marks for School Reform

ALEC report card compares, ranks states’ academic achievement with reforms

By Ben Boychuk

Vermont tops the states when it comes to test scores but ranks at the very bottom in school reforms, while Florida earns a solid B+ for its sweeping and sustained reform efforts, according to the American Legislative Exchange Council's report card on American education.

ALEC's report card, now in its 16th year, offers a comprehensive overview of education achievement levels for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The top 10 reform states on this year's report card are Florida, Colorado, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, South Carolina, Arizona, Arkansas, and Idaho.

The 10 states at the bottom of the reform list are Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New York, Nebraska, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Vermont.

The report card rankings penalized states with persistently low or slowly rising test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. States fared better in the rankings if they had

Group Calls for More Web-Based Learning

By Rick Docksai

Building on increasing interest in Web-based learning around the nation, former governors Jeb Bush (R-FL) and Bob Wise (D-W.VA) have formed an organization devoted to encouraging school districts to let more children use online education options.

Bush and Wise are cochairs of the Digital Learning Council, a coalition of business leaders, think tank directors, and public officials whose shared goal is to increase public funding for and use of Web-based learning tools in U.S. education.

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Federal Anti-Bullying Bill Sparks Debate

By Sarah McIntosh

As schools struggle with cyberbullying and other student-on-student abuses in and out of the classroom, a coalition of more than 70 civil rights, religious, education, professional, and civic activist groups is urging federal officials to step in with sweeping action—including a law to make bullying a federal crime.

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights has called on U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to make combating school bullies a higher national priority.

The coalition says it wants more federal government funding for local bullying prevention initiatives; federal mandates requiring every state and local education institution to adopt an anti-bullying harassment policy; funding for anti-bullying research; federal information-sharing with state and local school districts; promotion of legislation against bullying; stronger federal enforcement of civil rights protections in schools; and more stringent rules and regulations on “exclusionary disciplinary practices,” such as restraint and confinement.

Bill Offered in Congress

In response, Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) introduced S. 3739, the Safe Schools Improvement Act.

The act would require schools that receive federal money to adopt certain codes of conduct prohibiting bullying and harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion.

In a speech at the International Equality Dinner earlier this year, Casey explained his legislation is necessary because data show bullying happens “most frequently to children who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.”

Several organizations have endorsed the act. They include the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, and Human Rights Campaign.

Local Solutions Preferred

Robert Holland, senior fellow for education policy at The Heartland Institute, says there’s no need for federal meddling in local disciplinary issues.

“The U.S. Department of Education—the least popular of all federal agencies according to a recent Pew poll—should not intervene in this local issue,” Holland said.

“ Well-trained classroom teachers, working in cooperation with parents, should discipline students who engage in bullying or other misbehavior,” Holland said. “Local school boards should spell out disciplinary policies clearly. If a school fails to maintain sound discipline, parents should be free to choose a better school for their children.”

ROBERT HOLLAND, SENIOR FELLOW THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

“ If a school fails to maintain sound discipline, parents should be free to choose a better school for their children.”

Private Schools Concerned

Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education, a coalition of national organizations and state affiliates serving private elementary and secondary schools, says Duncan’s vision of safe schools closely resembles what private schools already provide.

“We obviously oppose bullying in schools, and private school administrators take the steps necessary to address the problem whenever it becomes known,” McTighe said.

“Administrators in religious and independent schools know exactly what the secretary is talking about because he is describing those schools quite accurately,” McTighe added.

But McTighe warned against federal overreach.

“We are always on high alert about possible government controls that might threaten the autonomy of private schools and that might constitute an unacceptable level of regulation that could ultimately render private schools indistinguishable from public schools,” McTighe said.

Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) is a constitutional scholar writing from Lawrence, Kansas.
Florida Earns High Marks for School Reform

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relatively high scores and showed consistent achievement growth between 2003 and 2009.

Florida placed third overall on the report card because the Sunshine State had high scores (ranked 11th overall) and showed significant growth (ranked first overall), even though most of Florida’s students come from what the report described as disadvantaged backgrounds.

‘Lots of Choice’ Is Key
Reforms were graded on 10 factors, including the range of school choice, strength of charter school laws, and how teachers are evaluated and certified.

“Unfortunately, no states achieved an ‘A,’” said Matthew Ladner, vice president of research at the Goldwater Institute. He coauthored the report card with Andrew LeFevre and Dan Lips.

Florida, which during Republican Gov. Jeb Bush’s administration passed a series of sweeping school reforms in 1999, earned the authors’ plaudits throughout the 141-page report card. Ladner points out, for example, Hispanic 4th grade students in Miami-Dade schools outperformed students in the entire state of Oregon on the NAEP reading test.

Florida’s success may be explained by a few factors, Ladner said. Longevity of reform efforts and “a lot of school choice” were crucial, he said. Several years passed before Florida saw real gains in academic achievement after implementing choice programs a decade ago. “It’s possible if Florida passed those reforms this year or last year, it would be on the bottom of our list,” Ladner said.

Florida also imposed what Ladner calls “sensible top-down” policies. “They’ve been very transparent,” he said. “They don’t use any funny labels or jargon. They grade all the schools with an A, B, C, D, or F. Everyone can understand what that means.”

Matthew Ladner  
Vice President of Research  
Goldwater Institute

“[Florida has] been very transparent. They don’t use any funny labels or jargon. They grade all the schools with an A, B, C, D, or F. Everyone can understand what that means.”

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Focus on Flexibility
Report coauthor LeFevre, a government relations and public affairs consultant and former executive director of the pro-school choice REACH Alliance in Pennsylvania, says the report card gives higher grades to policies and programs in states that give parents and students the most flexibility in choosing their education.

“The system is still very rigid,” LeFevre said. He says the authors kept flexibility foremost in mind when judging the states’ education policies. “Do states have policies and programs that allow for private school choice? Do states have robust charter school laws? Do they have multiple authorizers? Or do they have caps? Do the states offer intra- and interdistrict choice, or do they just send kids to the school in their ZIP code?”

“Some reforms,” such as alternative teacher certification, “tinker around the edges,” LeFevre said. “And some cut right to the core.” States with more choice will have a more positive impact on student achievement than those with little or no choice, he said.

Low-Income Students Compared
To maximize comparability among states, the ALEC research team scrutinized the testing performance of children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches based on their family income, who are not enrolled in either special education or English Language Learner programs.

“We asked the question, if you had to be born over again as an economically disadvantaged child, where would you want to live and go to school?” Ladner explained.

The report card’s authors did not alter data to remove race as a factor, a deliberate decision.

“We’re aware of the racial achievement gap in this country,” Ladner said. “It’s a fact of life and something we need to confront.”

“We now have a good idea of what works in K-12 education reform now. We have plenty of evidence of what’s successful and what isn’t. The task now is to get the right policies in place,” Ladner said. “States really should be saying, ‘I’ll have what Florida’s having.’”
Ga. Officials Reconsider Support for Online Charters

By Ben DeGrow

Georgia officials are taking a second look at the state’s restrictions on funding of online education after an initial ruling forced two virtual charter schools to postpone their first year.

The Georgia Charter Schools Commission in June ruled virtual charter schools should operate on less than $3,300 per full-time student in tax support. That initial dollar figure was derived from the state’s funding share for an average brick-and-mortar public school student. At an August 19 meeting, the commission authorized a study to revamp the funding amount.

“We’ve gotten a clear signal that the state portion alone is not enough,” said the commission’s executive director, Mark Peevy. “We’re looking for the right number that will give us quality virtual charter schools and a competitive virtual market.”

Delaying Operations

Operators of two virtual schools authorized by the commission to serve in-state high school students—Kaplan Academy of Georgia and Georgia Provoost Academy—opted to delay their scheduled fall 2010 openings because the allotted funding was inadequate, they said.

New York City-based Edison Learning, Inc., which directs the Provost Academy project, posted a message on its Web site explaining the decision to postpone its September launch.

“The commission provided new funding guidance, it became immediately evident that we would not be able to replicate the quality online education model that has already shown success,” the company said in the statement.

Georgia’s commission has authority under state law to determine funding formulas for the charters it authorizes, using the state’s share plus an amount equivalent to the local share raised in the district in which the school resides. The applications from Kaplan and Provoost were the first two virtual school applications the commission considered.

“This was a relatively new concept in Georgia,” said Peevy. “It was putting a stake in the ground for the starting amount.”

Adjusting Amounts

Georgia Cyber Academy (GCA), a virtual charter school that has served K-8 students since 2007, also hopes to secure commission authorization and a funding increase starting in 2011-12. GCA currently receives about $3,500 per student to operate as a state-chartered special school.

“The economics certainly aren’t sustainable in the long term to operate a high school,” said GCA Headmaster Matthew Arkin.

Peevy noted the commission’s study must be completed and a new funding level approved by December in order to approve petitions to open schools in fall 2011. Interviews conducted for a 2006 report by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates suggested operating costs for virtual schools are “about the same as the costs of operating brick-and-mortar schools.”

“Most states fund full-time virtual schooling consistent with their charter laws,” Patrick said. “Charter schools may be suffering from inequity in funding, but at least they are funding all the charter schools the same way.”

Patrick labeled the commission’s initial decision “arbitrary” and said Georgia is an “anomaly” compared to most of the 25 states that fund students enrolled in full-time virtual schools. “We’re really pleased that they’re going back to the drawing board to look at the real costs associated with funding a student who learns online,” said Patrick.

By Ben DeGrow (ben@i2i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute, a think tank in Golden, Colorado.
L.A. Mayor Favors Charters in School Turnaround Bids

By Sarah McIntosh

In the ongoing effort to turn around some of the worst schools in the nation’s second largest school district, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D) has thrown his support behind reformers who favor letting private and nonprofit charter school operators take over failing public schools.

With the new school year underway, Villaraigosa is stepping up his campaign for public school choice. He says his goal for the Los Angeles Unified School District is to create “an autonomous, empowered network of schools.”

The mayor touted his public school choice plans at the grand opening of Camino Nuevo Academy, a charter elementary school in downtown Los Angeles, which began the year with more than 350 students.

Choice “stands for the proposition that new schools and schools that are currently failing ... ought to be able to make a choice about whether or not they’ll continue the status quo or engage in the kind of innovation and transformative reform that you see at Camino Nuevo,” Villaraigosa said.

Mayor Chides Superintendent

Last year the Los Angeles school board passed, at Villaraigosa’s behest, the Public School Choice resolution. The mayor described it as one of the most radical school reform initiatives in the nation, allowing charters, nonprofits, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), teacher cooperatives, and the district itself to bid for management of new and low-performing schools.

But in the first call for proposals, held last November, charter school operators won control of just three of 36 schools. None of the city’s three largest charter school operators—Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, Green Dot, and Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools—was chosen.

Instead, the district awarded most of the turnaround schools to teachers groups controlled by UTLA, the district’s teachers union.

This July, as the district was preparing for a new round of proposals, Villaraigosa publicly chided his handpicked school superintendent, Ramon Cortines, for favoring the teachers union and establishment groups over private charter operators. Three weeks later, Cortines announced plans to retire.

Another round of bidding will be held later this fall, in which applicants may bid to manage other low-performing schools.

Skeptical About Turnarounds

Although Villaraigosa and other state and federal officials have touted the idea of school turnarounds, Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare at the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation, says the evidence on school turnarounds suggests very few schools improve.

“Especially when schools are not starting from scratch with new school leaders and a new school culture,” Snell said.

Snell notes state officials approved many union-led plans even though they had doubts about them.

“Many of the teacher-led teams were approved by the school board with reservations. This means that even before they started the school improvement work, the school board did not have full confidence in the teams and their plans,” Snell said.

‘Politics Before Children’

Gabe Rose, deputy director of Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based coalition of parents advocating parental choice, says he shares Villaraigosa’s disappointment with district officials. Rose called the bias against charters another instance of “politics being put before children.”

“There are some really great charter operators in the area with a proven track record whose bids were completely rejected,” Rose said. “The teachers union and many others benefit from the status quo, and thousands of calls were made to try to convince parents to support the districts’ proposals instead of charters. It’s politics.

“At the end of the day, what I care about is allowing whoever best raises educational performance to run a school,” Rose added. “Education policy should be simple: Do what’s best for the children, not the adults.”

Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) is a constitutional scholar writing from Lawrence, Kansas.
Activist Works to Empower Parents in L.A. Suburb

Lydia Grant would be first to use California’s new ‘parent trigger’ law

By Ben Boychuk

California’s new “parent trigger” law is getting its first test from a parent in a Los Angeles suburb.

Lydia Grant, a 45-year-old mother of three and member of the Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council, says she’s spent 10 years trying to persuade the Los Angeles Unified School District to improve Mt. Gleason Middle School, to no avail. Grant says the parent trigger law is her community’s “last, best hope.”

Under the law, if 50.1 percent of qualifying parents sign a petition, the school must initiate one of four turnaround plans prescribed by the federal government.

In August, Grant and a small group of parents began circulating petitions to “trigger” Mt. Gleason to use a transformation model that would replace the school’s top administration. School Reform News recently spoke with Grant about her efforts. A podcast of the complete interview is available at http://www.schoolreform-news.org/audio.html.

School Reform News: What are you trying to achieve with the new parent trigger law?

Lydia Grant: I had a child at the middle school, and his education was not that great. I ended up having to pull him out and put him in home schooling. Later, he did return to high school. The problem was, he did not really get the education he deserved. ... There were a lot of things that were cropping up that in my opinion made the school unsafe. ... Over the last three years the problems have escalated to the point where action had to be taken to protect the kids.

SRN: How does Mt. Gleason Middle School qualify for the parent trigger?

Grant: There [are] only really two qualifications for a school to be eligible for the parent trigger. One of those is the school [not making sufficient] improvement under No Child Left Behind. It means the school hasn’t met the criteria that the federal government has set for it. Our school has been on program improvement since 1997. The other qualification is the school has to have less than 800 API [Annual Performance Index] points, and our school is at 744.

SRN: So the school qualifies for the parent trigger academically. But the school is failing kids in other ways that concern parents too. Is that correct?

Grant: Yes. Many of the parents in the community feel even though our teachers are extremely hard working and they have increased the test scores—the test scores have gone up—they’re trying to do it in an environment that’s unsafe. If a child has to worry about being bullied or attacked, [his] mind is not set on learning. So it’s our belief as parents that the environment on the campus is not conducive to learning and that is what’s holding test scores down.

SRN: When the legislation was being debated in December and January, opponents—mostly the California Teachers Association—said this was a “lynch mob” law. Did you ever imagine yourself leading a lynch mob? Or what do you see yourself doing in this effort?

Grant: In my situation, in our school’s situation, anybody who would think that trying to protect the lives of children would [be] a lynch mob mentality, ... first of all, it shames me they would even be involved in education. Truly. Because that is just such an inappropriate statement.

SRN: The state board of education in July passed some emergency regulations clarifying what the parent trigger law does. There was some pushback in August from the state office that oversees regulations. You had an opportunity to testify to the state board of education in July and August. What did you tell them?

Grant: [Opponents] were trying to say, you know, the schools have been failing for so long that it’s just not an emergency any longer.

Every day a child is not getting an education creates a future for them that is going to be bleak. So it is an emergency. And in our particular case, we’re trying to protect the lives of children, so it was definitely an emergency.

SRN: How is your signature-gathering going?

Grant: We’re still in the process. We got some petitions done up. We started collecting signatures. We’ve held back a little bit since I did the first couple of days of signature collection because I felt the petition that we had done could be a little clearer, so they’re being redone. ... We have to state on the petition which [turnaround option] we’ve chosen. And it was on the petition, but I felt it should be much bigger, that the name of the school that was being triggered should be big so that people were more aware when they looked at it what exactly it meant instantly, without having to read mice type. So we’ve just asked for a much brighter, easier-to-read petition. ... This will probably be the first trigger, so we have to set the example and be very transparent. And we want to make sure that along the way it’s brought to our attention if something should be better. We really appreciate the feedback.

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New Coalition Calls for More Web-Based Learning

Continued from page 1

said Bush. “With technology, a teacher can customize lesson plans and even tailor schoolwork to the interests of each student.”

Online Learning Ascendant
Web-based learning is already increasing in many U.S. school districts. Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform and a member of the digital learning group, notes more than 1.5 million primary- and secondary-school students now take some or all of their classes online.

Florida and Pennsylvania both host “virtual charter schools” that educate their students over the Internet.

“Increasingly, online classes are supplementing and advancing the studies of traditional public school students,” said Allen.

Thomas Abeles, president of software consulting firm Sagacity Inc., points out Internet video makes it possible for a teacher to instruct students in person in one school while also reaching remote groups of students elsewhere. The remote groups tune in for teleconference sessions or watch pre-recorded DVD course programs.

Software Saves Money
Abeles is not a Digital Learning Council member, but he strongly supports schools’ increasing their use of digital learning applications. Web-based learning allows schools to share their limited resources, he notes.

“There are schools that are hurting because they cannot afford teachers, but they can buy courses, and it’s cheaper than to have licensed professionals that provide them on-site,” Abeles said.

Abeles said many high schools now use software programs, like Illuminiate, which let a teacher talk to a room full of students miles away in real time. The students converse with the teacher on-screen using microphones, while an on-screen “whiteboard” displays videos, MP3s, and any other interactive content the teacher posts.

Flexible Schedules
Another increasingly popular model, says Abeles, is “community learning schools.” Students take some classes at home online and others at the school site. They also go to the school for scheduled subject tests.

“The kids can come in on their own time and [take the] test. And they find the kids do just as well as kids that have been there since early morning every day,” said Abeles.

When the students do come to school, they are allowed custom-made schedules and instruction plans. A student in a music course might have intensive two-hour lessons instead of more one-hour lessons. A sports team’s players might alternate one full afternoon of school lessons with one full afternoon the next day on the field, instead of cramming both lessons and team sports drills into each afternoon.

Tutoring Help
Abeles also envisions schools offering more tutoring help over the Internet. He identified a college-level precedent in Smarter Thinking, an online learning service that offers 24-7 subject help to students at Minnesota State University and other colleges that buy its services.

“The students don’t have to go to the campus help center, they don’t have to wait for someone to have hours, and the tutor does not have to sit in a room and be paid even if no one shows up. It’s a very efficient way of tutoring,” said Abeles.

Blended Model Suggested
Digital tools may transform how teachers interact with students, but they won’t replace teachers. Ed Gordon, president of the workforce-consulting firm Imperial Consulting, argues a “blended” model that supplements in-class instruction with online support might work best for most students.

“Pure e-learning is useful, in general, for individuals who need to acquire new technical data. It’s great for engineers,” Gordon said. “Pure e-learning all by itself, though, can’t and won’t, as a standalone, be able to complete the learning process for most children.”

Gordon said only in-person instruction can help students develop their critical thinking and analytical skills. Even the best Web program won’t do your thinking for you, he says.

“There has to be a social component for learning where they have the opportunity to discuss it, try it out, have it critiqued in real time,” Gordon said.

Mixed Outcomes
Gordon points to a National Bureau of Economic Research study that surveyed the at-home Internet access and scores in reading and math of half-a-million middle-school students throughout North Carolina over a five-year period. The study concluded having a computer at home had only a very small positive effect on most students’ reading and math scores. It also found access to high-speed broadband had a slightly negative effect on math and no effect on reading.

“The majority of kids—and particularly the high-risk kids—may use computers to play games, buy stuff on the Web, instant-message their friends; it will not necessarily improve their reading comprehension or their spelling and math skills,” said Gordon.

Bush says the Digital Learning Council will discuss the pros and cons of digital learning, and over the next few months the membership will draw up a list of digital-education best practices.

“They will identify and advocate for the policies and principles that local, state, and federal leaders should adopt to provide every student a customized education,” said Bush.

The set of best practices is due for completion by December. The council will then begin lobbying states to adopt it.

Rick Docksai (rick.docksai@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.
By Brooke Terry

A coalition of five New Jersey Democrats has filed legislation to expand choice for students and parents in the Garden State by making it easier for more charter schools to open.

The proposal establishes an additional charter school authorizer, expedites approval of charter school applications, and allows new types of charter schools to open, including virtual schools, single-sex schools, and schools focusing on specific behavioral needs or disorders such as autism.

At present the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) is the sole authorizer of new charters. The bill's author, Assemblywoman Mila Jasey (D-Essex), said, “The DOE simply does not have the capacity to expand charter opportunities in a meaningful way. Many other states have successfully implemented multiple authorizers to alleviate the burden of bureaucracy, get charters up and running, and provide the assistance and monitoring needed to ensure successful schools.”

More Flexible Process

The bill, A3083, would allow Rutgers University to approve new charter schools. In addition, it removes other obstacles to new charters by removing the hard deadline for applications, allowing applications to be submitted at any time. The bill also shortens the approval process by requiring a five-month turnaround on applications.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports six new charter schools opened last year in the state, bringing the total to 68. There are 2,415 traditional public schools in New Jersey.

Independent Authorizers

Of the 40 states with charter school laws, 21 allow independent or multiple authorizers, according to the Center for Education Reform. The group advocates states allow multiple authorizers.

The organization's president, Jeanne Allen, explained: “States that do not have multiple authorizers create hostile environments for charters because school boards often view charter schools as competition and reject applications based not on merit but on politics. Multiple authorizing entities provide for a more focused and professional approval process and allow innovative schools to flourish.”

Several states let colleges or universities serve as an independent charter school authorizer, such as the State University of New York, Central Michigan University, and Ball State University in Indiana.

Derrell Bradford, executive director of Excellent Education for Everyone (E3), said, “I hope the legislature will see this as an opportunity to be bold and not incremental both in the number and kind of authorizers and the number and kind of schools brought into existence.” He sees a need for more charter schools in New Jersey, citing the more than 4,000 students on a waiting list in Newark alone.

A companion bill, Senate Bill 2198, is sponsored by state Sens. Teresa Ruiz (D-Newark) and Sandra Cunningham (D-Jersey City). The Senate Education Committee heard testimony on August 16, with additional scheduled testimony on September 28 before the Joint Committee on Public Schools in Trenton.

Brooke Terry (brooke.terry@yahoo.com) writes from Texas and is a former education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.
**Teacher Performance Plans Emphasized by ‘Race’ Round Two Winners**

By Sarah McIntosh

Proposals to improve teacher and principal quality produced mixed results in the second and final round of the federal Race to the Top grant competition, according to three separate analyses by education groups.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan in March urged applicants to focus their round-two proposals on boosting teacher quality, using student achievement data, and turning around the lowest-performing schools.

All 37 round-two applications stressed pay for performance under the rubric of “improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance.” The U.S. Department of Education announced 19 round two finalists in July and named 10 winners on August 24.

**Some Dubious Winners**

According to an analysis by the Partnership for Learning, all 10 round-two winners require student achievement growth data to be part of annual evaluations for teachers and principals. Florida and Rhode Island require student achievement growth to count for more than half of the evaluation. Washington, DC, Georgia, Hawaii, and Maryland require student achievement growth to count for 50 percent of the evaluation, while New York requires student achievement growth to count for 40 percent of the evaluation.

Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio have a more elastic standard, requiring only that student achievement growth be “a significant determinant” in an educator’s annual review.

The National Council on Teacher Quality graded all 50 states and the District of Columbia on five areas: delivering well-prepared teachers, expanding the teaching pool, identifying effective teachers, teacher retention, and “exiting ineffective teachers.”

**Paying for High Demand**

A study by the Education Commission of the States examined applications from 36 states and the District of Columbia. ECS looked at three categories of performance-pay proposals. The first, state-led, was used by nine states. If approved, funding would be used to identify and pay high-performing teachers—directly to teachers, indirectly to the Local Education Agency (LEAs), or both. The financial incentives would be focused mostly on schools and subject areas in greatest need of highly skilled teachers.

For example, New York, one of the winners, wrote that it would use part of its $700 million grant to set up a $30 million fund designed to reward teachers and principals who choose to work in schools in areas most in need.

Eighteen states proposed pilot programs through which to develop performance-pay models that later would be Implemented statewide. Of the pilot group, Georgia, Maryland, Hawaii, and Rhode Island received grants.

Nine states proposed granting LEAs discretion to implement performance compensation programs free from state rules and mandates. Of those, only Massachusetts won a grant.

**Performance Pay Lauded**

Lindsey Burke, a policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, says performance pay is superior to the current, union-mandated model of paying teachers merely on the basis of seniority.

“Performance pay rewards teachers based on effectiveness and a teacher’s capacity to improve student learning,” Burke explained. “Not only would performance pay better compensate high-performing teachers, it would allow school districts to target resources more efficiently.”

Neil McCluskey, associate director of education policy at the Cato Institute, says performance or merit pay is “almost a no-brainer.”

“If I were running a company I would certainly reward employees based on their performance,” McCluskey said. “But it’s very hard to do that effectively in public schooling, where everything must be done bureaucratically and where there are no customers taking their money from schools that don’t work.”

“Where there is no free market, performance pay will do little good,” McCluskey added.

**Dollars Were ‘Main Driver’**

Burke says the Obama administration deserves credit for pushing states to include performance-pay proposals in their applications, but she says the administration probably undermined that objective by insisting on “buy-in” from teacher unions.

“I think many states genuinely want to implement reforms such as merit pay, but when the administration put such a high priority on ‘stakeholder buy-in’ in the application process, teachers unions were able to set the high-water mark for reform, which has probably blunted more substantial reform efforts,” Burke said.

McCluskey says the states would have implemented merit pay regardless of Race to the Top, but the lure of federal aid acted as an incentive.

“Clearly the main driver—or at least what put merit pay over the top—in most states was the pursuit of [Race to the Top] dollars,” McCluskey said.

‘**Forced Conversion**’

Regardless of the outcome, McCluskey says Race to the Top was a step in the wrong direction for the states.

“For one thing, all the changes that have been made are largely motivated by pursuit of federal bucks, not real reformist desire,” McCluskey said. “It’s a forced conversion.”

“Many of the changes have been cosmetic, altering a few things around the edges but doing little to enable real change,” McCluskey explained. “It’s lifting charter caps when charters face much bigger obstacles, or eliminating some barriers to meaningful teacher evaluations while doing nothing to actually get good evaluations.”

McCluskey warns the real legacy of Race to the Top may be unconstitutional federal overreach in education policy. Citing states’ rapid embrace of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, McCluskey issued a dire prediction.

“It could very well be the final nail in the coffin of locally controlled education and the beginning of a uniform federal schooling system,” McCluskey said. “That’s the last thing we already stagnant, monopolistic education system needs.”

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New Mexico Targets Charter Schools for Budget Cuts

By Rob Goszkowski

Funding for New Mexico's 80 charter schools is under scrutiny by the state education department as state legislators weigh difficult budget cuts.

Schools across the Cactus State are facing a 3 percent across-the-board reduction in funding for the 2011 fiscal year. But charter schools could face greater restrictions if legislators adopt the recommendations of a Legislative Finance Committee report.

Based on the recommendations, legislators are considering a freeze on new charters “until the application and renewal process has increased rigor, monitoring and oversight and charter schools are closed on the basis of performance.” Currently, 16 new charters are awaiting approval from one of the state’s two charter authorizers.

The legislature also may prohibit charter schools from obtaining funds under the state’s “small schools” program and could consider imposing growth thresholds on existing charter schools.

The state education department also recommends lawmakers limit or cut lease-assistance funds to charter schools.

Charters’ Affordability Disputed

“We certainly have opponents to charter schools, and certainly this report is going to make those opponents happy,” said Lisa Grover of the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools.

The New Mexico School Board Association opposes funding charter schools unless the money for traditional public schools stays the same even if students leave. The group has called for a moratorium on new charters.

“It doesn’t make sense to be funding two separate types of school systems,” said Joe Guillen, the association’s president. “The argument is that in good economic times it’s nice to have two homes or two cars, but when you can’t afford it, it doesn’t make sense. We should not continue an experiment that for the most part, has not worked.”

Says Students Need Choices

Ellen Moore, principal of Los Puentes Charter School in Albuquerque, says she has heard that argument before. “I understand the perception—there’s a limited amount of money and it has to get cut up so many ways,” said Moore.

“But it’d be a mistake to say ‘charters don’t work, send everybody back.’ Our school is a better match for young men and women transitioning from juvenile corrections or expulsion into our small charter designed to handle that population as opposed to sending them back to an Albuquerque public school with two thousand kids,” Moore said.

“In New Mexico there are close to 14,000 students in charter schools, and what that says to me is that for whatever reason a traditional public school did not work for them.”

ELLEN MOORE, PRINCIPAL
LOS Puentes CHARTER SCHOOL

Definitions of Success

Guillen claims charter schools are not working in New Mexico.

“A quick review of the Adequate Yearly Performance results indicate that about 15 percent are doing better and the rest are doing the same or worse than public schools,” said Guillen. He agrees with the education department’s recommendations that the state put charters under increased oversight and shut down poor performers.

“The current standards are very general, and they need to be nailed down quite a bit,” Guillen said.

Moore agrees charter schools should be held accountable for maintaining rigorous standards, “but not necessarily based on test scores, because you have to look at their specific niche.

“My students’ test scores aren’t going to show their success,” Moore explained. “But my graduation rates and short-cycle assessments are going to show it.”

Limited Moratorium Supported

The proposed moratorium has some support from both sides.

“I think the authorizer should be scrutinizing the function of that charter school in the community,” said Moore. “For example, Taos has only 5,000 residents and four charter schools, and that seems like a lot.”

Current state law allows charters to benefit from the state’s “small schools” adjustment, which some charter opponents find especially irksome. Because New Mexico is predominantly rural, the state provides additional funding for schools with fewer than 500 students and small tax bases. The Legislative Finance Committee noted some charter schools receive as much as 45 percent of their funding through the small schools adjustment.

“‘It’s like they’re taking full advantage of it,’” Guillen complained.

Additional Funding Concerns

But charter backers say the adjustment is essential for keeping charter schools running in New Mexico.

“I’ve heard that as many as 80 percent of charters would close without the adjustment,” said Moore. The New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools says the number may be closer to 90 percent.

Moore said her school would struggle without the adjustment. “We have to take security into account and keep the classes small, among other safeguards, because of the nature of the students,” Moore said. “Reducing the staff to just a principal and a couple teachers could result in a nightmare on your hands.”

Lease assistance grants are another crucial line item for small charter schools. The Legislative Finance Committee found the schools receive, on average, 26 percent more funding per student than traditional school districts. In a few isolated instances, the committee found some charter operators benefited financially from expensive lease agreements.

The legislature is not expected to act on the report’s recommendations until January, when newly elected members are sworn in.

Rob Goszkowski (rogoszkowski@gmail.com) writes from San Francisco, California.
Indiana Increases Dual-Credit Classes

Administrators cite $10 mil. in tuition savings, accelerated learning

By Joy Pavelski

Indiana school administrators say families could save at least $10 million in college tuition costs following a 27 percent increase in dual-credit enrollment last year as more high school students take tougher classes to save time and money in college.

Indiana’s department of education is in the first year of a three-year initiative to redesign its college-level career and technical offerings.

The state is expanding “a career pathway that will transition students from two years of study in high school where they’d typically earn 18 to 24 college credits, then transition into that program at our institution and maybe finish it in a year,” explained John Newby, assistant vice provost for K-12 Initiatives at Ivy Tech Community College. Ivy Tech is the system of community colleges that works with local teachers to form and accredit the classes.

Dual-credit classes must meet college standards for content, materials, and testing. Like Advanced Placement classes, they count toward both a high school and a college diploma.

Of 316,000 Indiana high school students last year, 21,126 took dual-credit classes, according to state records. They earned more than 100,000 college credit hours.

“With young people today, everything happens at such a fast pace that to give them this head start on college is a benefit, and they see it that way,” said Cindy Frey, assistant director of the Walker Career Center in Indianapolis, which enrolled 712 dual-credit students last year. “The teachers think it’s just a no-brainer, because it’s what they’re teaching anyway.

“For parents, any time a student can get college credit at no expense, oh yeah,” Frey enthused.

Taxpayers already pay for public and charter schools, and Ivy Tech is a publicly funded community college. The partnership thus saves time and money. Newby says, because students needn’t take the same class twice to progress toward a college diploma.

Indiana last year began requiring all of its 390 public high schools to offer at least two dual-credit classes to students pursuing one of two honors diplomas the state offers.

The more-than-80 currently available classes vary from technical offerings such as mechanics, computer-aided design, and pre-engineering, to courses such as economics and literature. Public, charter, and even state-accredited private schools may offer the classes through Ivy Tech.

“The intent of the state is to make sure that when our children graduate from high school they’re actually prepared for college,” said Leslie Hiner, vice president of programs and state relations for the Foundation for Educational Choice and board chairman of Irvington Community School, an Indiana charter school.

“Remediation rates across the country have skyrocketed over the years, and Indiana is no exception. It’s a terrible additional burden on taxpayers to essentially pay twice to educate students,” Hiner said. “So by offering dual credits and more opportunities for advanced placement classes in high school, it’s proving to be an excellent way to fully prepare students for college.”

Joy Pavelski (joy.pavelski@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.

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N.C. PTA Rakes in Tax Dollars as Parents Seek Alternatives

By Sara Burrows

The North Carolina Parent Teacher Association is becoming less popular among parents but more popular among politicians.

North Carolina parents are leaving the PTA by the thousands, opting to form independent parent teacher organizations. Some are fed up with the PTA’s political involvement—it partners with teacher unions to lobby against school choice—but many say they just want more bang for their buck.

The state General Assembly found NCPTA worthy of more than $1 million in dropout prevention grants over the past four years. The grants were given for NCPTA’s Parent Involvement Initiative. Parent involvement in the organization has declined steadily for 50 years.

The organization has lost one-third of its membership since 2001 and is only half the size it was in the 1960s. Its 188,000 members represent about 7 percent of the state’s parents with children in school.

Hasn’t Met Goals

NCPTA has received nearly $2 million in government funds since 2007. Tax dollars now make up about two-thirds of its operating budget.

In June the General Assembly appropriated $500,000 from its $15 million in dropout prevention funds to the PTA’s parent involvement program. It is the largest grant the organization has received so far. The spending was awarded with no application and no evidence the program had accomplished its goal the previous three years.

The goal of the Parent Involvement Initiative is to keep more kids in school by engaging parents in school activities. Its Web site lists the following successes:

• At Douglas Byrd Middle School in Cumberland County, parent clubs for Hispanic families helped 19 students pass reading and math tests.
• At West Hoke Middle School, home visits to at-risk students helped 18 students “improve” developmental scores.
• Home libraries were established for specially selected families at Anson Middle School in Anson County.

Volunteers Hired Full-Time

NCPTA recently hired six paid staff members—an executive director and five “parent involvement coordinators.”

Debra Horton, who served previously without pay as NCPTA president, created a paid position for herself—executive director—before her term expired in 2009. She since has hired five full-time staff members to do the work previously done by volunteers.

Horton said the full-timers were necessary because volunteers didn’t have time to make home visits, attend parent-teacher conferences, and conduct parent education workshops.

Also, they’ve built customized home libraries for 25 families in Hoke County and “several other counties,” Horton said.

Horton would not disclose how much the coordinators were paid. She also refuses to release her own salary.

Parent Seeks Volunteerism

Several frustrated parents, teachers, and principals interviewed for this story wished not to be identified because they feared retribution from either the NCPTA or the North Carolina Association of Educators, with which it is closely aligned.

One parent said she was “appalled” when she heard the PTA got $500,000 this year. “I’ve been scratching my head for the last year and a half trying to figure out what the PTA actually does,” she said.

As a board member at her child’s elementary school—where PTA membership dropped from 70 to 40 last year—she was in charge of PTA drives. People started asking her, “What does the PTA do for my child? Why should I join?”

This year she told the principal she’s not going to participate in the membership drive. Instead she’s going to promote volunteerism.

“People don’t understand that you don’t have to be a member of the PTA to volunteer in your child’s classroom,” she said.

Lawmakers Justify Grants

This year’s bill appropriating dropout prevention funds to the NCPTA had 22 sponsors. Only four answered phone calls or e-mails asking why the PTA deserved the money.

Rep. Rick Glazier (D-Cumberland) said the House Appropriations Committee wanted to give a larger portion of the dropout prevention grants to “programs that have shown capacity for replication, good outcomes, and that are research-based or have substantial research-based components adapted to North Carolina.”

The PTA met those conditions, he said. Asked for documentation, Glazier suggested contacting either Horton or Gerry Hancock, a former state senator turned lobbyist for NCPTA.

Rep. Douglas Yongue (D-Scotland) said the PTA could prevent dropouts by educating parents. “They have strong parent organizations in Singapore, and the dropout rate there is almost zero.”

China, India, and Denmark pay parents to attend school meetings, Yongue added. “Plus, you won’t find an overweight student or faculty member in those countries.”

Rep. William Brisson (D-Bladen) said he cosponsored the bill because his rural district had “a lot of high school dropouts” and he assumed some schools in his district were affiliated with NCPTA. The Bladen County superintendent says there are no PTA schools in the area.

PTA vs. PTO

Brisson’s confusion could have been related to the distinction between PTOs and the PTA.

Founder of PTOToday.com Tim Sullivan said parents often refer to their school’s parent-teacher organizations as the PTA, even though 75 percent of these groups nationwide are unaffiliated.

Sullivan said some parents want out of the PTA because of the organization’s left-leaning political activism and its close ties to the National Education Association, but more often parents just want to keep money in their schools and spend it as they see fit.

Sara Burrows (sburrows@carolinajournal.com) is associate editor of Carolina Journal, published by the John Locke Foundation in Raleigh, North Carolina, in which this article first appeared. Reprinted with permission.
Public Opposes Greater Federal Control of Education

By Neal McCluskey

Most Americans do not want federal government bureaucrats seizing education reins from the states, according to the latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll on public attitudes toward education. The poll also found widespread public anxiety about school funding, as state and local governments continue to struggle with budget shortfalls.

Phi Delta Kappa Executive Director William Bushaw said the annual survey, now in its 42nd year, clearly shows Americans believe proper authority over education “resides within state governments” and not in Washington, DC.

Two-thirds of U.S. adults surveyed said state and local governments should have the lead role in setting education policy. At the same time, however, four of five adults surveyed said local school boards should not set education standards.

The poll also found a drop in public support for President Barack Obama’s education agenda. Just 34 percent of respondents gave Obama’s education policies a grade of A or B, down from 45 percent in 2009.

Insufficient Funds Highlighted

Bushaw also highlighted public worries about insufficient funding for local schools, which he said had been growing “since the start of the millennium.” Of the public’s concerns for public schools, 36 percent of U.S. adults ranked funding first, followed by poor discipline and school overcrowding.

The 2010 poll reiterated earlier findings that most Americans think positively about their local schools but give low grades to the nation’s public schools generally.

About half of the poll’s respondents gave their community’s schools a grade of A or B, virtually unchanged from 2005. The percentage of respondents giving high marks to public schools nationally dipped from 20 percent to 18 percent.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said the high grades for local schools were “very much contrary” to the grades the public gave the nation’s schools overall.

Domenech says there’s evidence dissatisfaction with local schools might be growing. While the percentage giving top grades inched up, the percentage of U.S. adults who graded their local public schools with a C, D, or F also rose, from 43 to 49 percent. A seven-point drop in respondents who answered “I don’t know” allowed the favorable and poor grades to rise simultaneously, Domenech explained.

Public Backs Merit Pay

Another key finding of the 2010 poll showed substantial public support for teacher merit pay, which teacher unions vehemently oppose.

Seven in 10 Americans say a teacher should be paid “on the basis of his or her work,” with 72 percent of parents with children in public schools supporting the idea. The poll also found a sharp increase in support for tying teacher pay to student achievement, with 73 percent saying pay should be “somewhat” or “very closely” tied to test scores, up from 60 percent in 2000.

School Choice Absent

Missing from the survey were any questions about private school choice, which Bushaw said those questions haven’t been asked “in about three years.”

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington, DC, said the absence of controversial questions about school choice should be seen as an asset rather than a liability.

“There’s little doubt that PDK removed any questions about private school choice because those questions caused enormous controversy and tainted the PDK poll’s validity,” Allen said. “The questions were poorly worded and misleading, helping PDK get the results they wanted to fit their positive narrative about the quality of public schools.”

Although Allen says the 2010 poll is an improvement over previous years, she criticized the use of vignettes from teachers union leaders and other education establishment voices. “You get the impression that PDK isn’t trying to produce a public opinion survey but a glossy advocacy piece,” she said.

Neal McCluskey (nmccluskey@cato.org) is associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.
Board OKs Texas Charter School Facilities Funding

By Sarah McIntosh

Texas is one step closer to tapping the state’s education trust fund to help charter schools secure permanent facilities.

The state legislature and Texas attorney general are reviewing a new policy the state Board of Education recently approved over the summer, which would authorize the state to buy or construct new schools and lease the properties to nonprofit charter organizations.

The controversial plan narrowly passed with a 7-6 vote, and it could be reversed when a new state board is seated after the November general election.

The Texas School Fund, established in 1854 with a $10 million federal grant, is a $22 billion endowment that receives annual revenues between $160 million and $200 million from land sales, mineral lease royalties, and interest. The state board of education oversees the fund, which distributes about $1.2 billion a year to local school districts.

State Board of Education member David Bradley (R-Beaumont), who co-sponsored the measure, says the board could allocate up to $100 million for charter school facilities from the fund.

**Charters at Disadvantage**

“Traditional schools get local property tax dollars and money from the state for operations and maintenance, and localities can enact bond measures for facilities,” Bradley explained. “The permanent school fund guarantees those bonds to help the district. This helps them by giving them a triple-A [bond] rating, which saves them money on interest and insurance.

“On the other hand, charter schools get their funding from the state based on enrollment. They can’t get facilities dollars from the state or through bonds. So they are at a disadvantage because they only get about 80 percent of the funding that traditional schools get. Plus, they aren’t able to use the [Permanent School Fund] to guarantee bonds,” Bradley said.

Bradley notes the state legislature hasn’t authorized funding for school facilities, charter or otherwise. With the state facing an estimated $11 billion to $18 billion budget deficit, the legislature is unlikely to act on school facilities in the next session, which convenes in 2011. Bradley’s proposal could allocate funds for charter facilities in the meantime.

**Authority Questioned**

The board’s decision drew opposition from some fiscal conservatives, including at least one candidate for the state school board.

“There is a substantial question whether the action was within the board’s authority, a question the attorney general will need to decide,” said Marsha Farney, a Republican candidate for the state board vying to replace incumbent Republican Cynthia Dunbar, who is retiring.

“If the attorney general were to conclude that the board has a role to play in this area, I still believe the board should consider the matter with caution,” Farney added.

“Our focus should be to take care that 100 percent of the Permanent School Fund investments are always working to receive the highest investment return for the public school children of Texas,” Farney said.

**Small Amount of Money**

Bradley says the board already has asked the attorney general’s office for an official opinion. He says he expects skeptics’ fears to be alleviated.

“First, this amount represents only about one-half of 1 percent of the total assets of the fund,” Bradley explained. “Second, it is a prudent investment. The money, of course, will only go to vetted charter schools that meet quality standards,” Bradley added. “It could be used to offer to help purchase existing facilities or to secure land to build a new facility. The title would be held by the state and leased back to the school. The expected rate of 4 3/4 to 5 percent guaranteed income from this investment is significant and less risky than current hedge fund investments.”

**‘Charters Broaden Choices’**

Bradley predicts a positive response to the board’s facilities plan from the legislature next year. “Leaders on the education committees have expressed support for the measure,” he said. “I hope that they will help to facilitate this program or they could take the lead and offer bond guarantee or facilities funding themselves.”

Bradley says he supports charter schools because every parent should be able to direct the education of their child.

“The wealthy can pay private school tuition. The middle class can afford to relocate to better school districts,” Bradley said. “But, the children who suffer are those whose families cannot afford these other options. Charter schools broaden the choices these families have.”

**Charter Operators ‘Optimistic’**

Josie Duckett, vice president of public and government relations at the Texas Charter Schools Association, hailed the board’s decision.

“Investing in charter schools is a smart idea for the future of Texas,” Duckett said. “We solidly support a plan that simultaneously benefits the state and the charter school movement.

“In many Texas communities, the local charter school presents a viable choice beyond the traditional public school and a private school,” Duckett said. “The distinct ability to offer tuition-free, quality options across our state absolutely empowers Texas families. Real choice means real chance.”

Duckett said the state aid would be a real boost for charter schools. “We are making do with our current circumstances, but charter school students deserve better than portable trailers, transformed grocery stores, or vacated churches,” she said.

Although the charter schools group would like to see more standalone facilities, Duckett said the legislature also could provide charter schools with greater access to existing public school facilities, particularly in districts with vacant schools or unused property.

Sarah McIntosh (mcintosh.sarah@gmail.com) is a constitutional scholar writing from Lawrence, Kansas.
Film Exposes Inconvenient Truths About Education

**FILM REVIEW**

Review by Matthew Ladner

Davis Guggenheim, winner of a 2006 Academy Award for *An Inconvenient Truth*, weighs in on the education reform debate with his new film, *Waiting for Superman*.

Center-right moviegoers might be inclined to dismiss Guggenheim for his association with Al Gore, but that would be a mistake. Guggenheim’s new film uses unimpeachable sources to make a powerful point about the need for effective change.

*Waiting for Superman* is an extremely moving documentary that derives its title from a story from Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone charter school.

Canada relates in the movie that one of the most disillusioning moments of his childhood came when he learned that Superman was not real. Canada noted Superman always protected the good people and ensured justice would prevail. As a young Geoffrey pondered the implications of a world without Superman, a deep fear overwhelmed him.

**Playing Rawls’ Lottery**

The unseen hero of *Waiting for Superman* is not a comic book character but the political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls, a Harvard professor whose thinking profoundly influenced the American center-left, advocated a provocative view of societal ethics.

Rawls created a thought experiment known as the “veil of ignorance”: Imagine you could restart the world, but you would have no knowledge of your starting point in your new life. You could be the brilliant child of a high-tech billionaire, or you could be born to a low-income single mother. Rawls argued that, under the veil of ignorance, the present “you” would want to leave a path out of poverty for the future “you,” just in case you lost the cosmic lottery.

Rawls’ views evolved over time and were subject to many interpretations, but the passion for equality of opportunity resonates strongly throughout his writings.

His unseen hand moves throughout *Waiting for Superman* as the film focuses not on theoretical lotteries but on real lotteries held by several high-performing charter schools. In instances where student applications exceed available places, state laws typically require charter schools to select children randomly for admission.

**Beyond the Inner City**

*Waiting for Superman* follows several students seeking to escape underperforming inner-city schools in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The filmmakers weave heartbreaking personal drama into an overall presentation of the flaws of the nation’s education system. Together, these themes are incredibly powerful and mutually reinforcing.

To their credit, the filmmakers examine educational issues outside the easy pickings of dysfunctional inner-city schools. They also spend some time following a middle-income charter school applicant from a suburban district school reeking of money but offering only academic mediocrity. This portion of the film drew from the “Not as Good as You Think” research of the Pacific Research Institute, and it ably demonstrates the pervasive nature of our K-12 education crisis.

Guggenheim skillfully weaves short interviews with experts such as Michelle Rhee, Howard Fuller, Lance Izumi, and Canada into the narrative of the film. As the documentary reaches its conclusion, the cameras fix on the faces of the students and parents waiting in quiet desperation at the lotteries. More and more numbers are called, and the odds against the protagonists grow longer and longer.

It feels incredibly wrong to have the future hopes and dreams of children decided in such a fashion.

**Urgent Need for Change**

*Waiting for Superman* poses a stark Rawlsian question: If you were born as a disadvantaged child, would you want to be assigned to a school based on your ZIP code regardless of its record of academic failure? If inner-city schools aren’t good enough for you in theory, they aren’t good enough for disadvantaged children in practice.

There is no Superman—only us. As this film vividly shows, our children need the adults to pull our heads out of the sand and get about the urgent business of improving the nation’s embarrassing dysfunctional system of education. They have been waiting far too long already.

Matthew Ladner (mladner@goldwater.org) is vice president of research for the Goldwater Institute, a Phoenix-based independent government watchdog, and coauthor of Report Card on American Education: Ranking State K-12 Performance, Progress and Reform (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2010).

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The filmmakers weave heartbreaking personal drama into an overall presentation of the flaws of the nation’s education system. Together, these themes are incredibly powerful and mutually reinforcing.”
Some Districts Closing Black-White Achievement Gap

Exit exams put New Jersey’s high graduation rate in question

By Lindsey Burke

Certain school districts across the United States are doing exceptionally well at raising the academic achievement of African-American male students, a new study by the Schott Foundation for Public Education reports.

But in singing the praises of monopoly public schools the study may overstate the successes of students in New Jersey, where minority students have been using a “special review assessment” (SRA) to avoid the state’s high school exit exam requirement.

The report, “Yes We Can: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males,” lauds New Jersey for raising academic attainment, singling out Newark’s schools for their high graduation rates and progress in closing the black-white achievement gap.

“New Jersey’s commitment to implement its Abbott plan and ensure equitable resources to all students proves that it can be done at the state level—as New Jersey is the only state with a significant Black male population with a greater than 65 percent high school graduation rate,” the reports notes.

The “Abbott plan” is the result of a series of state supreme court rulings in Abbott v. Burke, which require the state to equalize funding among urban and suburban school districts.

Special Review ‘a Scam’

Although the Schott report estimates the graduation rate for black male students in Newark stands at 75 percent, that figure may be inflated by the process though which students are deemed eligible for graduation.

Derrell Bradford, executive director of Excellent Education for Everyone (E3) in New Jersey, notes about 13,000 predominantly African-American students have used the special review assessment process to graduate after failing one or both portions of the standard high school exit exam as many as three times.

Bradford argues the Schott study suffers by not disclosing what he describes as a testing scam in the Garden State.

“The study does provide an important national talking point about the historically low achievement visited upon black boys who attend monopoly school systems,” Bradford said.

“Not exposing the SRA/Alternate route issues in New Jersey borders on criminal. The truth here requires more than just taking the word of state education bureaucracies with a long history of self-interest,” Bradford said. “Everyone in New Jersey understands the scam the SRA has visited on black students. Why didn’t the study’s authors?”

Money Equals Achievement?

The Newark school district spends an estimated $22,000 per pupil per year. The high per-pupil expenditures in Newark have been worthwhile, Holzman argues.

“Sending a child to private schools like Groton or Phillips Exeter costs $40,000 to $50,000 per year. If spending had no correlation with academic achievement, it is doubtful that these schools could charge parents those amounts,” Holzman said.

“The Newark academic outcomes are attributable to the changes that were put into place to make the academic opportunities for Newark students similar to those for students in New Jersey’s highly successful suburban districts,” Holzman explained. “The result is worth the cost—more children have the opportunities for better lives; college attendance is up, and crime rates are down.”

Spending ‘Far from Reliable’

Bradford says high spending matters less than how the money is spent.

“Instead, you’ve got the same muddling system, just twice as expensive as everywhere else. It’s not what you spend, it’s what you spend it on that matters,” Bradford said.

“I think we know that spending isn’t unimportant, but it’s far from a reliable predictor,” Bradford said. “Newark public school tuition is elite private school tuition in many places in the country. Combine that with an average teacher salary of near $80,000, and you should have the best urban system in America.”

‘Are There Choices?’

Bradford criticized the Schott report for downplaying the need to give inner-city parents more educational options.

“You can’t use a hammer to fix everything. The study lays on the one true solution—a mythical urban public education monopoly—to reform itself and finally get about the business of equal opportunity,” Bradford said.

“The study, and so many like it, expects us to not recognize what’s important: Are the teachers good, and are there choices when they aren’t? Until we get there, all this other stuff is just paper,” Bradford added.

Lindsey Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is a policy analyst in domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation.

INTERNET INFO

School Convergence Presents Policy Opportunity

By Bruce S. Cooper

The lines separating private and public, nonsectarian and religious K-12 education are blurring, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity for legislators and policymakers.

States are regularly passing voucher programs, tax credits, and charter school laws that in some cases work to “privatize” public education while making private and religious schools more “public.”

A voucher, of course, allows parents to choose a religious or private school, and the charter school policy helps religious groups open schools with Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant identities. The U.S. Supreme Court has said voucher programs are perfectly constitutional.

Next Step: Religious Charters?

Lately, however, for state lawmakers, a new practical and legal question has arisen: Should religious groups be given full state funding for charter schools embodying their beliefs and values?

Already Florida has four predominantly Jewish charters affiliated with the Ben Gamla organization; Minnesota has the Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy (TiZA), affiliated with several Muslim groups; and Archbishop Donald Wuerl has converted eight failing Catholic parish schools into charter schools in Washington, DC. Similarly, the Greek Orthodox community in Brooklyn, New York formed the Hellenic Classical Charter School on the site of a former Greek Orthodox school.

These charter schools often teach the language of the religious group (e.g., modern Hebrew, Greek, or Arabic). TiZA actually stops its classes at noon for prayers. The question for state and federal legislators, then, is: Do children and society benefit from the mingling of public support and dollars with private and religious values, languages, and practices?

Charter schools under religious banners are perhaps the best of both worlds. Public support can mean more help for all children and schools, based on individual need and public goals. And private religious education can build stronger values, answer human concerns, and foster spiritual development.

Decades of Precedent

Precedent extends to the “legalization” of private religious schools in 1925, in a landmark Supreme Court case originating in Oregon. Gov. Walter Pierce (D) attempted to make public education compulsory through a successful state constitutional amendment, essentially outlawing private and religious schools.

The Catholic Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary joined with the Hill Military Academy in Portland to sue the state. They won in the landmark Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925)—establishing a modern Magna Carta for private and religious education in the United States that remains in force to this day.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002) affirmed the legality in Cleveland, Ohio of giving public, tax-based vouchers to families who could in turn “cash in” their vouchers in a private or religious school of choice without violating the “separation of church and state.” Zelman thus affirmed the spirit and letter of the Pierce decision.

We’ve done a better job in recent years of letting religious groups exercise their educational rights and responsibilities. Perhaps as education reform enters its next phase, the motto should be: “In God we trust!”

Bruce S. Cooper Ph.D. (bruce.cooper@mac.com) is professor of school leadership and policy in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. His books include Blurring the Lines: The Rise of Religious Charter Schools (Information Age Publishing, forthcoming) with Janet Mulvey and Arthur Maloney.

"Lawmakers should not view private or religious schooling as competitors but instead as complementary to the traditional public responsibility in education ..."
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The Heritage Foundation

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