Bipartisan Effort Underway to Revive DC Voucher Program

By Lindsey Burke

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act, a bill to restore and expand funding for the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program through 2017. HR 471, introduced by House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), passed largely along party lines, by a vote of 225-195. Nine Republicans joined Democrats voting no. The bill faces an uncertain future in the Senate, where it has bipartisan support.

Walker Would Expand Milwaukee Vouchers

By Lindsey Burke

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) would make school reform, including an unprecedented expansion of Milwaukee’s two-decade-old voucher program, the centerpiece of his budget plan for the coming fiscal year. Walker in March signed into law a budget repair bill limiting collective bargaining for public employees, including teachers. While the bill to help bridge a $4 billion deficit garnered unprecedented media attention, the governor’s FY 2011-12 budget proposal has received comparatively little coverage. Under Walker’s proposal, K-12 education programs would receive a 5.5 percent reduction in state funding, or

Obama Seeks More Ed Spending

Congress has proposed cutting more than $5 billion from the U.S. Department of Education, but the White House countered with a plan that would increase spending.

Idaho Enacts Sweeping Reforms

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter (R) has signed two bills to phase out teacher tenure and phase in performance pay and limit public-employee union collective bargaining.

Ky. House Scuttles Charter Law

After a vote by the Kentucky Senate to allow a small number of charter schools, Democratic leaders in the state house called the bill “dead on arrival.”

Georgia Looks at iPads vs. Books

Georgia legislators are considering a pilot program to replace textbooks in the state’s public middle schools with iPads and other electronic readers.
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Please remit all proposals to JSC.Editor@utsa.edu
School Reform News

President Barack Obama’s budget for the 2012 fiscal year would exempt the U.S. Department of Education from any cuts. The White House announced cuts across the federal government, but the Office of Management and Budget says, “K-12 education receives one of the only significant funding increases in the 2012 budget.”

The House of Representatives in late February countered the president’s proposal with a vote on a continuing budget resolution to cut some $5 billion from the federal education budget.

Adding to Previous Increases

Under the Obama budget, funding for the Education Department would increase to $77.4 billion. Notable increases include $900 million for a new Race to the Top grant program; $1.4 billion in competitive grants for preschool, K-12, and higher education reforms; and $350 million for a new Early Learning Challenge Fund.

The budget request also increases by 6.9 percent, to $26.5 billion, spending on programs funded under No Child Left Behind.

Obama’s budget would build on decades of increased federal funding for education, representing a 57 percent inflation-adjusted increase in the Department of Education’s budget since 2000.

The increases come in addition to the $100 billion stimulus “bonus” the Education Department received in 2009, and on top of the one-time $10 billion “edujobs” funding the president approved in August 2010.

Trillions ‘Helped Politicians’

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says the administration’s proposed education budget increases are unlikely to lead to any improvements in academic achievement or other educational outcomes.

Coulson in February testified before the House Education and Workforce Committee on the impact of the federal government’s growing role in education. Coulson said the FY 2012 budget would compound the inefficiency of federal education spending.

“I'm sure people will see the president’s budget as the definition of insanity—doing the same thing that’s consistently failed in the past with the hope that it will magically work this time,” Coulson said.

“But that’s not quite right,” he added. “Two trillion dollars in federal spending has certainly failed to do any good for America’s children, but it has helped the careers of the politicians who have spent it, winning them the fierce support of public school employee unions.

“The question for the American people is, how much longer will they allow federal officials to squander their money for political gain?” Coulson said.

Budget Hiked, Scholarships Cut

Robert Enlow, president of the Foundation for Educational Choice in Indiana, pointed to what he described as hypocrisy in the president’s budget.

“The education budget decimates Opportunity Scholarships yet continues to aggrandize the federal government at a time when the power and money should be with the states,” Enlow said.

K-12 education isn’t the only area to receive a significant boost in federal spending. Higher education funding, particularly funding for Pell Grants, will receive a substantial increase if the president’s proposal is enacted.

Matthew Denhart, administrative director for the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, says the FY 2012 budget increases will not solve the underlying college cost problem.

“President Obama’s FY 2012 budget proposal to a large extent protects funding for higher education financial aid programs, most notably Pell Grants. While the Pell Grant program has helped millions of Americans pursue a higher education, missing is any significant measure of accountability for those funds,” Denhart explained.

“Graduation rate data for Pell Grant recipients does not exist,” Denhart said. “Furthermore, many of America’s public universities admit a shamefully low percentage of Pell Grant students. Harvard and Yale both have a higher proportion of Pell Grant students than does the University of Virginia,” Denhart continued.

Higher Ed Exempted

Denhart says the president’s budget fails to seriously address the growing cost problem in higher education.

“His proposal protects several financial aid programs that have contributed to the sector’s cost explosion by funneling more and more taxpayer money to institutions without requiring them to show that the money is being well-spent,” Denhart said.

“Until the underlying incentives facing higher education institutions are addressed, financial aid programs will continue to serve as a costly band-aid,” he added.

Lindsey Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.
Stymied Ky. Charter Advocates Pledge New Bill in 2012

By Jim Waters

The third legislative attempt in three years to bring charter schools to Kentucky has foundered as the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives refused to hear House Bill 103 during the current session of the Kentucky General Assembly.

The bill by state Rep. Brad Montell (R-Shelbyville) proposed a five-year pilot program and capped the number of charter schools at 20.

A bill giving local school boards complete control of the charter authorizing process passed the Senate during the first week of this year's legislative session. However, House leaders deemed Senate Bill 3, sponsored by Senate President and gubernatorial candidate David Williams (R-Burkesville), “dead on arrival.”

More Authorizers Sought

Leading charter advocates say they prefer Montell's bill because it allows more authorizers and gives charter schools needed autonomy.

"Someone may apply for a charter, it is denied by the local board, then it is appealed to the Department of Education and they prolong and prolong and prolong the process," wrote Charity Edmonston, president of Parents for Improving Kentucky Education (PIKE), on the Jefferson Review, a libertarian Web site covering Bluegrass State issues. “Local boards cannot be the only authorizers of a charter; ... they will simply fail.”

Senators, however, argued restricting authorizing decisions to local school boards would allay rural lawmakers’ fears about outside authorizers diminishing local leaders' ability to make critical decisions.

Misunderstanding Noted

All of this shows the continuing communication challenge about charter schools in the commonwealth, said Montell, who plans to introduce similar legislation in 2012.

“Yet I’ve heard [rural legislators say] ‘How would you like a charter school in your community?’ It may be good for the inner cities but not for our small communities,” Montell said. “Such a response gets back to a lack of understanding of how charter schools operate—that they are market-driven and if a community does not want that charter school, or there’s no support for it, there’s not going to be one there.”

Pastor Jerry Stephenson, coordinator of the Kentucky chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, said a productive educational effort during the months after the current legislative session ends will be critical to success in next year's General Assembly.

“We're going to be educating the general public a great deal, and particularly the African-American families, on what impact this system is having on low-income and minority children,” Stephenson said. “That’s where we’ve got to put our energy.”

‘Look for Opportunities’

Kentucky remains one of only 11 states without a charter school law. Stephenson cites important gains made over the past year, including hearings by the bipartisan Interim Joint Committee on Education in August followed by the senate’s vote to pass SB 3 in early January.

Between sessions, “we have to look for opportunities to get our legislators to understand that we’re not here to kill public education but we’re here to enhance it, and that public charter schools will enhance the results in the total public education system,” Stephenson said.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
To Reform Higher Ed, 10 Principles Should Guide

By Richard Vedder and Matthew Denhart

American higher education suffers from rapidly escalating costs and poor student learning outcomes. Collectively, the United States spends $430 billion on higher education, the equivalent of 3 percent of total gross domestic product (GDP), an amount that exceeds the entire GDPs of several midsize European countries.

Yet, there is growing evidence that students at campuses across America are not succeeding. Nearly 40 percent of students fail to graduate with a bachelor’s degree within six years of first enrolling in college, and data suggest even those who do graduate often have trouble finding jobs that require college-level training.

With high costs and frightening outcomes, it is clear American higher education needs serious reform.

To guide this reform, The Heartland Institute has published a booklet we authored outlining “Ten Principles of Higher Education Reform.” This list is not exhaustive, but it does target several of higher education’s most pressing areas. Each of the principles is discussed briefly below.

Reduce Third Party Payments. When someone other than the customer is paying the bills, a producer has little incentive to cut costs or improve the quality of its product. With large government subsidies footing a significant part of the bill, this happens in both health care and in higher education. Ending government subsidies to higher education and removing tax breaks for third-party subsidization would more directly align the costs of higher education to the benefits of those who attend.

Fund Students, Not Institutions. Most third-party support for higher education assumes funds will be used to enhance the quality or reduce the cost of the undergraduate experience. Yet that assumption is often wrong. If subsidies were given directly to students, not schools, the balance of power would change. Students would gain the power to direct the subsidies to the schools that best serve their needs. Instead of going begging to state legislators, university presidents would have to pay more attention to the students themselves.

Increase Transparency. For a competitive higher education market to flourish, students, taxpayers, and policymakers need information about the quality and costs of the nation’s colleges and universities. Unfortunately, little information exists, and even less is made public, to show how colleges spend students’ tuition, how alumni fare in the job market, or even what students learn in college. State governments have a responsibility to collect and report the data needed to hold higher education’s leaders accountable for results.

Don’t Push College on Everyone. President Barack Obama’s goal of having the United States lead the world in college degree attainment by 2020 would require many more Americans to go to college. Yet, projections indicate the jobs forecast to have the greatest growth in the next decade do not require college-level training. Clearly, traditional four-year degrees are not the best option for everyone. Alternative postsecondary training programs may be more suitable for many.

Emphasize Instruction. Universities do many things that deviate from their twin missions of teaching students and conducting research. For example, they operate restaurant and lodging operations, conference centers, hospitals, entertainment enterprises (notably intercollegiate athletics), and recreational facilities such as golf courses and weight/conditioning operations.

Restructure University Ownership and Governance. Most U.S. universities are organized on a management model developed in the Middle Ages and essentially unchanged for more than a century. Committees often make decisions, with various interest groups possessing some limited sort of veto power forcing costly and illogical compromises. University management structures need to be simplified, which can be encouraged through student-centered aid and the consequent emphasis on delivering real educational value.

Raise Academic Standards. Low standards and grade inflation are damaging the educational quality of U.S. higher education institutions and creating a culture of mediocrity. Frightening evidence shows declining literacy among college graduates and suggests today’s students study for only 14 hours per week, down from 24 hours in 1961. Value-added measures of academic performance are needed, and third-party financial support should be dependent on colleges demonstrating they are positively adding to the learning, critical thinking skills, or other qualities expected in a college graduate.

Measure Institutional Success by Student Performance. Market forces drive companies to be evaluated by customers based on the cost and quality of their product. However, little information exists for customers to determine the quality of education a college provides, and a complicated financial aid system makes cost determination difficult. Introducing market principles into higher education will provide the necessary incentives to concentrate on making students’ financial investment pay off, which will encourage institutions to cut costs and operate more efficiently.

Reduce Barriers to Entry and Encourage Accreditation Reform. The cost of meeting accreditation standards is often very high, measured in millions of dollars. Yet, accreditation tends to be based on inputs—spending money—instead of outputs, the demonstrated proof that students are actually receiving a beneficial education. Reforming the accreditation system would allow more competitors to enter the higher education market and encourage institutions to compete based on cost and the value-added of their degrees.

Richard Vedder (vedder@ohio.edu) is director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity and distinguished professor of economics at Ohio University. Matthew Denhart (matthew.denhart@gmail.com) is administrative director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.
Idaho Gov. Otter Signs Sweeping School Reform Bills

By Ben DeGrow
A mid a rancorous atmosphere that included vandalism against Idaho’s top public school administrator and threats of violence against lawmakers, Gov. Butch Otter (R) signed a pair of bills aimed at a comprehensive overhaul of the state’s elementary and secondary schools.

Senate Bills 1108 and 1110 both passed Idaho’s upper chamber by 20-15 votes, with eight Republicans and the entire Democratic caucus in opposition. The bills passed by large margins in the House. Together the legislation would phase out teacher tenure and phase in performance pay, include student achievement and parental input in professional evaluations, and limit the scope of public-employee union collective bargaining.

“It’s a great start, and it’s the beginning of where we need to go,” said Briana Le Claire, an education policy analyst for the Idaho Freedom Foundation. “The labor reform particularly will cause a lot more openness and transparency.”

‘Largest Step in 40 Years’
A third bill, Senate Bill 1113, was returned to the Senate’s education committee for technical changes. The bill would modify the state’s school funding formula to provide greater local spending flexibility. Funds would be available from slightly increased class sizes to invest in classroom technology and upgrade teacher base pay. The bill initially cleared the committee by a 5-4 vote.

“In the education arena, this is the largest step that’s ever been attempted during my tenure in the state legislature,” said Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde (R-Coeur d’Alene), who has served since 2001. “Some would suggest it’s the largest reform attempt in 40 years.”

Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna has championed the reforms, dubbed “Students Come First.”

“The more people understand the facts that are in this plan, and separate the facts from the myths, the more support we get,” Luna said. “People recognize that what we’re doing is not financially sustainable.”

The Senate vote was the largest obstacle in the reform process. “We’re not taking anything for granted,” said Luna. “But we knew the high water mark was the Senate, which is why we started there.”

Uncivil Tactics
Two incidents directly affecting Luna highlighted the intensity of opposition to reform. On February 12, a self-identified teacher angrily confronted Luna at his mother’s house. Two nights later, the superintendent’s truck was defaced with graffiti and its tires slashed while parked in the driveway of his Nampa home.

“Obviously, the opponents of this, some of them have crossed the line,” Luna said.

The reform plan’s leading antagonists in the Idaho Education Association issued a statement denouncing the vandalism and stating the union had “urged members to act with civility and professionalism.”

Some reform opponents posted on Facebook the home addresses and phone numbers of lawmakers backing the plan, urging others to confront them or pressure their neighbors.

Le Claire says the tactics are symptomatic of a larger trend. “Judging from the activity in Wisconsin, it’s typical union politics,” she said.

The opposition in Idaho has been muted in comparison with Wisconsin, where union demonstrators and paid protestors occupied the capitol building for weeks.

“The debate thus far in this body has been civil, and I would not expect anything less than that as this moves forward,” said Goedde.

Upgrading Technology
Initial resistance to the reform plan centered on Luna’s proposal to provide taxpayer-funded laptop computers to all high school freshmen.

“Early on there was a perception we were going to give 9th graders laptops, and they were going to go home into their bedrooms and find inappropriate places on the Internet,” said Goedde. “That has been fairly well dispelled.”

Goedde says the proposal addresses those concerns by leaving authority to local school trustees to set policies on laptop use.

At least one group is urging lawmakers to expand digital learning. The Idaho Freedom Foundation sponsored a visit from high-profile consultant Tom Vander Ark to explain the sweeping recommendations of the national Digital Learning Council.

“We hope that he can give the legislature an overall picture of what digital learning is doing in other states, and how Idaho can get there,” said Le Claire.

Ben DeGrow (ben@12i.org) is a policy analyst for the Independence Institute in Golden, Colorado.

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“The debate thus far in this body has been civil, and I would not expect anything less than that as this moves forward.”

JOHN GOEDDE
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN COEUR D’ALENE, IDAHO
By Ben Boychuk

In an apparent policy reversal, California State Board of Education President Michael Kirst announced plans to accelerate the timetable for approving permanent regulations for the state’s landmark Parent Empowerment Act, also known as the Parent Trigger.

Kirst says the board’s April 21 meeting would be devoted exclusively to discussing final rules governing the 2010 law. He indicated a working group formed in February by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson should have recommendations for the board by early April.

Temporary Rules Extended

“The board will engage in a thoughtful process to develop regulatory guidance that will allow parents and school districts to make full use of the Parent Empowerment law,” Kirst said, reading from a prepared statement.

“I applaud the parents who traveled to Sacramento and testified before the board,” Kirst added, referring to more than 100 parents from Southern California who traveled overnight by bus to speak before the board on behalf of the law. “Parental involvement is a key element for the success of all students. I know that their input will help guide the board in its work on this issue.”

The board also voted 10-1 to extend temporary regulations the board passed last year for an additional 90 days. Patricia Rucker, chief lobbyist for the California Teachers Association, was the sole dissenting vote.

Reportedly Three Dozen Petitions

Under California’s law, if at least half of the eligible parents at a failing school sign a petition, the school district must adopt one of a handful of reform strategies: shut down the school and allow students to enroll in higher-performing public schools nearby; convert the school into an independent charter; or implement the “turnaround,” “transformation,” or “alternative governance” models of reform set forth by federal Race to the Top regulations.

“The meeting on February 9 was a learning and listening session for the board,” Kirst said. “As such, the board took no action on regulations nor did the board support legislation to amend the Parent Empowerment law.”

Although there is no official count, Sherry Griffith of the Association of California School Administrators told the board as many as three dozen parent petitions may be circulating in districts throughout the state. State law caps the number of schools that may be “triggered” at 75.

The first Parent Trigger petition by parents from the Los Angeles city of Compton was rejected last month by the school board, which cited technical violations. A lawsuit by parents against the school district is pending in Los Angeles Superior Court.

‘Fifth Intervention’ Questioned

New board member Carl Cohn, former superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District, pointed to a section of the Parent Trigger law referring to alternate governance as a possible “fifth intervention” districts could employ in response to a parent petition.

“Hypothetically, I could say, as superintendent of Long Beach Unified, I am personally going to supervise this school,” Cohn said. “That could be an appropriate response under this statute.”

Debbie Statlin, a parent from the Los Angeles suburb of Sunland, said the fifth option worried her. “That should only be available if parents want it, not for a superintendent to insert himself and override parents,” she told the board.

Griffith, however, said alternate governance held “great promise” for schools with elected school-site councils, where parents advise administrators.

Parent Trigger Legislation in Other States

**Colorado**

The Colorado House Education Committee on March 14 voted down the Rocky Mountain State’s proposed Parent Trigger law. HB 11-1270, by freshman state Rep. Don Beezley (R-Broomfield), would have empowered 51 percent of parents at a failing school to petition to either close the school or convert it to a charter or special innovation school.

Two Republicans, including freshman state Rep. Robert Ramirez (R-Westminster) and Education Committee Chairman Tom Massey (R-Poncha Springs), joined six Democrats in voting against the bill, which was defeated 8-5.


**Texas**

Legislators in Texas introduced two parent empowerment bills for consideration. HB 3339 by state Rep. James White (R-Hillister) would let parents at a school graded “unacceptable” for two consecutive years petition to convert the school to an independent charter. Currently, 188 schools would qualify.

An early draft of White’s bill had included a provision allowing parents to obtain vouchers to send their children to a public or private school of their choice. The language was removed before White filed the bill on March 11.

HB 3466 by state Rep. Diane Patrick (R-Arlington) is similar to White’s bill in defining what schools would qualify for a petition. The language differs, however, in specifying how a school board may respond.

Bob Schoolfield, chairman of Texans for Parental Choice in Education, said Patrick’s legislation is “a fake parent trigger” because it gives school districts too much leeway to reject parents’ petitions and includes no appeal process.

**Missouri**

In Missouri, state Rep. Timothy Jones (R-Eureka) introduced House Bill 393, the Parent Empowerment and Choice Act. Parents whose children attend a failing school would have three options for reform if 51 percent sign a petition: close the school and reopen with a new principal and staff; convert the school to an independent charter; or allow parents to send their children to a high-performing public school nearby or to a private school with a voucher.

HB 393 awaits a hearing in the House Education Committee.

—I Ben Boychuk

“I applaud the parents who traveled to Sacramento and testified before the board. Parental involvement is a key element for the success of all students. I know that their input will help guide the board in its work on this issue.”

— Michael Kirst, President
CALIFORNIA KIRST, PRESIDENT
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Bipartisan Effort Underway to Revive DC Voucher Program

Continued from page 1

tisan support from members but has drawn opposition from Senate Democrat leaders.

Sens. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Susan Collins (R-ME) presided over a hearing in February on the impact of the program. Lieberman, who chairs the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, noted how he usually tries “to see the argument on both sides, ... but I can’t,” referring to opposition toward the voucher program.

Collins called the previous Congress’s phase-out of the scholarships an “unfortunate decision” that is “disappointing and shortsighted.”

Lieberman, along with Collins, Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and John Ensign (R-NV) are sponsoring S 206, the Senate version of Boehner’s bill.

White House Opposed
Days before the House’s March 30 vote, the White House issued a “Statement of Administration Policy” announcing its opposition to the program.

“The Federal Government should focus its attention and available resources on improving the quality of public schools for all students,” the statement read in part. “Private school vouchers are not an effective way to improve student achievement.”

Greg Forster, a senior fellow with the Foundation for Educational Choice and author of “A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Vouchers,” took exception to the administration’s claim the program is not effective.

Forster noted how the policy statement cites a multi-year, high-quality empirical study of the DCOSP finding that vouchers have not improved student achievement. “Which is curious,” Forster said, “because there has been a multi-year, high-quality empirical study under the auspices of the Department of Education. But it found vouchers have improved student achievement.”

The Education Department’s evaluation of the program found students who received a voucher and used it to attend private school had a 91 percent graduation rate, compared to 70 percent of their peers with a similar demographic profile.

Academic achievement in Washington, DC public schools is poor—the District ranks last in the nation on most measures of academic achievement.


Program Would Be Expanded
According to John Schilling, chief operating officer of the American Federation for Children in Washington, DC, Boehner’s bill would ensure the continuation of the scholarships for at least five more years.

“SOAR would reauthorize the highly successful DC Opportunity Scholarship Program for five years, allow new students to enter the program, modestly increase scholarship amounts, create a sibling preference, and reinstate a robust program evaluation,” Schilling explained.

“In addition to the reauthorization of the OSP, both bills would continue funding for DC public schools and public charter schools as part of the three-sector federal initiative for educational improvement in the District of Columbia,” Schilling continued.

Scholarships ‘Vital Component’
Launched in 2004, the DCOSP provides scholarships up to $7,500 for low-income children in the nation’s capital to attend a private school of their choice. Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) inserted language in a 2009 omnibus-spending bill preventing new enrollments, effectively phasing out the program.

Andrew Campanella, president of the Campanella Group, a media firm focusing exclusively on education reform, says the scholarships are popular among District residents.

“The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program is a vital component of education reform in the District, which is one of the reasons that 74 percent of District residents support congressional reauthorization,” Campanella said, noting a long waiting list with at least four applicants for every available scholarship.

‘Height of Irony’
At $12 million, the DC scholarships account for a tiny fraction of the $780 million budget allocated for DC Public Schools and the $64 billion Department of Education discretionary budget. Boehner’s bill expands the program’s budget to $20 million.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, notes some irony in the hostility toward the DCOSP from President Barack Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, and senators such as Durbin.

“It’s the height of irony that the Obama administration wants to increase overall federal education spending despite overwhelming evidence that such spending does no good, but kill perhaps the only federal education program to ever demonstrate real, positive returns,” McCluskey said.

‘They Need Options Now’
Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of DC Parents for School Choice, was instrumental in the creation of the scholarship program and has testified in favor of the current House and Senate legislation.

“The Lieberman/Boehner reauthorization bill is bringing hope to District low-income families who only want the very best for their children. They cannot wait any longer for DC school reform efforts to bring about change. They need options now,” said Walden Ford.

“The DCOSP has provided more than 3,000 families a chance to enroll their children in quality educational environments, but so many more need and desire this same chance. The reauthorization of the DCOSP will allow more children the opportunity to receive a quality education and have a successful future,” Walden Ford concluded.

Studies by the American Federation for Children and The Heritage Foundation estimate 85 percent of the students currently benefiting from DCOSP would be compelled to return to underperforming public schools if Congress fails to reauthorize the program.

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) writes from Washington, DC.
Colorado School District Approves Pilot Voucher Plan

By Ben Boychuk

Colorado’s third-largest school district has established a pilot program allowing up to 500 students to attend a public or private school of their choice.

The Douglas County Board of Education unanimously approved the program, which is subject to annual review. Students will be eligible to receive $4,575 to attend a private school, starting in the 2011–12 school year.

The suburban district between Denver and Colorado Springs currently includes more than 60,000 students. Although it budgeted $2.29 million for vouchers, the board estimates the program could save as much as $3 million a year through savings from the Colorado State Assessment Program and other state mandates.

A ‘Universal Voucher’

Ben DeGrow, a senior education policy analyst for the Independence Institute in Golden, Colorado, says the Douglas County pilot project is unique among voucher programs around the nation.

“The program isn’t limited based on a family’s income, the success or failure of the current school, or any particular needs or abilities of the student,” DeGrow explained. “In this sense it’s a ‘universal voucher,’ which sets it apart from nearly all other choice programs.”

The only eligibility requirement is students must be enrolled in Douglas County schools for at least one year. A lottery will be held if more than 500 students apply.

Legal Challenge Possible

A group called Taxpayers for Public Education opposed the plan, saying tax dollars should not flow to private schools and Douglas County schools had no need for a voucher program because the district is one of the highest academic achievers in the state.

“A school district may provide parents a variety of its own programs and options, but the best choice for a number of families still may be something a private school can provide more effectively,” DeGrow replied.

The school board also established a legal defense fund in the event of court challenges to the program.

Colorado’s Supreme Court in 2004 struck down a statewide opportunity scholarship program aimed at students in failing schools, citing a state constitutional provision stating school boards must have “local control” over instruction within their district.

“What Douglas County has done is the epitome of local control and answers that concern,” DeGrow said.

Unions’ Power Still Formidable

Terry Moe, a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and author of Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools, says the Douglas County program is a positive step for choice, but he opposes the 500-student cap.

“Ultimately, these kinds of policy decisions are shaped by power; power stands in the way of school choice,” Moe explained. “As long as the teachers unions are powerful, this is the kind of minimalism you get,” he added.

Moe says the Douglas County program is nonetheless likely to attract national attention and give other districts ideas to adopt and emulate. “There are 14,000 districts in 50 states,” he said. “With so many holes in the dike, it’s impossible for the teachers union to plug them all.”

Ben Boychuk (bboychuk@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.
Democrats May Preclude Flight of Indiana House

By Joy Pullmann

Indiana House Republicans reached a compromise with 39 Democrats who fled the state to deny a quorum and prevent votes on a slate of ambitious labor and school reform bills.

Among the school reforms Democrats described as “anti-worker” and “anti-middle class” were bills to increase the number of charter schools, offer vouchers to low-income students, introduce some merit pay, and more—all intended to shoot Indiana “to the top of the education reform ladder,” as Indiana Speaker of the House Brian Bosma phrased it in February.

Republican legislators, previously enthused about the chance to pass bills they campaigned on, withdrew a controversial right-to-work bill and rewrote the voucher bill to cap the number of students eligible for a scholarship at 7,500 the first year of operation and 15,000 the second.

Three Bills at Issue

The compromise ended a five-week standoff, which began when Democratic caucus leaders said members would remain in an Urbana, Illinois Comfort Suites hotel as “long as it takes” to get what they want. Originally, the Democrats demanded Republicans withdraw 11 bills. Later, the list was whittled to three. In the end, the Democrats agreed to changes in wording.

Democrats earned just 36 percent of the vote for the state’s House of Representatives in 2010. The election gave Republicans a majority in both chambers and a second term to Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels.

“The reforms on the table right now really expand the opportunities for parents to find the right educational fit for their students,” said Leslie Hiner, vice president of programs and state relations at the Foundation for Educational Choice in Indianapolis.

“It’s accurate to say that this action by [the Democratic] legislators is dramatic and hampers the legislature from doing its duty for the public,” Hiner said. “Any time the legislature is held up like this, there is less time to hear from citizens and debate the measures.”

Hoosier legislators aren’t the only ones who fled their state to forestall legislative action. The Indiana Democrats left the state on February 22 after a similar flight by Wisconsin Democrats five days earlier over curbs to collective bargaining proposed by Gov. Scott Walker (R). Wisconsin Republicans used a procedural move to pass the measure, and Walker signed the bill on March 12.

‘Never Seen a Session this Strange’

Walkouts to prevent quorum happened occasionally in America in the nineteenth century, especially during periods of high populist influence. The practice rarely has been seen since the early 1900s until recently. In 2003, 11 Democratic state senators from Texas left the state to protest a redistricting bill.

At least 26 bills expired during the Indiana Democrats’ walkout. Indiana’s absent legislators remained in Illinois despite a $250—later raised to $350—daily fine Bosma imposed on the representatives. The Democratic Party said it paid the legislators’ expenses.

“I’ve been around a lot of sessions and I’ve never seen a session this strange,” said Russ Simnick, president of the Indiana Public Charter Schools Association. “[The Democratic] caucus has made a huge effort to tie the issues of education and labor together.”

If the legislators had not returned by the session’s end on April 26, Daniels said he would call special sessions until the state’s business got done. Because of Indiana’s budget cycle and its two-term limit on governors, this is the last time the legendary cost-cutting governor, known as “the Blade,” can sign an Indiana budget.

Theoretically, Hiner said, the standoff could have continued through the 2012 elections.

Vouchers, Charters at Issue

The education bills at issue would offer vouchers low-income children could take outside the public education system, raise public charter school funding closer to traditional public school levels and tie school transportation funds to the child so charter students could ride on public school buses.

The charter school expansion bill also would permit charter schools to move into old, unused public school buildings. The facilities and transportation issues are sticking points for Democrats, Simnick said.

“Governor - WI
Scott Walker
Governor - WI

The conversation has to switch from what’s best for institutions to what’s best for children,” said John Elcesser, executive director of the Indiana Non-Public Education Association. “If kids are left in places where they’re not successful for consecutive years, the chances of them being successful [in life] are minimized.”

Democrats also charge granting vouchers to poor kids would deprive local public schools of funds. Elcesser points out private schools currently have only about 2 percent of classroom space available to students who would apply for a transfer from public schools.

‘Not Quality, But Fit’

At present, 3,500 Indiana students are on charter school waiting lists, Simnick said.

Sometimes it’s not even about [school] quality; it’s about fit,” Elcesser said. “If you have a variety of options and education programs and different school cultures that families can choose from, then the chances of having them find the best fit for their son or daughter are higher.”

Only one school reform bill, the charter school expansion, passed the Indiana House before the Democrats left the state. HB 1002 is currently pending before a state Senate committee. The Senate version of the bill would need to be reconciled with the House version before going to the governor.

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INTERNET INFO

Indiana's Adequate Yearly Progress reports: http://www.doe.in.gov/ayp/

The bills proposed in the current Indiana legislative session: http://www.in.gov/apps/lsa/session/ billwatch/billinfo?year=2011&session=1&request=all
By Jim Waters

As state governments faced huge deficits, tens of thousands of public employee union members, including teachers, spent weeks protesting legislation to limit collective bargaining privileges and expand education reforms in Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

In Wisconsin, upwards of 100,000 people descended upon the capitol in Madison to protest Gov. Scott Walker (R), who signed a budget repair bill restricting collective bargaining and making other program cuts.

In Indiana, 8,000 union members, many of them teachers union members bused in from outside the state, protested a similar collective bargaining reform bill and legislation to expand charter schools, empower parents to transform failing schools, and change the way teachers are hired, evaluated, and paid.

In Ohio, teachers have rallied against Senate Bill 5, which would reduce collective bargaining rights of teachers and other state employees.

Retired Teacher Reports

Carol Prudhon, a retired Wisconsin public school teacher, went to Madison for a counter-rally on February 19, organized by the Wisconsin Tea Party and its allies to show support for Walker’s attempt to address the state’s looming budget deficit by limiting collective bargaining rights of teachers and other state employees.

The Badger State faces a $137 million budget deficit in the current fiscal year and a $3.6 billion deficit during over the next two years.

Prudhon said what she experienced “was pretty scary.” Although police said union protestors were peaceful, “they were completely surrounding us,” Prudhon said.

Cost Savings Predicted

The unions were protesting Republicans’ plan to restrict collective bargaining rights to wage increases no higher than the rate of inflation without a voter referendum. Teachers also would be required to contribute 5.8 percent of their salary to their pension plans and double their health care contribution to 12 percent.

Walker says Wisconsin can no longer afford such luxuries, noting the union pensions and health insurance are perks few taxpayers who fund those benefits now have.

Nationwide, the comparable employee health care contribution was 20 percent of pre-tax income, while the average contribution from take-home pay to a retirement plan was 7.5 percent in 2009, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Employee Benefits Research Institute, respectively.

Walker said his reforms would save more than $30 million during the final few months of the fiscal year, and he warned in a memo to state workers and teachers that not implementing them would cause 1,500 state employees to face layoffs and “could result in the state being unable to pay for health services to thousands of children and families in Wisconsin’s BadgerCare program.”

Indiana, Ohio Face Walkouts

In reworking labor policies to address fiscal crunches, some governors have gone farther than Walker.

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels (R) wants to limit coverage of local collective bargaining agreements to wages and wage-related benefits. The Daniels-backed measure passed the Indiana Senate by a 30-19 vote, but House Democrats, like Wisconsin’s Senate Democrats, left the state to prevent votes on labor-related legislation and a handful of education reform bills. They returned in late March.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich (R) says he wants to ban collective bargaining outright for 42,000 state workers plus 19,500 college system workers, and he would limit bargaining for others by taking health care and other benefits out of the negotiating process involving contracts with 300,000 union workers, including teachers, police, and firefighters. Walker’s plan exempts police and firefighters.

A handful of Ohio Republican legislators have said they either oppose Kasich’s plan or are on the fence about it. Kasich’s office says if the plan had been in place during Fiscal Year 2010, taxpayers could have saved about $1.3 billion on health insurance and automatic pay increases.

Reform Efforts Spreading

Beyond Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin, Olson says, important reforms are underway in states once thought to be impervious to reform.

“Look at Michigan,” Olson said. “I think it’s the sleepier state. The legislature is passing some very serious reforms with rather pathetic opposition from the [Michigan Education Association].

“It’s quite refreshing to see all the bluster from the union be completely ignored,” Olson added. “In fact, when the union began laying the groundwork for a statewide strike, legislators answered by introducing legislation increasing financial penalties on the union.”

Olson says strikes could have an unintended positive effect.

“Parents and taxpayers could learn a lot, including which teachers are truly committed to educating, preparing, and inspiring the state’s students,” he said.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Georgia Legislature Considers Investment in iPads

By Joel Mathis

Georgia legislators are contemplating a pilot program that would replace textbooks in the state’s public middle schools with iPads and other electronic readers, joining a burgeoning worldwide trend aimed at reducing education costs and engaging cyberminded students of the twenty-first century.

“Georgia spends $6 out of every $10 on some form of education in the state,” including higher education and the state’s community colleges, said state Senate President Tommie Williams (R-Lyons) “About $40 million is spent on textbooks annually, many of which are already outdated.”

Williams is backing a pilot program aimed at introducing Georgia middle school students to the electronic devices.

“Utilizing some type of e-reader or tablet device in the place of a textbook would give students the most up-to-date information in a format that’s engaging and interactive,” Williams said.

No estimate of the cost of the pilot program has been given. The basic iPad model costs $500 each, and Williams has been soliciting private donations for the effort.

Positive Early Reviews

Williams and his colleagues in the Georgia legislature are the latest to contemplate the possibilities of iPad-based education, just one year after the device was introduced to the public.

The first round of pilot programs using the device in the classroom is about to complete its first school year.

Perhaps the best-known advocate of the iPad as an educational tool is Fraser Speirs, who outfitted with the device every student at the Cedars School for Excellence in Scotland. Speirs has been writing about the experience at a blog followed by experts in the tech and education sectors.

“The iPad has been in users’ hands for less than a year,” Speirs wrote in January. “Everyone is still finding their way with it and what’s happening in education with [the tablet] is exactly what’s happening in society as a whole: normal teachers are excited about and interested in technology.”

Speirs warns against adopting electronics merely to save money, however, saying such efforts could distort the educational purpose of the device.

“Justifying the iPad on hard cost grounds alone is not the right approach,” Speirs explained. “You may see some cost savings but you'll probably also drive an ‘everything on the iPad’ mentality that will force its use when it’s not appropriate.”

In the United States, four dozen students in two humanities classes at Roslyn High School in Long Island, New York were given iPads for school use this past December. The school district plans to expand that program to 275 students in the fall, and eventually to all 1,100 of the school’s students.

Dan Brenner, superintendent of Roslyn Public Schools, agreed with Speirs’ approach and his understanding of the issues involved in adopting the iPad in the classroom.

“I think it has to be conceived of as an investment in technology, which most schools make,” Brenner said.

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The next Really Big Idea in School Reform is The Parent Trigger

WHAT IF parents could “pull the trigger” to transform their child’s education?

WHAT IF empowered parents could direct their school districts to convert failing schools to charters or have the funding follow their children to schools that meet their needs?

This is the Parent Trigger, a variation on legislation signed into law in California in 2010. It could vastly expand the number of charter schools in the U.S. It could jump-start the national movement for vouchers. Read about it at schoolreform-news.org.

Support this bold new idea for school reform by calling Bruno Behrend, director of the Center for School Reform at The Heartland Institute, at 312/377-4000.
Nation Is Spending More on Education, Producing Worse Outcomes

By Veronique de Rugy

In November the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released its Program for International Student Assessment scores, measuring educational achievement in 65 countries. The results are depressingly familiar: While students in many developed nations have been learning more and more over time, American 15-year-olds are stuck in the middle of the pack in many fundamental areas, including reading and math.

Yet the United States is near the top in education spending. The OECD data compare K-12 education expenditures per pupil in each of the world’s major industrial powers. With the exception of Switzerland, the United States spends the most in the world on education, an average of $91,700 per student in the nine years between the 13-year education of a high school senior who graduated in 2009, compared to $50,000 (in 2009 dollars) for a 1970 graduate.

Schools Lack Competition

Despite the dramatic increase in spending, there has been no notable change in student outcomes. Using data provided by Andrew Coulson, an education policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, Figure 1 shows National Assessment of Educational Progress scores in reading, math, and science, along with per-pupil spending. The only trend line with a pulse is the amount of spending.

More spending usually means more teachers. Last year Obama not only used stimulus funds to preserve education jobs but called for “10,000 new teachers.” Yet as Figure 2 shows, the number of students per teacher in U.S. public schools fell from 17.4 in 1990 to 15.7 in 2007.

We have tried spending more money and putting more teachers in classrooms for more than a generation, with no observable improvements to anything except the schools’ bottom lines. Why? Because of the lack of competition in the K-12 education system. Schooling in the United States is still based largely on residency; students remain tied to the neighborhood school regardless of how bad its performance may be.

Federal spending on education (which amounted to 8.3 percent of total public education spending in 2007) is funneled to students through the institutions to which they are tied, largely regardless of student performance. With no need to convince students and parents to stay, schools in most districts lack the incentive to serve student needs or differentiate their product. To make matters worse, this lack of competition continues at the school level, where teacher hiring and firing decisions are stubbornly divorced from student performance, tied instead to funding levels and tenure.

Reforms Needed

If reform is to be defined by something other than the amount of money flushed down the toilet, it is time to reverse the flow of power from the top (administrators, school districts, teachers unions, governments) to the bottom (students, their parents, and taxpayers who want their money spent wisely).

A first step in that direction is to change our teacher labor market practices in terms of both hiring and firing. On the hiring end, there are too many restrictions on who can become a teacher. On the firing end, we need to restore the relationship between job retention and job performance. Lisa Snell, director of education at the Reason Foundation, points out in an email one recent example of how bad a school’s labor practices can be: “L.A. Unified School District laid off hundreds of its top teachers and replaced them with lower-performing teachers with seniority.”

In long-suffering California, a bipartisan coalition is supporting a new response to such irrational practices: the “parent trigger,” which allows fed-up parents whose children are in a consistently underperforming school to quickly change the school’s leadership. By signing a petition, parents can force reorganization of a school’s management or conversion into a charter school. In December parents of students at Comp-ton Unified School District’s McKinley Elementary School did just that.

Parent Trigger

A parent trigger is not a panacea, but it introduces an element of choice (and hence competition) into a monopoly that has been shortchanging its customers and benefactors for decades. Wealthy people already exercise school choice, either by sending their kids to private schools or by choosing where to live based on school districts. The parent trigger gives less-fortunate parents a similar and much less-expensive tool.

Along with the growth of online education and the charter school movement, these lurches in the direction of consumer choice are heartening and long overdue.

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Wisconsin’s Walker Would Expand Milwaukee Vouchers

Continued from page 1

approximately $834 million, in the coming fiscal year.

The governor’s biennial budget also proposes to expand school choice throughout the state by increasing access to options such as vouchers and charter schools. The budget would lift the cap on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which currently enrolls more than 20,000 low-income children. The MPCP is the nation’s oldest voucher program.

Would Relax Income Rules
Participation in the MPCP is currently restricted to families whose incomes are at most 175 percent of the federal poverty line. Walker’s budget proposal would lift that restriction to 325 percent. In the past, Walker has hinted at making the program a universal voucher program by removing all income restrictions.

Mike Ford, vice president of operations at School Choice Wisconsin, says the governor’s proposal would dramatically increase access to quality educational options.

“Gov. Walker’s proposal eliminates superficial enrollment caps, phases out income requirements for new students in participating schools, and allows schools in Milwaukee County to enroll students from the city,” Ford explained.

“Walker’s proposal recognizes the benefits of the MPCP—higher graduation rates than the Milwaukee Public Schools, school safety, parental satisfaction, and its demonstrated positive impact on public school test scores are things that are good for all Milwaukee students, not just those that currently qualify,” Ford said. “These changes allow schools in the MPCP to enroll students just like any other charter or public school in Milwaukee, which simplifies things for parents and for schools.”

Ford also noted more than 80 percent of Milwaukee Public School students are low-income, which ensures the voucher program would continue to benefit families most in need. “The experience of charter schools in the city, which enroll 83 percent low-income pupils despite having no means-testing, shows what will likely happen to schools in the MPCP,” Ford said.

‘Big Expansions’ into Vouchers
Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Foundation for Educational Choice in Indianapolis, sees the events underway in Wisconsin as “game-changing” for the national school choice movement.

“What’s great about Gov. Walker’s proposal is that he gets that they need to extend school choice to the middle class,” Enlow explained. “People don’t realize that the irony here is that what it takes to survive and thrive in America is not some false definition of poverty. It’s ridiculous to think some family of five earning $60,000 or $70,000 in urban America is rich,” Enlow said.

“Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida—we’re talking about big expansions into vouchers that are widely available. This is school choice 2.0,” Enlow said.

“Choice for Every Child”
Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst at the Mackinac Institute in Wisconsin, said the benefits for students and families in Walker’s budget proposal are great.

“The current proposal stands to benefit school choice options across the state and will increase educational options both in Milwaukee and statewide. The first change is an expansion of the country’s first modern school choice program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” D’Andrea noted. “The new limit of 325 percent of the poverty level—approximately $73,000—expands school choice to the majority of the city’s students and is the first step toward lifting the cap and providing choice for every child in Brew City.”

“The second change is an expansion of charter school authorizers and a lifting of the enrollment cap for virtual schools,” D’Andrea explained. “This bill will allow for all 13 four-year University of Wisconsin campuses to authorize their own charter schools, which will help grow the charter school market and bring innovative schools to areas across the state.”

D’Andrea says previous laws restricted charter access and authorization. The new bill could “help spur community involvement and bring additional educational options to students everywhere,” D’Andrea noted.

‘Path of Innovation’
“‘The expansion of the state’s virtual school laws will help as well, especially in speeding up the school application process for families that previously would have to wait until August to know whether or not their children would be attending these virtual academies,’” D’Andrea added.

He also says expansion of school choice options in Wisconsin would be a lifeline for families in a city that’s “sinking to the bottom when it comes to educating children in a major metropolitan area.”

“The MPCP has its flaws, but part of the overarching problem here is that there have been few changes to the program since its inception,” D’Andrea explained. “Over the past 20 years we’ve seen how other states have run more successful programs based on what they’ve learned in Wisconsin.”

D’Andrea predicts the Milwaukee program’s expansion would launch it “down the path of innovation.”

“Bringing in additional schools throughout the county will help boost the roster of good, quality schools provided by the MPCP, but there’s still much work to be done. This commitment in 2011 will pave the way for greater changes in the future,” he concluded.

Wisconsin has been a leader in providing school choice options since the early 1990s. The MPCP in particular has paved the way for other successful school choice programs, such as the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program and similar programs in Ohio.

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Accountability Missing from Ky. Superintendent Reviews

By Jim Waters

An open-records project by the Bluegrass Institute reveals superintendent evaluations by school boards in low-performing school districts in Kentucky exclude academic performance from the criteria and fail to hold top administrators accountable for poor student outcomes.

“Rewarding Failure: The Rubber-Stamping of Kentucky’s Superintendent Evaluations” highlighted four of the superintendent evaluations the organization sought through open-records requests from school districts that failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for at least two consecutive years.

Three of the evaluations were from districts failing to make AYP for at least eight consecutive years.

Academic Performance Missing

The report, released in January, published photo reproductions of the evaluations, which were taken from large and small districts across the state, including Jefferson County, home of Louisville and the state’s largest school district with 98,000 students. Often missing in the evaluations were references either to historical academic results or objective goals and detailed plans for future improvement.

The Jefferson County Board of Education’s 2008–09 evaluation of Superintendent Sheldon Berman’s performance included recommendations from Berman himself about how trustees should evaluate him. The performance evaluation made no reference to the district’s 41 schools that failed to make AYP in 2009 or did not make the review note Kentucky’s Department of Education ranks Jefferson County among the state’s 13 persistently low-performing districts.

In its evaluation, the Jefferson County board praised Berman, whose annual salary is $260,000 plus benefits, for his talent as “an engaging public speaker” and in labor relations.

“Private-sector job evaluations are usually based on measurable, quantifiable results,” said Logan Morford, the Bluegrass Institute’s vice president of transparency initiatives. “We aren’t seeing that in superintendent evaluations. What we do see are favorable evaluations in districts falling short of even the most basic standards year after year.”

‘Too Trusting’

Some of the evaluations were handwritten and included few comments.

The Knox County Board of Education’s assessment of the strengths of Superintendent Walter Hulett included incomplete, handwritten phrases, such as, “Good people skills, good organization, visionary, great work ethic.”

The only comment included under Hulett’s “weaknesses” was: “Too trusting.”

Knox County has been embroiled in a school choice controversy with the higher-performing Corbin Independent Schools, the subject of ongoing litigation. Only 15 percent of the district’s high school juniors met ACT benchmark scores during the 2009–10 school year. Neither the poor performance nor the litigation was mentioned in Hulett’s evaluation.

School Site Councils Criticized

A longtime educator says superintendents aren’t the only ones to blame for low-performing school districts. Members of the districts’ School-Based Decision-Making Councils (SBDM), Kentucky’s school-management bodies, also should be subject to greater accountability in light of their immense authority, says Richard Ratliff, a retired superintendent who spent 28 years in Kentucky’s schools.

“How can a superintendent be effectively evaluated now with this SBDM model?” asked Ratliff. “He doesn’t have sufficient authority in hiring the principals or the teachers—the people that do, in fact, affect a school’s instructional program the most.”

SBDM councils also have control over scheduling schemes, which puts superintendents at a big disadvantage, Ratliff explained.

“At the high-school level, the council’s persuasion is very important. They can go with block scheduling, which drops instruction time by 30 percent but is highly recommended by teachers unions,” Ratliff said. “It gives teachers more time for planning and consulting, but I think it’s too much time.”

Ignoring Academic Performance

A follow-up project by the institute suggests academic performance isn’t high on the list of SBDM councils’ agendas in low-performing districts.

For example, a review of last year’s meeting minutes of the council in charge of Heritage Elementary School in the Carter County district in eastern Kentucky indicated meetings averaged 30 minutes, with the longest being 50 minutes. The documents also show most of the council’s discussions involved bake sales and other fundraisers, with no discussion of student achievement or curriculum.

Carter County Superintendent Darlene Gee’s 2009 evaluation indicated she “meets expectations,” without noting the district remains among the state’s 13 persistently lowest-performing districts.

‘Dysfunctional Environment’

Research included in a National School Boards Association report released in February suggests board members’ priorities may differ from the assumptions of parents and communities.

The report, coauthored by Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, was based on survey responses from 900 school board members and 120 superintendents from 418 school districts. Despite “all the contemporary focus on college and workforce,” Hess and his team found 16 percent of the board members and superintendents ranked preparing students for college as the least important of six education goals, and about the same number ranked preparing students for the workforce as least important.

A challenge in using a site-based management approach is in “aligning authority and accountability,” Hess said.

“In a site-based council environment, where a committee of people are making decisions but ultimately are not accountable—one where accountability is not clearly indicated—then you have set the table for a dysfunctional environment,” Hess said.

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Tea Party Success Gives Valuable Lesson for Efforts to Expand School Choice

By Lil Tuttle

For at least the past two decades, school choice initiatives have been limited programs designed either to benefit a small group of special-needs children or to punish failing government schools.

No doubt these programs have given a few students opportunities they wouldn’t have had otherwise. But these programs touch the lives of only a tiny fraction of children—maybe 3 percent at best.

Moreover, the school choice movement itself has often been splintered, its successes have been minimal, and even some of its victories have been reversed, as happened in Florida and Washington, DC.

In short, school choice as defined today helps too few children, matters to too few taxpayers, and serves only to unite and mobilize choice opponents, particularly the teachers unions. That doesn’t seem to be a good way to expand the movement.

Four Factors

To the question of how a school choice movement can grow and thrive, we need to look to the Tea Party. A simple seed of an idea—Taxed Enough Already—rooted in a field of crisis spontaneously and rapidly grew into a mighty force to be reckoned with.

I see four factors at the heart of the Tea Party’s success.

• Ordinary taxpayers realized they had skin in the game. The response from voters was: This issue affects me personally. It’s about my life, my well-being, and my future.

• Taxpayers reacted separately and spontaneously. They understood this affects me right now.

• Taxpayers were motivated to do something. There was a sense that this affects me so profoundly that I can’t afford to sit on the sidelines.

• The Tea Party’s message resonated so strongly among the broader electorate that many voters outside the Tea Party movement decided if these elected officials won’t vote for me, I won’t vote for them.

Independent voters saw the issue as a conservative response to liberals’ reckless spending that they hated. It drew moderates and conservatives together in a winning coalition and sparked a dramatic political course correction in less than two years.

It’s About Spending

Could these factors be applied to the school choice issue?

I believe they can. In fact, I believe the school choice question is to state and local governments what taxed enough already is to the federal government, because it’s the same battle. It’s about government spending.

Many states and localities are in deep financial crisis—and one of the biggest pigs at their budgetary troughs is the public school system.

Public schools now consume at least one-third of all state government budgets and at least one-half of all local government budgets. By Cato Institute estimates, 46 cents of every state and local tax dollar raised this year will go to feed the public schools.

Public school jobs, salaries, and benefits have exploded. Over the past decade, the private-sector workforce increased a paltry 0.2 percent, while the public-sector workforce grew by a whopping 9.2 percent.

Then there are state pension plans, underfunded by an estimated $3.5 trillion. These Cadillac benefit plans are putting many governments on a fast track to insolvency.

Liberals’ priority has always been the money, and that’s where conservatives must fight the school choice battle as well. Unions’ rallying cry over the years has been, “You can’t take money away from the public schools.” But times have changed, and taxpayers desperately need a less costly way to deliver public education services.

Public Education vs. Public Schools

Overlooked in the school choice debate is this fact: “Public education” and “public school” are not synonymous. Public education defines a policy objective, whereas public school describes one way to achieve it. Public schools are not the only way to deliver public education today.

Conservatives have a great case to make that school choice can cut in half taxpayers’ cost of educating a child.

Official estimates put average public school spending at about $12,000 per student, but official estimates are notoriously unreliable. Adam Schaeffer at the Cato Institute did a wonderful study last year of school districts in the nation’s five largest metro areas. He reports real per-pupil spending was 23 percent to 90 percent higher than what public schools reported they spent.

Solution to Spending Problems

School choice can grow stronger if we make the case that school choice is a solution to reckless and wasteful education spending—a case, incidentally, that fits perfectly with the Taxed Enough Already message. If taxpayers want to reduce spending and taxes at the state and local level, school choice is their ticket.

Of course, school choice benefits children and families, but it’s even more beneficial to taxpayers, from the 16-year-old earning his first paycheck to the 60-year-old paying local property taxes.

Big spending problems demand bold solutions. School choice is one such solution. The method may be different in each state—vouchers, tuition tax credits, scholarships—but all good choice plans will be universally available to every child; have no income or means-testing; and ensure funding follows the child regardless of where he or she is schooled.

Rahm Emanuel said, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” When it comes to school choice, reformers would be wise to take his advice.

Lil Tuttle (ltuttle@cbpli.org) is education director of the Clare Booth Luce Policy Institute in Herndon, Virginia. This article is adapted from remarks delivered at the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, DC.
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