National School Choice Week Breaks Participation Records

School Choice Advocate Confirmed as Ed Sec in Historic Tiebreaking Vote

By Michael McGrady

The 2017 National School Choice Week (NSCW) was “the largest series of education-related events in U.S. history,” the event’s coordinators reported on the NSCW website in February. NSCW is a nationwide series of events celebrating school choice and encouraging expansion of education opportunities to more children. The goal is “to raise public awareness of all types of education options for children,” the event’s website states. “These options include traditional public schools, public charter schools, magnet schools, online learning, private schools, and homeschooling.”

The first-ever NSCW was held in 2011 and featured 150 events in several states. The 2017 NSCW, held January 22–28, featured 21,392 events in all 50 states, with 16,000 schools and 2,000 homeschooling groups participating. More than six million people attended NSCW.

By Teresa Mull

Signaling a big change in national education policy, Vice President Mike Pence cast a historic tiebreaking vote to confirm Betsy DeVos as the new U.S. education secretary.

DeVos, most recently chairwoman of the American Federation for Children, a school choice advocacy group, has long supported charter schools and voucher programs. DeVos cleared the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions by a 12–11 party-line vote on January 31. DeVos was confirmed by the full Senate on February 7.

“Democrats, teachers unions, and liberal protesters have been flooding sending

ED SEC, p. 6
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Blaine Amendments at Center of Georgia Case Challenging Tax-Credit Scholarships

By Ashley Bateman

The Georgia Supreme Court is hearing arguments in a case challenging the constitutionality of the state’s tax-credit scholarship program.

Georgia launched the Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit program (QEETC), a tax-credit scholarship program, in 2008. Individual and corporate donors receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits in exchange for donations made to QEETC. The scholarships help “prior public school students access schools that best fit their needs.”

EdChoice reports 93 percent of students statewide are eligible for the program, which awarded 12,917 scholarships in 2015.

Ongoing Lawsuit

In April 2014, four Georgia taxpayers, represented by the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), filed a lawsuit alleging the tax-credit scholarship program violates the state constitution’s Blaine amendment, which prohibits the use of public money to fund religious institutions.

In February 2016, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Kimberly M. Esmond Adams ruled, “Courts that have already considered whether a tax credit is an expenditure of public revenue have answered this question in the negative. … Plaintiffs have not presented any arguments for why this Court should not follow this persuasive authority.”

The plaintiffs appealed the ruling, and the Georgia Supreme Court began hearing arguments in Gaddy v. Department of Revenue on January 23, 2017.

‘Discriminatory View’

Leslie Hiner, vice president of programs at EdChoice, says SEF has a history of challenging the validity of school choice programs.

“About a year prior to filing this lawsuit, [SEF] took a position against private religious schools based on what the SEF determined to be ‘anti-gay’ policies of religious schools.”

Program Is ‘Wildly Popular’

Ben Scafidi, director of the Education Economics Center at Kennesaw State University and a fellow at the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, says families are satisfied with Georgia’s tax-credit scholarship program.

“While Georgia’s tax-credit scholarship is small, it is wildly popular,” Scafidi said. “Donations far exceed the $58 million statewide cap on the first day of the year. Scholarship recipients love the program as well. And the private schools say they wish they could help even more kids get a better education.”

Scafidi coauthored a study on tax-credit scholarship recipients in Georgia in November 2013, finding parents were nearly universally satisfied with the program.

“We surveyed the families of scholarship students,” Scafidi said. “These parents almost unanimously thought their children were better off in their new schools compared to their former public schools.”

Plaintiffs ‘Unlikely to Prevail’

Hiner says the fact Indiana, Nevada, and Oklahoma have overcome Blaine amendment claims and maintained their tax-credit scholarship programs bodes well for Georgia.

“Plaintiffs are unlikely to prevail on their Blaine amendment argument, and it is unlikely that Georgia’s tax-credit scholarships will be ruled unconstitutional,” Hiner said. “Three recent state supreme court cases involving Blaine amendments and one recent U.S. Supreme Court case involving standing to sue tax-credit scholarship programs, provide justification for my view.”

“Conclusive court rulings emphasize that at the point when parents receive their child’s share of state funding for education, how and where parents use those funds to provide K–12 education for their child is a private choice, uniquely the right of the parent to make that decision,” Hiner said.

Reversal Would Be ‘Devastating’

Lisa Kelly, president of Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., which awards approximately one-third of the tax-credit scholarships in the state, says ending the program would destroy opportunities for thousands of children.

“If the court strikes down this popular tax-credit program on constitutional grounds, thousands of families will be forced to return their children to public schools that the State of Georgia annually identifies as failing,” Kelly said. “This would be a devastating outcome.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.

LEARN MORE

Hundreds of kids, parents, and teachers showed up, despite temperatures in the 20s and low 30s. The record-breaking year for National School Choice Week underscores how passionate Americans are for choice in education. There’s a real hunger among parents for more control over their children’s educational careers.

**Americans ‘Passionate’ for Choice**

Michael Schaus, communications director at the Nevada Policy Research Institute, which took the lead in organizing an NSCW rally in Carson City, says the event’s turnout proves people are eager for school choice.

“It was a great event,” Schaus said. “Hundreds of kids, parents, and teachers showed up, despite temperatures in the 20s and low 30s. The record-breaking year for National School Choice Week underscores how passionate Americans are for choice in education. There’s a real hunger among parents for more control over their children’s educational careers.”

**Appreciating Choice**

Jennifer Brock, a public relations officer at Abington Christian Academy in Pennsylvania, says students and teachers at her school celebrated NSCW by expressing why they’re grateful for choice.

“We had a little assembly and gave the students the opportunity to talk about why they liked being at Abington Christian,” Brock said. “They [said] they really knew their teachers and their teachers really cared about them and were teaching them in an engaging way. And then the teachers were asked why they liked to teach at Abington Christian, even though they earn substantially less than they might be able to do in a public setting, and the responses were that the smaller class sizes really enable them to get to know the students the opportunity to talk about the wonder of how our bodies are made and how that causes us to know God and to worship Him and to be in wonder and appreciation of the complexity of our bodies,” Brock said. “The psychiatrist there said, ‘Do not move her. This is incredible. What she’s getting is exactly what she needs.’ The smaller overall school size education for her. I have nothing but good things to say about our public district, but I really would like to see everyone have the ability to choose.’

“Think the thing that the current public system doesn’t provide families is the ability to choose the education that’s best for their child,” Brock said. “I have a special-needs daughter, and just speaking personally, I have taken her to the public district several times because I want to make sure she’s getting the best help that she can, and they said they can’t really touch the kind of individualized instruction that she receives at our little, tiny Christian school.

“She goes down to the children’s hospital in Philadelphia, where she got a complete neuro-psyche evaluation,” Brock said. “The psychiatrist there said, ‘Do not move her. This is incredible. What she’s getting is exactly what she needs.’ The smaller overall school environment, the attention, and just being told daily that her life has purpose, she’s loved by God, it’s the right size education for her. I have nothing but good things to say about our public district, but I really would like to see everyone have the ability to choose.’

**Customizing Education**

Brock says her own daughter has benefited greatly by attending a school of choice.

“The record-breaking year for National School Choice Week underscores how passionate Americans are for choice in education. There’s a real hunger among parents for more control over their children’s educational careers.”

MICHAEL SCHAUS
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
NEVADA POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
Study: Milwaukee Voucher Program to Generate Nearly $500 Million in Benefits

By Kenneth Artz

Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s school voucher program will generate nearly $500 million in economic benefits to the city over the next 20 years, a study has found.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has been providing private school vouchers to low-income students since 1990. During the 2016–17 school year, 28,188 students participated in the program.

More Grads, Less Crime

The study, titled “The Economic Benefit of School Choice in Milwaukee,” found students who attend high-performing schools are more likely to graduate from high school, be employed, stay out of prison, and be less dependent on welfare and other government services.

“By 2035, because of higher high school graduation rates, students who use a voucher in the MPCP will generate $26 million more economic benefit than similar students at MPS,” the study reports. “Graduating from high school is associated with being more likely to earn a higher income throughout life—which results in more tax revenue, less likely to need expensive, government-funded medical care, and a lower likelihood of being reliant on welfare.

“By 2035, in total, because of less crime committed, students who use a voucher in the MPCP will generate $473 million economic benefits to Wisconsin more than similar students at [Milwaukee Public Schools],” the study reports. “Graduating from high school is associated with being more likely to earn a higher income throughout life—which results in more tax revenue, less likely to need expensive, government-funded medical care, and a lower likelihood of being reliant on welfare.

Potential for Other Cities

Researchers Corey DeAngelis, a distinguished doctoral fellow at the University of Arkansas, and Will Flanders, education research director at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, conducted the study.

Flanders says the benefits experienced in Milwaukee could be improved upon in other areas with fewer regulatory constraints.

“I believe the benefits here are even on the low end of what could be expected in programs that are maybe a little bit more lightly regulated,” Flanders said. “I think other cities could realize similar or larger benefits.”

DeAngelis says the differences among cities means he can’t guarantee the benefits will be the same everywhere, but he says he would expect similar benefits for comparable types of students in other locations.

“Test scores are very mixed across the United States, so it’s hard to tell, if you ask me about a specific place, what the effects would be,” said DeAngelis. “If you’re asking if we can theorize, [yes], other places may receive similar benefits.”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.

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School Choice Advocate Confirmed as Ed Sec in Historic Tiebreaking Vote

Continued from page 1

ators with calls and emails protesting her nomination for myriad reasons,” The New York Times reported in January, citing DeVos’ “donations to Republicans and their causes” as a main bone of contention for protestors.

DeVos needed 50 Senate votes to become the next U.S. education secretary. Democrats held the Senate floor for 24 hours leading up to the final vote in an attempt to persuade more Republicans to reject DeVos. All 48 Senate Democrats and two Republicans—Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska—voted against confirmation.

During his campaign, President Donald Trump proposed a $20 billion voucher program to allow poor families to access schools of their choice.

“We acknowledge today that not all schools are working for the students that are assigned to them,” DeVos said during her confirmation hearing. “I’m hopeful that we can work together to find common ground and ways that we can solve those issues and empower parents to make choices on behalf of their children that are right for them.”

Democrats ‘Engaged in Small Ball’

CJ Szafir, vice president for policy at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL), says Senate Democrats purposely focused on petty issues to undermine DeVos.

“The Democrats on the committee had the opportunity to engage in a substantive conversation about federal education issues with DeVos,” Szafir said. “Instead, they engaged in small ball, focusing on issues relating to her family’s wealth and religious donations. It’s not surprising that they would do this since public opinion is clearly behind DeVos’ positions on school choice, vouchers, and charter schools.”

‘A Vote for America’s Children’

Kelly McCutchen, president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, says DeVos’ confirmation will be a boon to the nation’s students.

“The vote for Betsy DeVos is a vote for America’s children,” McCutchen said. “Mrs. DeVos has exercised her constitutional right to put her money where her mouth is—into school choice—and we’re excited to see her promote her preference to give families options for their children’s education. Competition is a rising tide that lifts all boats; there’s especially no reason for an unchallenged government monopoly for America’s low-income families.”

N. Carolina Teachers Rewarded with Test Score-Based Bonuses

By Jenni White

Two categories of North Carolina public school teachers received merit-based raises in January 2017 because their students performed well on state tests.

The North Carolina General Assembly approved a state budget in July 2016 that included an average pay increase of 4.7 percent for teachers across the state.

“Those [teachers] in the top 25 percent in the state according to student growth scores in reading from the previous year will split $5 million,” the News & Observer (Raleigh, NC) reported in July 2016. “Third-grade teachers whose reading growth scores put them in the top 25 percent in their local districts will split another $5 million.”

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction announced in January 1,318 teachers with 3rd-grade students who scored in the top 25 percent in state reading exams received $3,523 each. At the district level, 1,293 teachers had students with reading scores in the top 25 percent; they received an average bonus of $3,926.

High school Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) teachers were also awarded a $50 bonus for each student receiving a score of three or above on an AP exam and a four or higher on IB Diploma Programme exams.

“No policy will be perfect. We need to be comparing the new system not to perfection but to whether or not it is an improvement over the current system. Does it encourage and incentivize the things we want?”

BOB LUEBKE, SENIOR POLICY ANALYST, CIVITAS INSTITUTE

‘Pragmatic and Deliberate’ Approach

Terry Stoops, director of research and education studies at the John Locke Foundation, says new leadership at the state level has transformed the state’s education system.

“Since the election of a Republican majority in both chambers of the General Assembly in 2010, lawmakers have tried to move the teacher pay system away from the one-size-fits-all model,” Stoops said. “Their approach has been pragmatic and deliberate: to pilot various research-based performance and incentive pay models and find one or more that rewards high-performing teachers and, more importantly, encourages them to stay in the classroom.”

Will ‘Boost Student Achievement’

Stoops says merit pay will ultimately benefit students as well as teachers.

“Differentiated pay will not somehow extract an untapped reserve of skill and ability from a teacher—” said Stoops. “What it will do is boost student achievement by helping to keep the best and brightest [teachers] in the classroom while encouraging poorer performers to pursue other endeavors.”

Improvement to Current System?

Bob Luebke, a senior policy analyst at the Civitas Institute, says it’s important to compare new strategies to tired, old ones.

“I’m a big fan of merit pay,” Luebke said. “Current salary schedules link teacher pay to time, not job performance, but most discussion gets bogged down around people showing it to be an imperfect system. No policy will be perfect. We need to be comparing the new system not to perfection but to whether or not it is an improvement over the current system. Does it encourage and incentivize the things we want?”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Catholic School Provides Unique Service to Philly

By Ashley Bateman

"Virtue, liberty, and independence" is Pennsylvania’s motto, and one Philadelphia Catholic high school is taking the saying to heart in preparing its graduates for spiritual and career success.

Mercy Career and Technical High School (Mercy CTE), a private, co-ed vocational high school, was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1950. "In 1973, Mercy Vocational High School was born and grew its reputation for excellence in teaching workplace values and vocational education," the school’s website states.

Today, Mercy CTE offers technical training in six career and technical education areas of concentration, including business, business trades, computer technology, cosmetology, culinary arts, and nurse-aide training.

The school’s website reports, “97 percent of 2016 graduates received at least one industry recognized certification.”

Near-Perfect Attendance, Grad Rates

Mercy CTE boasts a 99 percent graduation rate and a 97 percent average daily attendance rate. Of the 74 students who graduated from Mercy CTE in 2016, 60 percent went on to post-secondary education, including trade schools and training programs; 23 percent are working and continuing their education; 7 percent directly entered full-time employment; and 1 percent entered the military, according to the school’s website.

The school integrates classroom-based learning with practical work experience by partnering with a variety of organizations. More than 100 business throughout the Philadelphia region have hired Mercy students for paid and unpaid work, including the Philadelphia Police Department, University of Pennsylvania, Lockheed Martin, and Fox Chase Cancer Center. Schools, hospitals, community centers, salons, and corporations employ Mercy students.

“The three-year career and technical education curriculum develops educational and career goals, providing on-the-job learning experiences, and offers students whose talents and career goals are best served by comprehensive academic/career and technical education programs the opportunity to acquire marketable competencies and/or the foundation for post-secondary career education,” Mercy CTE’s website states.

‘Promote Service to Others’

Christian Aument, Mercy CTE’s vice president for academics, says the school also emphasizes public service.

“The mission of the school is we promote service to others,” Aument said. “Our students have unique skills to help others. A lot of Catholic schools have some sort of service requirement. Our students have skills that are developed in career and technical [fields], so they can go out and use them.”

Catherine Glatts, Mercy CTE vice principal for technology and career and technical education, says students regularly receive hands-on learning.

“Even in the curriculum, our teachers take the students out to do service,” Glatts said. “Students have tackled the homeless issue working with Impact Philly, [a program to help the homeless and unemployed]. They have built houses with Habitat for Humanity. Our culinary students serve dinner for committee meetings. Our business program has been designing thinking into the classroom and working with Impact Philly to tackle the homeless issue.”

‘Making a Better Society’

Fr. Stephen McDermott began his career in high school ministry in his native Philadelphia. McDermott says he found many disruptive students had poor family structures and lacked direction, preventing them from realizing their full potential. A faith-based education and opportunity to work can greatly affect the trajectory of a student’s life, McDermott says.

“When we create a system where people are enslaved by the welfare state, how are they able to give glory to God?” McDermott said. “When you’re given everything… It devalues dignity. By showing people the dignity that they have and giving them opportunities to manifest those dignities, to study, to grow, and to cultivate those skillsets that God has given every one of us, not only are we achieving the potential that God created us to have, now I am transforming the culture and making a better society.”

“God has given people these gifts and interests they should explore and learn, and they should cultivate these gifts,” McDermott said. “Whether you’re a doctor, a farmer, or a janitor, each one of us has value. We have this welfare-state culture that does not lend to [the notion] that everyone can contribute. The Catholic education teaches us our dignity and value, no matter what we’re called to in life.”

Real-Life Learning

Mercy deploys teams of students around the country to address the needs of those surviving natural disasters. The projects are housed under the school’s Operation Katrina program, founded when students served in post-Hurricane Katrina states.

Glatts says these real-world experiences give young students perspective.

“The service work helps them decide what they might like to do in life and define a plan for themselves where they’ll be successful,” Glatts said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.

THE BARNEY CHARTER SCHOOL INITIATIVE

Hillsdale College is challenging the public education monopoly with its Barney Charter School Initiative.

The initiative supports the launch of K–12 charter schools that provide a rigorous education in the classical liberal arts and sciences. Hillsdale will assist school-founding groups with the charter application process and work to create a comprehensive academic program.

The Barney Charter School Initiative attempts to achieve a more perfect union by giving young Americans a proper liberal and civic education.

To contact the Barney Charter School call 517/437-7341 or email charterschool@hillsdale.edu
Chicago-Area Public School Mandates Students Attend ‘White Guilt,’ ‘Blackenomics’ Seminars

By Elizabeth BeShears

A Chicago, Illinois-area public high school forced students to attend presentations and seminars centered on race and progressive messaging.

New Trier High School, a top-rated government school serving the affluent Chicago suburbs of Northfield and Winnetka, required its students to attend an all-school seminar day with the theme of “Understanding Today’s Struggle for Racial Civil Rights,” on February 28, 2017.

School administrators informed parents in a December 2016 letter the event is “a day of regular attendance for students, who will hear from two keynote speakers and choose two workshops presented by staff, students, and experts on the topic.”

Race Indoctrination

One workshop offered in the catalog is titled “Blackenomics 101 (The Movement, The Music, The Solution).” Its description reads, “Rapper, entrepreneur, and activist, John the Author explores systemic racism in relation to building a black business and artist presence in minority communities. Empowering and embracing blackness is a way to move beyond the inequities seen in our country.”

Another title and description read, “Appropriate Alliances: Working in White Spaces: Students will lead this discussion on how white students can help break down stereotypes and other types of structural racism in white spaces. The discussion will also address why white guilt is an ineffective form of acknowledging racism. We will discuss how to be an effective supporter without appropriating other people’s identities and moving from thought to action.”

A description for a third presentation, titled “Seeing the Unseen: The Bias All Around You,” reads, “Most systemic racism is invisible … often to both ‘sides’ … until you know it’s there. Once you know it’s there, you can’t stop seeing it. In this workshop, you’ll participate in an activity that will help you see the unseen, and possibly recognize some systemic biases that you see every day without realizing they are there.”

Parents of New Trier students concerned about the seminar day started a blog, titled Parentsofnewtrier.org, which includes information about the day and a petition calling to “balance or else suspend” the day, which the blog labels “biased, unbalanced, divisive, and costly.”

‘Promotes a Politics of Victimology’

Joseph A. Morris, an attorney for Morris & De La Rosa in Chicago, says supporters of the program are taking the wrong approach to accomplish their professed goals.

“Teaching children that kindness equals socialism is not teaching children to be kind,” Morris said. “Teaching children that hatred of white people is the antidote to hatred of people of color is not the teaching of tolerance or the rejection of racial bias.”

Morris says the curriculum is biased and perpetrates racist thinking.

“Based on a review of the catalog of the day, it cannot be seriously argued that these seminars aim at a fair and neutral exposition of civil rights, whether based on some laudable theoretical construct such as that of Martin Luther King, that people be judged on the content of their characters rather than on the colors of their skins, or on the principles of individual liberty and equality before the laws that are embedded in the U.S. Constitution,” Morris said. “This program promotes a politics of victimology under which rights are held by groups, not by individuals, and the rights of groups are measured and apportioned not by inherent individual right or by earned merit, but by perceptions of past collective victimizations and perpetuations of wrongdoing.”

‘Parents Should Make a Fuss’

Jane Robbins, a senior fellow at the American Principles Project, says parents must be persistent in protesting the teaching of unsuitable material.

“Parents should make a fuss about this,” said Robbins. “They should contact the teachers first, then if there’s no resolution there, go to the principal. And if there’s no resolution there, [they should] go to the local school board and talk about what is happening in the school and point it out. I have friends who are very active in this area in one of the large counties in Georgia, and they have spent many hours going to local school board meetings talking about this kind of thing. They’ve had lots of success in getting the offensive textbooks and other materials withdrawn.”

Robbins says parents should not be afraid to stand up for their children.

“There is safety in numbers,” Robbins said. “A lot of times parents are hesitant to raise a fuss about something that’s going on because they don’t want their children to be targeted, held responsible, or treated badly in any way because of it. We would hope that kind of thing wouldn’t happen, but we know it does. But if they can notify as many parents as they can and get more parents to agree to oppose this and to be willing to come to a meeting, then that’s the best thing. Trying to fight it on your own is not likely to be very effective, but you can assemble more people who maybe just didn’t realize what was happening.”

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erob@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.

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Arizona Approves Minor Changes to Common Core Standards

By Michael McGrady

Arizona parents and reform groups remain dissatisfied after the Arizona State Board of Education (ASBE) voted to approve minor changes to the state’s Common Core standards, rather than the sweeping reforms requested by the advocates for reform.

The Common Core State Standards are a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. ASBE voted in October 2015 to repeal the standards and approved new standards by an 8–1 vote in December 2016. One of the biggest changes in the new standards is a requirement that students learn cursive writing by 5th grade. The standards also add new spelling requirements for K–3 students and lessons for elementary school students about time and money.

Diane Douglas, the state superintendent of public instruction, campaigned in 2014 on repealing Common Core. She publicly characterized the recent revisions as the end of Common Core in the state.

“These new standards represent the final step in the repeal and replacement of the Common Core in Arizona, and they reflect the thoughts and recommendations of thousands of Arizona citizens,” Douglas said in a press release following the approval of the revised standards.

“The standards are Common Core plus. They cleaned up a lot of the language examples, but the real crux of it is still Common Core.”

JARED TAYLOR
ARIZONA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

A Sampling of New Trier High School’s 2017 All-School Seminar Day

Compiled by Teresa Mull

Editor’s Note: The following program titles and descriptions are from the catalog of New Trier High School’s all-school seminar day, titled “Understanding Today’s Struggle for Racial Civil Rights,” held February 28, 2017. The titles and descriptions below are re-printed here verbatim.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Workshop</th>
<th>Short Description of Workshop</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“21st Century Voter Supression”</td>
<td>A group discussion about the methods and regulations used in the US to deny or limit the voting rights of various minority groups. There will be a brief historical overview of American voting with short video clips. The main emphasis of the workshop will be to recognize, identify, and combat modern voter suppression tactics. Attendees should come out with a few concrete plans or ideas to help address the problem moving forward.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Blackenomics 101 (The Movement, The Music, The Solution)”</td>
<td>Rapper, entrepreneur, and activist, John the Author explores systemic racism in relation to building a black business and artist presence in minority communities. Empowering and embracing blackness is a way to move beyond the inequities seen in our country.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Examining Our Biases”</td>
<td>To create an environment where everyone feels valued, we must recognize our personal biases and the impact they have on ourselves and others. Through interactive exercises lead [sic] by a conflict management specialist, participants will challenge their personal assumptions about many dimensions of diversity, assess the ramifications of these unchallenged assumptions, and consider how biases affect daily decisions. Lastly, we will discuss what steps we can take to develop a more inclusive environment at New Trier and in our communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Seeing the Unseen—The Bias All Around You”</td>
<td>Most systemic racism is invisible...often to both “sides” ... until you know it’s there. Once you know it’s there, you can’t stop seeing it. In this workshop, you’ll participate in an activity that will help you see the unseen, and possibly recognize some systemic biases that you see every day without realizing they are there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Whose Civil Rights?: Transpeople of Color Navigating the U.S.”</td>
<td>Civil rights are social and political freedoms that everyone in our society is supposed to have access to; however, because of socialization, bias, and discrimination, many trans people (particularly trans people of color) do not have access to these freedoms. In this session, we will explore the current cultural climate that enforces a gender binary and, therefore, forecloses civil rights for many trans people. We will examine how trans people are challenging and changing these systems.</td>
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Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.

JARED TAYLOR
ARIZONA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

‘Minor Wording Changes’

Olga Tarro, who served as a parent member of the Arizona Standards Development Committee charged with reviewing the new standards, says the changes are merely cosmetic.

“[The] State Board of Education and Department of Education call minor wording changes or removing a few examples or moving the examples to a table a ‘change’ in standards,” Tarro said. “Parents don’t see that as changing the standards.”

Tarro says most Arizonans have given up on getting rid of Common Core.

“I don’t think there’s a political will in Arizona to do something different,” Tarro said. “I think everybody has closed up shop and said, ‘We closed the book on Common Core.’”

‘Common Core-Plus’

Jared Taylor, a member of ASBE, cast the sole dissenting vote against the standards. Taylor says the revised standards are effectively the same as Common Core.

“The standards are Common Core-plus,” Taylor said. “They cleaned up a lot of the language examples, but the real crux of it is still Common Core. There is only 4 to 6 percent of the Common Core standards that was significantly changed. They were cosmetic changes.”

Taylor says ASBE did not allow parents to provide input.

“I expressed my concern that we did not do what the governor asked us to do,” Taylor said. “We can’t legitimately say that these are standards with parents’ support, because the parents selected to review the standards and have meaningful discussions just never had that opportunity. I objected to it because it’s just not appropriate to just rubber-stamp something that the parents didn’t have appropriate input on.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
A group of teachers in Washington State is urging lawmakers to bring civics education back to the state’s classrooms.

The Council on Public Legal Education (CPLE) launched the Civic Learning Initiative in January 2017 “to bolster civic learning for Washington State students,” CPLE reported.

“High-quality civic learning is the most important factor in determining whether students will actively participate in their communities as adults,” the council’s website states. “A democracy thrives when its citizens vote, show up for jury duty, engage in public life, join neighborhood groups, are aware of current civic issues, identify and listen to viewpoints other than their own, attend local government meetings, or voice their concerns to lawmakers.”

CPLE plans “to ask the legislature for $250,000, some of which would be used to give teachers better training in civics education and expand it to middle- and elementary schools,” The Seattle Times reported in January.

‘Not Room in the Curriculum’

In a December 2016 update to their review of states’ civic learning requirements, the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement wrote, “Thirty-seven states require students to demonstrate proficiency through assessment in civics or social studies. … Seventeen states include civic learning in their accountability frameworks. … Seventeen states include civic learning in their accountability frameworks.

Margaret E. Fisher, distinguished practitioner in residence at the Seattle University School of Law, is leading the CPLE Civic Learning Initiative. She says government-imposed increases in academic testing on a narrow range of subjects have pushed civics learning out of classrooms.

“There are many reasons why the teaching of civics has been either eliminated or downplayed in school curricula,” Fisher said. “One of the major reasons is testing. With the focus on testing for math, English language arts, and science, there’s not room in the curriculum.”

Classical Education Replaced

Jamie Gass, director of the Center for School Reform at the Pioneer Institute, says schools’ shift away from a classical education model is a mistake many of the nation’s greatest thinkers throughout history would be opposed to.

“Training, properly understood, is not really education,” Gass said. “If you read any of the writings of the Founding Fathers or any of the prominent educators in the history of the country, most of them would express the opinion that a liberal arts education is the basis for not only citizenship but also to live a good life.”

‘Democracy is in Jeopardy’

Fisher says if people don’t know how our government system works or its history, the nation’s future is at risk.

“They have no way to meaningfully interact with government if they don’t understand [civics]. They lose power in their lives. If we don’t have a citizenry that can participate in democracy, then I think democracy’s in jeopardy.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
The K–12 school system in America is broken, and it has been for a long time. The school systems themselves aren’t in ruins, per se, but the way we’ve set them up, as geographically based monopolies in which only those with the means to move or pay tuition are able to choose a different option, have led to the creation of truly destructive learning environments for millions of kids who are trapped in failing educational establishments.

I wouldn’t run my company that way, and I believe families across America deserve better. Not only is our current system unfair, it’s doing irreparable harm to our economy and our future.

Trapped in a Failing System
When children, especially those in lower-income families, aren’t given the opportunity to receive an excellent education, they often find themselves stuck in a failing school without any good alternatives.

Unless our schools can graduate students at higher rates, nearly 12 million students are likely to drop out over the next decade, resulting in a loss to the nation of $1.5 trillion. We clearly need to reshape the system.

As Milton Friedman once argued, “The only solution is to break the monopoly, introduce competition, and give the customers alternatives.”

Fortunately, Friedman’s vision for education choice has slowly become a reality for many communities, especially during the past decade. Families in 30 states and the District of Columbia now have some ability to find a school that works for their children, instead of shoeorning those students into classrooms that weren’t necessarily designed with their specific needs in mind.

Leveling the Playing Field
School choice programs are designed to level the playing field so that every child, not just the ones whose families can afford to move or pay private school tuition, has a chance at a quality education.

Recent research shows school voucher programs have saved taxpayers more than $3.5 billion since the early 1990s and have provided students with better schooling options.

As additional educational choice programs come online across the United States, we have seen the positive effects of a thriving marketplace of ideas and options can have on all school types, including traditional public schools, which have started introducing new programs tailored for students with different learning styles and needs.

Choice Benefits Everyone
Choice hasn’t just been good for non-public, charter, and other schooling types; it’s been good for the entire K–12 landscape.

Education is the pathway to success in our country, and it’s clear from decades of national and international results that we’re no longer leading the way. Far too many of our students fall behind or drop out because they’re not in a schooling environment that works for them.

As we push forward, expanding the horizon of educational choice, we know there will be criticism from those who would rather preserve the status quo than dream big, innovate, and do what’s right for families. But we can also look around and see thousands of examples where a student’s entire future has come down to finding the right school.

From online shopping to medical care, we encourage choice in every other aspect of our lives. It’s time to lift up and praise those same options within K–12 education.

Patrick Byrne (think@heartland.org) is CEO of Overstock.com.

“Education is the pathway to success in our country, and it’s clear from decades of national and international results that we’re no longer leading the way.”

Patrick Byrne
CEO
OVERSTOCK.COM
Rioters at California University Shut Down Lecture

By Jane S. Shaw

A group of people protesting an event featuring a conservative speaker at the University of California-Berkeley committed numerous acts of assault and vandalism and succeeded in having the event canceled.

Masked and dressed in black, approximately 150 rioters streamed into the area around the student union of the university on the night of February 1. The rioters threw rocks and fireworks at police, set fires, broke windows, and threw Molotov cocktails, causing $100,000 in damage and minor injuries.

The rioters’ stated goal was to disrupt a speech scheduled for that evening by a controversial editor of Breitbart News, Milo Yiannopoulos. They succeeded; the university canceled the speech.

The instigators of the violence were nonstudents, according to a UC-Berkeley police spokesperson, who said the rioters were agitators who use “black bloc” tactics: masks, shields, black clothing, and violence. Police Magazine describes such groups as “criminal anarchists.”

One person among the agitators was arrested after the campus police told everyone to disperse. Police at UC-Berkeley say they are continuing their investigation into the attack.

Rise in ‘Disinvitations’
The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a watchdog group advocating for free speech on college campuses, reports speakers are increasingly being disinvited, forced to withdraw by protests, and forcibly prevented from speaking at college campuses across the country.

FIRE reports there were 42 such incidents in 2016, making it the worst “disinvitation” year since the organization began keeping records in 2000. Eleven of those disinvitations involved Yiannopoulos, whom the British Telegraph describes as an “ultra-conservative British journalist and provocateur.”

Giving Up on Academic Freedom?
Ashley Thorne, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, says there is a prevailing attitude of close-mindedness throughout the nation’s higher-education system.

“I believe the up tick in disinvitation attempts stems from the growing belief that we have the right not to hear beliefs that we find offensive,” Thorne said. “Harvard student Sandra Korn put this idea most clearly in her 2014 Harvard Crimson article, where she wrote, ‘Let’s give up on academic freedom in favor of justice.’ Willingness to hear and debate competing ideas is an idea of the past, she explained. Instead, colleges should be able to choose sides on controversial issues and decree that the other side is so heinous that it cannot be articulated on their turf.”

‘It is a Vicious Cycle’
Thorne says students have been trained to be intolerant and pass on their bigotry to succeeding generations.

“Students are leading this charge now more than administrators and faculty members, but it is because this is the mindset they have been taught in school, news, and entertainment,” Thorne said. “It is a vicious cycle of students rising up to become teachers of intolerance.”

Model Legislation Offered
To address this widespread curtailment of speech, the Goldwater Institute, a state policy think tank in Arizona, has joined with Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC, to propose model legislation protecting free speech. The model legislation was designed for state legislatures and portions could be adopted by university system governing bodies.

The legislation would override speech codes imposed by universities restricting free speech; require disciplining of students who inhibit speech, while ensuring due process for those accused of such violations; and enable those who believe their speech rights to have been violated to sue in court, and, if proven right, to obtain attorneys’ fees and court expenses from the defendant.

First Amendment Insufficient Now
Jenna A. Robinson, president of The Martin Center, says the model bill simplifies colleges’ authority.

“I wish the First Amendment [to the U.S. Constitution] were enough to ensure that students’ free speech rights are protected,” Robinson said. “Unfortunately, that’s not the case on many campuses. Universities have proved themselves irresponsible stewards of student rights. The Goldwater Institute’s proposal to protect free speech through new legislation takes the issue out of administrators’ hands.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
Higher Ed Reform Moves Up Lawmakers’ To-Do Lists

By Jane S. Shaw

Until recently, higher education was in the driver’s seat when it came to state budgets; university officials had little to worry about from legislators. Colleges and universities were much admired, and their issues were far less controversial than those experienced in many K–12 school systems. Many legislators were enthusiastic alumni of state universities. A standard pattern existed: In times of recession, when budgets were tight, higher education served as a “balance wheel.” Legislatures could cut back on appropriations, knowing tuition increases could fill the gap. When a struggling economy improved, tuition increases stayed and appropriations increased.

Those days are over. Rising tuitions and massive national student debt have focused unfavorable attention on universities. Left-wing faculty, campus protests, and limits on free speech have put higher education in the national spotlight. Administrators bloated and rising pension costs are now becoming a public concern across the country. Legislators want to know what is happening on campus, and as they face fiscal pressure, they want to take a serious look at higher education finances.

The Higher Education Section of School Reform News helps legislators understand these issues. School Reform News recognizes the importance of the higher education sector and its costs. Public colleges and universities represent nearly 10 percent of state expenditures—the third biggest item behind K–12 education and Medicaid, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers.

Higher Ed Finance Is Complex

Addressing the high costs of higher education isn’t easy. In a recent paper, the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO) warned, “The landscape of higher education finance is complex. It is shaped by forces beyond the state budget.” Those forces range from the federal government to university alumni who are enthusiastic about athletic programs.

“An analyst who has moved from a more traditional program area (such as corrections or transportation) to a higher education budget may find this transition more difficult to adapt to than someone who begins his or her career with the higher education assignment,” the NASBO paper states. “The more seasoned analyst might be frustrated by how the power and influence of the university system manifests itself in the budget development and/or implementation process."

The goal of School Reform News is to alert elected officials and others about progress and setbacks in education reform. Adding colleges and universities to the education matrix will expand recognition of the problems in the nation’s colleges and universities and enable the public to begin the process of addressing them.

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) is School Reform News’ higher education editor.

College Students Arrested for Handing Out Copies of the Constitution on Campus, File Lawsuit

By Jane S. Shaw

Two students are suing Kellogg Community College (KCC), alleging the school violated their First Amendment rights by arresting them for handing out copies of the U.S. Constitution.

KCC is a public college in southwest Michigan. The plaintiffs, KCC students Michelle Gregoire and Brandon Withers, are members of the Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) organization. The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), which is representing the students in the federal lawsuit, filed a complaint in January. The arrest occurred in September 2016.

Arrested for Talking

“When [the plaintiffs] tried to distribute pocket-size copies of the United States Constitution in an open, generally accessible area of the campus, ... Defendants ordered them to stop because they had not first obtained a permit and because expression was only permitted in one location,” the lawsuit states. “When Mrs. Gregoire, Mr. Withers, and three associates sought to engage interested students in conversation about freedom and liberty on campus, Defendants claimed that they were impeding students’ access to education, even though they were not blocking sidewalks, impeding access to buildings, or pursuing students who were not willing to converse.

“When Plaintiffs politely informed KCC officials that they planned to continue to exercise their First Amendment rights, Defendants arrested Mrs. Gregoire and two of her associates, jailed them, and charged them with trespassing, charges that were quickly dismissed,” the complaint states. “Defendants took these actions because of the content and viewpoint of Plaintiffs’ expression. In taking these actions, they implemented the challenged KCC policies, violated Plaintiffs’ clearly established constitutional rights, and inflicted irreparable injury upon them.”

The suit requests the court rule KCC’s speech policies violate the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution.

Such Cases ‘All Too Common’

Travis Barham, legal counsel for ADF, said, “I’ve been litigating cases for years, but this is the first time I’ve heard of students arrested for handing out the Constitution. While this case is extreme, policies that allow this kind of situation, where students can’t engage in peaceful expression, are becoming, sadly, all too common.”

TRAVIS BARHAM
LEGAL COUNSEL, ALLIANCE DEFENDING FREEDOM

"I’ve been litigating cases for years, but this is the first time I’ve heard of students arrested for handing out the Constitution. While this case is extreme, policies that allow this kind of situation, where students can’t engage in peaceful expression, are becoming, sadly, all too common."

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
NV Governor Budgets $60 Million to Fund State ESA Program

By Kenneth Artz

In a bid to restart an extensive education choice plan a court struck down due to a perceived technicality, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval (R) proposes to allocate $60 million of the state budget toward funding the beleaguered Nevada Education Savings Account (ESA) program.

ESAs give parents access to the state tax money allocated for their children’s public education, to spend on educational alternatives such as private school tuition, homeschooling textbooks, educational therapies, and tutoring. The Nevada ESA program launched in January 2016 and is “the nation’s first universal ESA program,” according to EdChoice, meaning students need only have attended a Nevada public school for at least 100 days prior to applying to qualify for the program.

ACLU Opposed Choice

Nevada’s ESA program has been in and out of courtrooms since 2015, when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Nevada filed a lawsuit claiming the program violated the Nevada constitution’s Blaine amendment, which bars the use of public money to fund sectarian enterprises.

In its September 2016 ruling, the Nevada Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the ESA program but said it could not be funded with money intended for public schools.

Legislators have not agreed on a funding mechanism for the program, even though 8,000 parents have signed up to participate. In his State of the State speech in January, Sandoval proposed allocating $60 million to fund the ESA program.

“We Thank Gov. Sandoval”

Michael Chartier, director of state programs and government relations at EdChoice, says he’s grateful for Sandoval’s pledge of $60 million.

“We thank Gov. Sandoval for standing with the thousands of Nevada families who have signed up to exercise their choice in education,” Chartier said.

‘Simply Isn’t Enough’

“Total funding for the major public schools budget, the Distributive School Account, is $1.6 billion a year,” the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported in January.

Michael Schaus, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, says the ESA program’s $60 million limit will prevent the program from reaching its goals.

“The amount simply isn’t enough to cover the students already enrolled, meaning this program will be far from the universal program with which we began. Nevada had the opportunity to be the nation’s laboratory for educational innovation and advancement. Limiting ESAs too much damages that possibility.”

Private Schooling Improves Nations’ Test Scores, Study Shows

By Kenneth Artz

Private school education improves overall test scores in countries across the world, a new study reports.

The findings indicate increasing the number of private schools ultimately raises a nation’s standard of living.

“An increased share of private schooling within a country can increase the quality of education experienced by students through increased competitive pressures, specialization, and an improved match between educator and student,” researchers from the University of Arkansas (UArk) College of Education Reform wrote in January.

In their paper, titled “Does Private Schooling Improve International Test Scores? An Instrumental Variables Fixed Effects Analysis of the Impact of Private Schooling on PISA Scores,” researchers analyzed the effect of private schooling on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in 62 countries from 2000 to 2012. PISA is a test 15-year-old students in member states across the world take to assess their mastery of mathematics, reading, and science.

“We find evidence to suggest that increased private schooling leads to improved PISA scores around the world,” the authors of the UArk paper wrote. “Specifically, our preferred model finds that a ten percentage point increase in the private share of schooling enrollment is associated with a 28 percent standard deviation increase in math, a 24 percent standard deviation increase in reading, and an 18 percent standard deviation increase in science.”

‘Pretty Huge’ Findings

Corey DeAngelis, a distinguished doctoral fellow in UArk’s Department of Education Reform and coauthor of the paper, says the study shows countries can improve their economic and social conditions by fostering the growth of private schools.

“This is pretty huge as far as this type of research is concerned,” DeAngelis said. “PISA scores are one measure of the competitiveness of a country or a society overall. What we do is take 62 countries over a decade and compare them to themselves over time. We find when the share of private schools increases within a country over time, their PISA scores increase as well, by a quarter of a standard deviation, which is pretty large.”

Private Schooling Lifetime Effects

M. Danish Shakeel, a doctoral academy fellow at UArk’s Department of Education Reform and another coauthor of the paper, says the effects of private schooling go far beyond test scores.

“One of the things we found was, on average, if a country is able to increase its share of private schooling, then we should expect its cognitive scores in both math and reading to go up,” Shakeel said. “If you connect this to economic outcomes, it can raise a person’s well-being overall, and society’s especially. And if an individual realizes these learning gains, [he or she] would have 13 percent more lifetime earnings, or approximately $150,000.”

LEARN MORE

Chicago Teachers Union Deal Blocks Classical Charter School

By Teresa Mull

A labor agreement the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) signed in 2016 with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is making it difficult for a group of parents and advisors to open what would be the city’s first K–12 classical charter school.

Parents Alice Epstein and Heidi Schroeder have been working for three years to develop the proposed Chicago Classical Academy. The school is affiliated with the Barney Charter School Initiative, a project of Hillsdale College that assists groups working to found classical charter schools in designing curriculum and training teachers.

Chicago Classical’s founding board, composed of Epstein and Schroeder, Hillsdale graduate and financial advisor James Gurnee, and advisor Bruno Behrend, plans to submit a charter application to the CPS Board of Education in April. If it’s approved, the founders plan to open the Chicago Classical Academy in fall 2018.

‘Not an Easy Process at All’

Epstein says the charter process in Chicago seems designed to discourage applicants.

“It’s not an easy process at all,” Epstein said. “It’s daunting, long, difficult, and there are a lot of places along the road where I think a lot of teams would give up. The charter schools in Chicago are authorized by Chicago Public Schools. The teachers union in Chicago is very anti-charter, so there’s a very complicated dynamic there where the authorizer is very involved with a very anti-charter organization.”

‘Greatest Threat’ to Unions?

As part of a labor agreement CPS made with the Chicago Teachers Union in fall 2016, “Chicago Public Schools committed to limit the number of students enrolled in CPS charters from increasing much beyond the total capacity for all buildings at the end of last school year,” The Chicago Tribune reported in November. “The district also agreed to a ‘net zero increase’ in the number of charter schools it approves.”

Behrend says charter schools threaten CTU because families strongly prefer charters over traditional public schools.

“From the union’s perspective, charters are the greatest threat at the moment,” Behrend said. “Because so many students have moved out, they are really putting on very hard pressure to deny charters or freeze charters. They’re working at the state level and at the Chicago level to stop every charter they can.”

Engaging the Community

Epstein says Chicago Classical must engage the community to thwart the union’s objections.

“The best way to overcome [the union] is through very robust community engagement during the application process,” Epstein said. “That means reaching out to parents, businesses, churches, community centers, libraries, anything in the neighborhood that serves children and families. That process is difficult, and it’s very time-consuming, but in the end, it’s incredibly rewarding because you are really building a school that reflects the neighborhood and the people.”

Schroeder says the community engagement requirement is an appealing concept, but it allows the Board of Education too much room for interpretation.

“It is really great in theory that the process is requiring you to involve the community so [the school] is a wanted community, neighborhood school,” Schroeder said. “Where my pessimism comes in is that it allows for a lot of subjectivity.”

Inspiration and Mission

Epstein says personal experience inspired her to open the academy.

“I started researching charter schools in general and a classical model when I was trying to help my oldest stepdaughter navigate the Chicago Public School system,” Epstein said. “I found Hillsdale and the Barney Charter School Initiative, and I thought it was a fantastic academic program and could not find anything like that in Chicago. With three little ones now who need schooling in Chicago, this is my life’s passion, to make sure this school opens its doors soon for my kids and other kids like my family in the city.”

Epstein said the classical model ensures students “are truly well-rounded people who have at least begun to cover the knowledge that humanity shares.”

Epstein says “[most parents] faces light up” when she tells them about the classical model.

“This is exactly what they had been wanting for their children,” said Epstein. “They just weren’t able to verbalize it before we spoke about it.”

Education for Life

Gurnee says the well-rounded education he received at Hillsdale has helped him in the professional world.

“In high school I had a public education, so moving on to Hillsdale, I think the biggest advantage is the fact that you’re getting a little bit of everything,” Gurnee said. “You’re able to apply these skills to your life as you go on. I work in the finance industry, and that was not my major while at Hillsdale. You learn to be well-rounded and to think critically and to apply those lessons to other areas. The same has been true for a lot of Hillsdale graduates who have gone on to excel in other areas than their specific majors.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.

LEARN MORE

Michigan Legislator Proposes Teacher Pension Reform Plan

By Elizabeth BeShears

A Michigan lawmaker says he plans to push forward a plan to reform the state’s unsustainable teacher-pension system.

“The cost of underfunding pensions to school budgets is massive,” Michigan’s Mackinac Center for Public Policy reported in January 2016. “$6 billion to $7.8 billion would have been saved if employees had been offered defined-contribution benefits over the past decade—enough to pay for every public school teacher salary for a year. Using pension officials’ own assumptions and projections, the state now owes current and future school retirees $26.5 billion more than it has saved.”

State Rep. Tom Leonard (R-DeWitt) told reporters shortly after he was elected speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives in November 2016 one of his priorities would be to fix the state’s “broken” teacher retirement system, by giving new school hires 401(k)-style contribution plans that would match teacher contributions at 7 percent.

‘Troubling’ Facts

State law prevents schools from paying more than 27 percent of their payroll costs into the pension fund; the state legislature makes up the difference. That difference, Leonard says, is now $500 to $600 per year for each Michigan public school student.

Leonard says the pension problem is only going to get worse.

“Right now, we have a situation where the Michigan Public School Employee Retirement System has a $22 billion liability, but what’s even more troubling is that [the] broken retirement system is costing our local schools about 36 percent of their payroll,” Leonard told School Reform News.

“Just recently, I met with a group who gave me facts that were even more troubling,” said Leonard. “Right now, that 36 percent of payroll would be assuming an 8 percent return on investment in the pension fund, which is very generous, at best. If you ratchet that down to 6 or 5.5 percent, where it likely should be, in the next few years we could be looking at over 50 percent of local school districts’ payrolls going to pension funds.”

Teachers Unions ‘Lie’

Leonard says teachers unions are trying to paint him as a villain, saying he’ll steal pension money from retired teachers, but Michigan protects its pensions in its state constitution.

“Michigan is unique in that all state pensions are constitutionally protected, so even if we wanted to go there, we could not take away a retired school-teacher’s pension,” Leonard said. “That is simply a lie coming from the teachers union. This [plan] would apply to only new teachers moving forward, and it would allow us to get more money in the classrooms. When you look at the fact that we’re spending 36 percent of the payroll on pensions, if we could get that down to 7 percent, we could get a lot more money in the classrooms to help our children.”

Alternative System Ready

James Hohman, assistant director of fiscal policy at the Mackinac Center, says Michigan already offers a defined-contribution retirement system to its state employees that ought to serve as a model for its school-pension system,

Hohman says teachers’ pensions should move in that direction, too.

“Michigan offers a defined-contribution retirement system to its state employees that ought to serve as a model for its school-pension system,” Hohman said. “The state plan has always cost 7 percent of payroll, whereas the school pension system now costs 31 percent of payroll. And the benefits in the school plan are no longer that generous: Half of employees will leave before they vest in any pension.

“The ballooning underfunding problem has demanded more of today’s dollars to go to pay for yesterday’s deferment,” Hohman said. “The underfunding is growing faster than the taxes used to pay for schools. It has driven layoffs and teacher concessions around the state.”

Current System ‘Unfair’

Hohman says the current plan isn’t fair to anyone.

“The state is not supposed to be in this situation,” Hohman said. “It is supposed to set aside the cash necessary to pay for pensions as they are earned. But the state underfunding has made school employees the state’s largest creditors. The ever-increasing costs to pay down that debt means that there are high costs for benefits that are not very generous. It is a system that is unfair to school managers, teachers, and taxpayers alike.”

‘It’s Going to Be a Battle’

Republicans maintain majorities in the Michigan House and Senate, along with the governorship.

Leonard says he has the Senate majority leader on his side and is optimistic they can begin to tackle the problem during the current legislative session.

“It’s going to be a lot of work,” Leonard said. “It’s going to be a heavy lift. But what I do know is that it’s a big priority for myself as well as for the Senate majority leader, so we certainly have two legs of the stool right now that want to get this done. It’s just a matter of he and I being able to muster up the votes. The teacher lobby sometimes does have a huge impact on some of our members, as well as local superintendents, so it’s going to be a battle, but I think we’re going to get there.”

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erob@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
Every Senior at Ohio Catholic High School Accepted to College for Third Straight Year

By Ashley Bateman

Students at a Cincinnati, Ohio Catholic high school have set the bar high: For the third consecutive year, every senior at the school has been accepted to college.

DePaul Cristo Rey High School (DPCR), a Catholic, college preparatory school, opened in June 2011 as part of the national Cristo Rey Network (CRN), a system of schools that exclusively serves underprivileged students through a unique work-study program. All students at DPCR receive financial assistance and participate in the Corporate Work Study Program to offset part of their education costs. Families pay an average tuition of $500.

“The Cristo Rey Network is the only network of high schools in the country that integrates four years of rigorous college preparatory academics with four years of professional work experience through the Corporate Work Study Program,” CRN’s website says. “Comprised of 32 Catholic, college preparatory schools that today serve more than 10,700 students across 21 states and DC and collectively claim 11,500 graduates, the Cristo Rey Network delivers a powerful and innovative approach to inner-city education that equips students from economically disadvantaged families with the knowledge, character, and skills to transform their lives.”

Celebrating Success
In January, DPCR held a pep rally to celebrate the Class of 2017 achieving a college acceptance rate of 100 percent. “Every member of the Class of 2017 has been accepted to at least one college, most have been accepted to multiple schools, and these seniors have already earned $3.8 million in merit-based academic scholarships,” DPCR announced on its website in January. “And the acceptance letters and scholarship awards continue to arrive in seniors’ mailboxes.”

DPCR was honored in January by Ohio Gov. John Kasich (R) with the Governor’s School Innovation Award. “In recognizing the Cristo Rey schools, Ohio Governor John Kasich called the urban education model of college-prep academics and Corporate Work Study, ‘the coolest thing,’” DPCR reported on its website. “He said that all the schools recognized ‘take risks’ and ‘prepare students for the knowledge economy.’ He said that he hopes these schools inspire ‘education envy’ and ‘prepare students for the knowledge economy.’ He said that he hopes these schools inspire ‘education envy’ and ‘prepare students for the knowledge economy.’”

‘An Awesome Program for the Kids’
Judy Vann’s daughter, Imani, graduated from DePaul in May 2016 and is currently a freshman at Berea College in Kentucky. Vann says she credits the school with preparing her daughter for higher education and professional life.

“The work study is such an awesome program for the kids,” Vann said. “A lot of the kids come from the inner-city, where they don’t have that type of exposure to a job. They are enlightened as to how their day should be [at work study] and how to keep a certain level of professionalism. When the kids come in from their job, they are so excited they have employment and feel very good about themselves. Imani just sailed right into [college] without any difficulties. DePaul really got her prepared for the real world.”

‘Hard Work, Persistence, and Grit’
Bessette says the encouraging environment of DPCR makes all the difference in students’ lives.

“The success of three out of three possible years of 100 percent college acceptance is a testament to the hard work, persistence, and grit of our students,” Bessette said. “Many have come from prior schools where someone has told them they aren’t ‘college material’ or they don’t have family members who have graduated from college, so college enrollment has not been a supported goal. Yet when they arrive at DPCR, they are surrounded by people who encourage them, believe in them and tell them over and over that they will go to college.”

Vann says the school’s message of acceptance is an important contributor to the school’s positive learning environment.

“The kids are all from different backgrounds and cultures, and they get along very well together,” Vann said. “They’re taught inclusion and respect for each other, and that’s very important, because when you go out into the world, that’s what you find ... a diverse set of people.”

Vann says DPCR is staffed by “awesome people” who “have care and concern for the children.” “[They] go above and beyond,” Vann said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
By Jay Lehr

In my first review of these five living history books produced by talk radio star Rush Limbaugh and his wife Kathyrn, I explained only a wonderful graduate school course on the American Revolution had previously been able to transport me to this period in history the way the Rush Revere books have.

Through these books, I, along with thousands of kids across the country, have been able to experience the sights and sounds of America’s founding.

As I summarize my experiences as an adult reader of these books, I cannot emphasize too strongly that all my readers should gift these books to the young readers in their lives.

Poignant Contemporary References

In Rush Revere and the American Revolution, I was brought to tears while reading the final pages of this 239-page action-adventure book, when a young man greets his Army dad returning from a year in Afghanistan. While time-traveling through the great events leading to the formation of America, the boy had learned why his father had to leave him: to defend the freedom so many throughout history have worked so hard to protect.

The creativity in the story is pronounced. The author parallels modern-day activities with the adventures experienced by the students of fictional history teacher Rush Revere, who is accompanied by his time-traveling horse, Liberty. The students benefit from what they learn as they visit historical locations and events, such as Bunker Hill, the Battle of Concord, and the creation of the Declaration of Independence.

Learning America’s Founding

Rush Revere ultimately gets permission to take a few of his students on a field trip to Washington, DC, where they visit the National Archives and view the original documents upon which our country was founded. They see the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. They learn though the war ended in 1783, these documents were not completed until the end of 1787, a fact I had long forgotten.

The students pose so many fantastic questions to their history teacher Rush Revere about these documents he decides to saddle up Liberty and search out James Madison, one of the fathers of the Constitution, to see if he would answer the students’ questions. The group finds Madison in a coffee house studying history, and he invites them to dinner for a lengthy discussion.

On Madison’s way to dinner at his boarding house, he meets George Washington and tells him of Rush Revere. Washington remembers his earlier meeting with Rush and his students and tells Madison to feel free to share with them the activities of the secret Continental Congress. How cool is that!

History of the 13 Original Colonies

The after-dinner discussion with Madison and others at the table focuses on how strong the relationship between the 13 colonies had been during the Revolutionary War but had since deteriorated because of the selfish leadership in many states. Their Articles of Confederation were failing and a new constitution was necessary. Because of the numerous competing interests among the states, the Constitution had taken several years to forge, and even then, many states remained skeptical of granting any power to a centralized government.

For me, it was as though I was sitting at the table with Madison and the students, enthralled with the history I had never before understood so clearly.

Real-Life Applications

In the final book of this five-book series, history teacher Rush Revere learns that one of his students desires to run for student-body president of his middle school. Unfortunately, the young boy’s motivation to win the election is to attain power and to become the most popular boy on campus. Carefully, Rush Revere guides the boy toward understanding what real leadership is about: service to society, something the Founding Fathers knew well.

The intermixing of modern-day life with early U.S. history feels so natural that young readers will receive an understanding of civics not widely available.

While I have long been a student of history, my new memories of sitting before these great men as they chatted with Rush Revere’s students during their time-traveling adventures will remain in my memory forever. You will never find a greater gift for the young people in your life than this magnificent set of books.

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