New York to Require Mental Health Education in K–12 Schools

By Kenneth Artz

New York has become the first state to require schools to provide mental health education, with curriculum changes to go into effect this fall.

A state law enacted in 2016 requires government schools to include mental health education in K–12 curricula. Local districts are required to develop lesson plans under guidance from the state Mental Health Education Advisory Council.

Mental health education will be incorporated into government school classes beginning in the 2018–19 academic year.
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Study: Federal Disciplinary Policies Lower Wisconsin Students’ Achievement

By Teresa Mull

Disciplinary policies imposed by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) have reduced student achievement in Wisconsin, researchers have found.

“In response to allegations of bias in suspension rates in schools along racial lines, the Obama Administration increased federal involvement in discipline policy across the country,” researchers Will Flanders and Natalie Goodnow write in “Collateral Damage: The Impact of Department of Education Policies on Wisconsin Schools,” released in January 2018. “Through a ‘Dear Colleague’ memo, federal incentives and legal threats, the [U.S.] Department of Education and Department of Justice worked in concert to push forward a system of positive behavioral support that was designed to reduced [sic] suspension rates, particularly among minority students.

“We gathered data on the implementation of the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system from more than 2,000 schools throughout Wisconsin from 2009–2016,” the authors report. “We combined this with data on the number of suspensions and academic outcomes of most schools in the state over the same time frame.”

Among key findings in the report, the authors state, “Mathematics and Reading Proficiency are lower in schools that implement PBIS,” and “Negative proficiency effects of PBIS are stronger in suburban and rural schools.”

‘Some Students Feel Unsafe’

Goodnow, a research fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL), says the policy mandates did not originate from evidence of need.

“Under the Obama administration, the Department of Education made a big push to reduce suspensions, in large part to combat accusations of racial discrimination in student suspensions,” Goodnow said. “Evidence has shown that African American students are suspended at higher rates than their peers. Around 2010, the Department of Education decided to focus on this issue, and they really ramped things up in 2014 with a ‘Dear Colleague’ letter. This letter told schools they had to dramatically reduce suspensions and replace them with softer discipline policies, like [PBIS]. There hasn’t been a whole lot of research on the effectiveness of these policies, but there has been some evidence that they make teachers feel unsupported, and they even, in fact, make some students feel unsafe, which is worrying.”

Calls for Local Control

Goodnow says control over disciplinary policy should be returned to the local level.

“There are kind of three different levels to work at,” Goodnow said. “We found math and reading proficiencies are lower at schools that implement softer discipline policies like PBIS, and that negative effects are greater in suburban and rural schools. Since releasing this report, we’ve heard from several teachers who have reached out to agree with our findings, reporting these softer discipline policies aren’t working in their classrooms. We think this is definitely an area of opportunity for the Trump administration and [U.S. Education Secretary] Betsy DeVos to rescind this Dear Colleague letter, but we think more also needs to be done at the state and local level.

“It’s important that states take a look at this and look into the impact of these policies in their schools and how they can actually support teachers and make them feel safer,” Goodnow said. “At the local level, schools should be aware of the collateral damage of this one-size-fits-all approach and determine whether PBIS is harming student climate and academic performance in their schools, and whether or not it’s a good fit for their students.”

Still Being Enforced

WILL Research Director Will Flanders says he’s surprised the Trump administration has not eliminated the PBIS policies.

“We heard through the grapevine that Betsy DeVos and the Trump administration are going to reverse this Dear Colleague letter, but we’ve been kind of surprised it hasn’t happened as yet, and actually what we saw in Milwaukee last month that not only are they not rescinding it, but they’re actually continuing to enforce the threats that are contained in the letter on the school districts,” Flanders said. “The Milwaukee school district here settled with the Department of Justice and were sort of forced to make changes to their disciplinary policy. So not only is it still in place, but it still to some extent is being enforced.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
New Tax Law Expands College Savings Plans to K–12

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President Trump signed the tax reform bill just before Christmas 2017.

Cruz Offered Successful Amendment
Prior to passage of the final tax reform bill, the U.S. Senate passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which included a Student Opportunity Amendment by Sen. Ted Cruz (R–TX) expanding the use of 529 dollars to include homeschool, private, and parochial students.

A letter sent to Cruz’s office in December 2017 with the signatures of 70 organizations had advocated the expansion of 529 education savings accounts. A project of the Invest in Education Foundation and the #EdTaxCredit50 Coalition, the letter urged the House and Senate to include the expansion language in the tax reform bill.

“If included in the final law, this will mark the first legislative expansion of nationwide private school choice in 20 years,” the letter stated.

Before Congress voted on the final version, a vote on Cruz’s amendment reached a 50–50 tie in the Senate. Vice President Mike Pence cast a midnight vote to pass the amendment.

Dems Exclude Homeschool Families
Although 529 plans are now available to students in elementary and secondary schools, the homeschool population was rejected when Senate Democrats used a procedural technicality to strike a few lines from the tax bill that deemed certain homeschooling expenses as permissible withdrawals from 529 accounts.

Thomas Carroll, president of the Invest in Education Foundation, says homeschooling parents should be allowed to participate just like anybody else.

“If parents are able to invest their own money in a 529 account, they should be able to take it out for legitimate homeschooling expenses,” Carroll said. “They are not asking for a gift from anybody; they are investing their own money.”

Carroll says homeschooling families provide a significant benefit to the public schools through their property taxes.

“Young incurring public expenses, they are paying federal, state, and local taxes to support schools that their children are not attending,” Carroll said. “They are doing a tremendous public service. The least we can do is make it easier to save their own money.”

Carroll says the credits are clearly targeted toward the middle class, not the rich.

“For the average person, 529 accounts have a big effect, because in states that allow you to deduct up to a certain amount of 529 contribution from your taxes, you can put money in and then take it right back out to pay private school tuition. Meanwhile, families are able to save a little money on their state taxes.”

JEFFREY DORFMAN
PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
Indiana, Colorado Ranked at Top for Charter School Laws

By Ashley Bateman

Potential for growth and a high degree of autonomy helped place Indiana and Colorado at the top of a new ranking of states’ charter school laws.


Indiana was rated number one in the nation. The state allows unlimited charter school growth, recognizes multiple authorizers, and has high-quality autonomy and accountability practices, making its law the nation’s strongest. Colorado took second place, “in part because of legislation that the state enacted in 2017 that will provide charter schools with equitable access to a local funding stream that most districts had refused to share with charter schools,” the report said.

PublicSchoolOptions.org criticized the rankings in an email, stating, “Some states [NAPCS] ranks in the top 10 are abysmal at actually providing public charter school options for students and families.”

Identifying Best Practices

Todd Ziebarth, NAPCS senior vice president for state advocacy and support, says NACPS developed its model law after much study.

“Right after we were created, we were doing a lot of work with state partners, charter association partners, regarding policies, accountability, funding caps, authorizing, … and we kept getting the question of who was doing this best and are there replicable models out there,” Ziebarth said.

NAPCS then assembled a working group of charter school law pioneers from the 15 years they’d been on the market, to reflect on what worked.

“We put together a model charter school law in 2009 and released it, and the purpose of that was twofold,” Ziebarth said. “One, at the time there were still 10 or 11 states that didn’t have charter school laws, so we wanted to give them a foundation from which to work as they crafted their own laws. We also wanted to have some best practices in the area—even if a state has a charter school law on the books, if they needed to improve accountability, facilities, flexibility—a model law to provide some best practices and support and options as they dig into improvement issues.”

Laws, Then Implementation

The rankings measure states against the model law. A separate report considers the implementation of those laws and factors for growth, innovation, and quality, which Ziebarth says isn’t easy information to collect.

“That has been a lot more challenging to do, getting good data and information across states and across years,” Ziebarth said.

Calls Model ‘Nonsense’

Tillie Elvrum, board president of PublicSchoolOptions.org, criticizes the rankings for concentrating on state laws.

“What should always matter most is if a charter law actually produces charter schools and that the law empowers students and families with new opportunities and choices,” Elvrum said. “The idea of ranking charter laws based on a one-size-fits-all ’model’ law instead of on how effective a charter law is at actually creating charter options for families is nonsense. A football team might look great on paper, the right players at the right positions, but if they fail to actually win games, how good are they?”

Explaining the Rankings

Ziebarth says the rankings reflect states’ foundations for long-term success.

“There have been five states that have come on with charter schools since we started the law review,” Ziebarth said. “We were deeply involved in all of those places, including Kentucky, Mississippi, and Alabama, so of course they stack up well because they used the model law. We feel like in those places they’re really setting a foundation for long-term success. But they do not move fast on education reform. These are risk-averse places. It took them 25 years to pass a charter law; they’re going to move cautiously.”

‘One-Size-Fits-All’ Problem

States have very different education systems, starting with differing constitutional frameworks and diverse funding models, and the very idea there is a one-size-fits-all best way to write a charter law for every state is completely at odds with the concept behind charter laws, Elvrum says.

“The rankings are based on a model that places far more value and trust in educational bureaucrats than the parents themselves and the schools they want to choose,” Elvrum said. “A prerequisite to be a high-ranking law should be how the law has worked to empower families with choices.

“Any law that fails to create widespread new educational opportunities for students and families, and fails to fundamentally empower and trust parents with decisions about their children, should never be given a high ranking, especially by organizations that are supposed to be supporting charter schools and the families who need options,” Elvrum said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.aa@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
New York to Require Mental Health Education in K–12 Schools

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‘A Major Inherent Danger’
Max Eden, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, says the requirements seem well-intentioned but are likely to create further problems.

“On the one hand, this seems like it can and should be a useful and constructive role for schools to play,” Eden said. “Basic knowledge of a handful of well-established facts about mental health can help provide students the tools to navigate confusing times and delineate between normal problems and pathological ones.

“The fear is that the concepts and frames from mental illness will bleed over and pathologize normal behavior and experiences,” Eden said. “We have seen on college campuses a widespread adoption of the notion of ‘triggering,’ a term of art from mental illness that’s now a mental lens through which a generation sees the world. So, there is a major inherent danger: that schools will use the language of mental health to inculcate particular, and perhaps very unhealthy, ways of thinking about the human experience.”

Data Problems
Ann Marie Banfield, a grassroots parent activist and education liaison for Cornerstone Action in New Hampshire, says unspecified treatment details and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data cited as justifying the curriculum decision cast doubt on the wisdom of the policy.

“My first concern is with the statistics they use to justify actions that they are taking,” Banfield said. “I’m not familiar with the CDC conducting double-blind, objective, peer-reviewed studies [on this subject]. The CDC does collect data from surveys through the Risk Behavior Surveys. Are the statistics authentic to begin with?

“Assuming that 20 percent of children are experiencing mental illness, as they suggest, my other concerns would be how they treat children in the public schools,” Banfield said. “If 20 percent are classified as having some sort of mental illness, are they treating 100 percent of the students? How are they treating the 20 percent or 100 percent of the students? What kind of mental illness are they treating? Depression? Suicidal thoughts? Behavior problems? Who is treating the students, and what credentials do they have to treat the more serious mental health problems?”

Questions Teachers’ Role
Banfield says she doesn’t think the average public school teacher is qualified to administer mental health evaluations of children.

“In New Hampshire, we found schools using teachers to assess students using a mental health assessment,” Banfield said. “I’ve had teachers contact me directly saying they are uncomfortable assessing their students. They were more bothered that their own children, who also attend a public school, were being assessed. They don’t know where the information goes, and they know the few hours of training the teachers receive does not qualify them for assessing their child’s mental health.

“I had a parent in Londonderry, [New Hampshire] contact me saying her child was removed from class and spoke to the school counselor, but when she asked to see the notes that were taken, the school refused to give them to her,” Banfield said. “She ended up pulling her kids out of the school and transferring them to a different school.”

Appropriate Venue?
Terry Stoops, vice president of research and director of education studies at The John Locke Foundation, says he’s worried schools are not the right place for treating children with mental health problems.

“I think they identify an actual problem,” Stoops said. “I don’t think the issue is whether children face mental health challenges; there are plenty of examples, some of them tragic. There’s evidence of that. Really, the issue is whether the schools are the appropriate venue for tending to the mental health needs of students.

“This is the typical one-size-fits-all-approach to a problem that will only affect a fraction of the number of students with mental health issues of varying severity. And I’m worried other states are going to follow New York state’s lead and take the same type of approach by incorporating a comprehensive mental health curriculum into the public school system.”

‘Choice Has a Role’
Stoops says school choice would provide a better solution.

“I think educational choice has a role here,” Stoops said. “Giving parents the resources to send their children to schools that specialize in the identification and treatment of mental illness would allow the states to focus resources on those who would benefit the most.

“In a state like New York, it’s doubtful that school choice would ever be considered a solution for these sorts of problems, but other states hopefully will find school choice to be one of the avenues to finding a solution to this problem,” Stoops said.

Kenneth Arzt (kennethcharlesartz@gmx.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Minnesota District Forces Kindergarteners to Analyze ‘White Privilege’ in the Classroom

By Kenneth Artz

A Minnesota school district has instituted an aggressively political curriculum requiring students to begin thinking about race in kindergarten and sustain that emphasis all the way through high school. Students attending government schools in the Edina School District in suburban Minneapolis have been subjected to the district’s “All for All” strategic plan since 2013. The program is “a sweeping initiative that reordered the district’s mission from academic excellence for all students to ‘racial equity,’” the Weekly Standard reported in February. “The Edina school district’s All for All plan mandated that henceforth ‘all teaching and learning experiences’ would be viewed through the ‘lens of racial equity,’ and that only ‘racially conscious’ teachers and administrators should be hired.”

Kindergarten students participate in a project aimed at examining their skin color. Tenth graders are required to take a course focusing on colonization, immigration, and “Social Constructions of Race, Class and Gender.” Since the program’s implementation, black students of Race, Class and Gender.” Since the program’s implementation, black student test scores have largely decreased across the board.

‘Can’t Really Be Surprised’

Julie Gunlock, a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum, says parents are largely to blame for curricula like the Edina program becoming rampant in government schools. “Parents need to take some of the responsibility” for the trend, Gunlock said. “After all, parents have willingly ceded many parental duties to schools and school officials. We can’t really be surprised that teachers and school administrators view it as their duty to teach a certain political ideology when they do a ton of other things for kids. Schools offer three meals a day, before- and after-care babysitting, health care, contraception, recreational programs to entertain our kids, daycare services for teens who have had babies. Some schools even send kids home with food over holiday breaks when the school is closed.

“The sad truth is that public schools are becoming social service hubs, so we shouldn’t be shocked when those that work in schools seek to prop up that system,” Gunlock said.

‘Parents Are Frequently Shut Out’

Jane Robbins, a senior fellow with the American Principles Project, says schools oftentimes go to great lengths to conceal what’s going on in classrooms.

“Most schools aren’t as explicit about what they’re doing as Edina is,” Robbins said. “I was quite struck by how explicit they are, by the types of people they’re hiring and the mindsets they require before they hire certain people. That was just quite remarkable to me. But as far as other schools are concerned, this sort of thing is happening, not to that degree, but it’s coming in just through the general curricula that are being turned out by various instructional materials companies and certainly with education tech products like digital learning.

“When something is online, frequently parents can’t even see what their children are seeing at school,” Robbins said. “Sometimes they can—sometimes there’s a parent portal, but frequently there isn’t, and sometimes the children are not allowed to log in to the school materials at home. They have to do that at school, so parents are frequently shut out. They have no idea what is happening, and I can assure you that the problem isn’t that the learning materials are leaning conservative. They’re all leaning in the other direction.”

‘It Is Slow and Relentless’

Robbins says the educational elites pushing these politicized curricula are relentless and secretive in their efforts. “They play the long game,” Robbins said. “They’ve been playing the long game for 100 years. They don’t think anything of getting struck down by a local school board. They just hide their time and work on other areas, then slowly but surely it all comes around. … So [for instance], somebody creates a digital curriculum for California, then other states start to use that curriculum, and parents don’t know it’s being used, and frequently the local and state school boards wouldn’t even know that’s in the curriculum. It is slow and relentless, like dripping water, and eventually it will erode away all of our founding values.”

‘More Divisiveness’

Robbins says the type of instruction conducted at Edina and elsewhere will have terrible consequences for society in the long run.

“You are not going to have students who are well-educated. You are going to have students who are indoctrinated in certain beliefs and that sort of thing. If you are minimizing the great literature and the legitimate, objective lessons of history that students have been exposed to in the past, then you are going to have less-educated people and you’re going to have more divisiveness.”

JANE ROBBINS
SENIOR FELLOW
AMERICAN PRINCIPLES PROJECT

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KENNETH ARTZ
kennethcharlesartz@gmx.com writes from Dallas, Texas.
Charter Schools Have Positive Impact on Nearby Schools, Study Finds

By Ashley Bateman

Charter schools positively affect neighboring schools’ student achievement, a new study finds.

Charters have a “spillover” effect on nearby traditional government schools, and the closer the proximity to a charter school, the greater the positive effect on the students in the nearby schools, Sarah A. Cordes, assistant professor of policy, organizational, and leadership studies at Temple University, reports in “Charters and the Common Good: The spillover effects of charter schools in New York City,” published by EducationNext in spring 2018.

Cordes studied more than a decade’s worth of student achievement data for 876,731 students attending 584 elementary schools in community school districts in New York City (NYC) with at least one charter school serving children in similar grades.

“These findings shed new light on the public debate over the effects of charter schools on non-charter students,” Cordes writes. “Rather than sapping resources and putting students at district schools at a disadvantage, the data in New York City show that students do better when charters open nearby.

In particular, students at co-located charter schools at a disadvantage, the data in New York City show that students do better when charters open nearby. In particular, students at co-located traditional schools at a disadvantage, the data in New York City show that students do better when charters open nearby. In particular, students at co-located district schools that are co-located with other district schools do not experience similar performance gains.”

Policy Implications

Cordes says the policy implications of her research are twofold.

“First, charter schools appear to have modest positive effects, or at the very least, no significant negative effects on student performance at district schools nearby,” Cordes writes. “This suggests that rather than capping the number of charter schools, it may be beneficial (and certainly not harmful) to allow for further expansion in NYC. Second, my results indicate that controversial co-location practices may actually be a good policy for both charter and district schools in NYC.”

The Closer, the Better

Cordes told School Reform News New York City policies make her research particularly meaningful.

“New York City has smaller districts within the larger districts,” Cordes said. “It was a unique opportunity that I had in New York because it’s one of the few cities that does co-location.

“I found that charters seemed to be increasing the performance of traditional public school students, and the effect was bigger when the charter school was co-located,” Cordes said. “The impact in the co-located school was relatively sizeable given that this was not an intervention within the schools, just going on without.”

More Spending Per Pupil

Cordes says the presence of charter schools enables traditional government schools to spend more money per pupil.

“New York City is rather unique in that [there is] school-level financial data,” Cordes said. “I wanted to look not just at the effects of charters on student performance, but the financial effect as well.

“I found that after charter schools opened, there was actually more spending per pupil at the school level for [traditional government] schools that were located near a charter school,” Cordes said. “The reasons for that, I suspect when I look at enrollments, is the enrollments in those schools declined slightly but not drastically enough to reduce the number of teachers. The school couldn’t really cut [costs], and it’s getting spread out over a smaller number of students. New York has some very specific funding for schools, where the budget can’t change much from year to year.”

“Competition is a dirty word in education, but it shouldn’t be. When school districts have a monopoly over enrollment, they have little incentive to innovate and respond to the needs of families.”

AARON SMITH

EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST, REASON FOUNDATION

“Competition is a dirty word in education, but it shouldn’t be. When school districts have a monopoly over enrollment, they have little incentive to innovate and respond to the needs of families.”

“Competition is a dirty word in education, but it shouldn’t be,” Cordes said.

“When school districts have a monopoly over enrollment, they have little incentive to innovate and respond to the needs of families. Options such as charters, open enrollment policies, and education savings accounts give parents the ability to hold schools accountable if they fail to meet their needs, and it shouldn’t be surprising that educators respond to parent-driven accountability by getting better. Just as competition has improved our standard of living in every other facet of life, it can also help improve outcomes in education.

“The results are encouraging, and we’ve come a long way in this respect, but we also need to maintain perspec-

tive, as there’s still much work to be done before all families have robust options,” Smith said. “Only then will we see exactly how beneficial competition really is.”

More Charters, Larger Impact?

Cordes says additional data will provide further insights into the effect of charter schools on neighboring traditional government schools.

“There’s been some research out there that indicates that charters take a while to get off the ground and become effective, and you need the longer period of data in order to assess that,” Cordes said. “My data captured ten years of charter schools, and they didn’t really start ramping up until two or three years after I began collecting my data. In the period I was studying, only about 5 percent of kids were in charters, not a huge part of the market.

“I would like to do work in other cities where charters are a larger share of the market,” Cordes said.

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

Learn More
Kentucky Lawmakers Reintroduce Tax-Credit Scholarship Legislation

By Savannah Edgens

Kentucky lawmakers have reintroduced legislation to bring tax-credit scholarships to the state, after the same bills failed last year.

Kentucky currently has no education choice programs. House Bill 134 and Senate Bill 36 would enable individuals and businesses to receive tax credits for donating funds to scholarships for middle- and low-income students to use at private schools or for other educational services.

“Developmentally disabled students would also be eligible to use the scholarships for either non-public school tuition or needed educational services such as occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech therapy,” the Lexington Herald Leader reported in January. “All foster children would be eligible for the scholarships regardless of family income.”

As of late February, H.B. 134 had moved to the Appropriations and Revenue Committee, and S.B. 36 had not yet been taken up for consideration.

Says Kentucky Needs Choice

Richard Innes, an education analyst at the Bluegrass Institute, says Kentucky is far behind the times in providing school choice.

“There’s no question that Kentucky needs more school choice options,” Innes said. “Last year, we passed a charter school bill that is still in the initiation phase. We don’t have any charter schools yet, and we really don’t anticipate seeing them until at least one more school term. We really don’t have any of the school choice options that any of the other states enjoy.”

‘The Gruesome Truth’

Innes says traditional public schools aren’t getting the job done for Kentucky children and the taxpayers who pay for the system.

“The gruesome truth is that only 40 percent of Kentucky’s fourth graders scored proficient in either reading or math,” Innes said. “That’s after more than a quarter-of-a-century of very expensive education reform efforts in our traditional public school system. In eighth grade, it gets much worse, with the worst case being eighth grade math. In 2015, only 28 percent of our eighth graders, overall, were proficient in math.”

‘Aren’t Really Any Drawbacks’

The tax-credit bill has bipartisan support and no noticeable flaws, says Andrew Vandiver, associate director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky.

“The way I see it, there aren’t really any drawbacks to the bill,” Vandiver said. “This is a bill that gives people choice. Legislation like this has been shown to improve educational outcomes across the board in other states. One of the most important issues is that it will save money over time. This legislative session, there is a lot of concern over new tax credits and anything that could potentially cost the state money.”

ESAs Gaining in Popularity

Jason Bedrick, director of policy at EdChoice, says a more expansive choice approach, education savings accounts, is popular in many state legislatures this year.

“There are a lot of states, right now, looking at education savings accounts,” Bedrick said. “The idea behind the ESA is that education takes place in more places than just the school. It’s expanding beyond the traditional classroom and providing families with an opportunity to use their education funds not just for private school tuition but also for certain homeschooling expenses, online courses, educational therapy, tutoring, textbooks, and so on.”

Savannah Edgens (savannah.edgens@gmail.com) writes from Gainesville, Florida.
Increased Access to Private Schools Raises Overall Test Scores, Study Finds

By Harry Painter

More access to private schooling improves student outcomes across the globe, a new study has found.

Increasing the private share of the world’s total primary school enrollment would moderately increase achievement in math, reading, and science, reports “The Public Benefit of Private Schooling: Test Scores Rise When There Is More of It,” released in January 2018 by the Cato Institute.

The study examined children’s test scores in 52 countries to see whether the data support the economic theory that private schools improve outcomes by putting competitive pressure on other schools, plus the proposition school choice provides a better match between teachers and pupils. The statistics support these hypotheses, the study shows.

Rather than relying on potentially faulty international comparisons, the study compares each nation to itself over time, controlling for changes in population and gross domestic product.

“I find that access to private schooling has moderate effects on math, reading, and science achievement for children across the globe,” study author Corey DeAngelis writes. “This report, alongside robust scientific evidence of improved short- and long-term outcomes for students and societies, further indicates that decisionmakers ought to increase access to private school choice around the world. In particular, Education Savings Accounts, tuition tax credits, individual tax credits, and voucher programs could increase access to private schooling and other private educational services within countries.”

Comparing School Choice

DeAngelis, a policy analyst at Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, told School Reform News not all forms of education choice are created equal.

“This study does not tease out the differential effects of charter schools and private schools,” DeAngelis said. “However, there are strong economic reasons to prefer private schools over charters. Private schools can fluctuate tuition levels, meaning that they can be financially rewarded when they attract large numbers of customers. Charter schools, on the other hand, are rewarded with a student waitlist. And as economists know, persistent shortages lead to quality reduction over time. The waitlist gives the charter school strong monopoly power—after all, if a family is unhappy with the education offered, the charter school could replace them with some other desperate customer waiting in line.

“Prices eliminate shortages,” DeAngelis said. “That is why we rarely find empty shelves in the grocery stores in the United States. Just imagine if government were to set the price of a loaf of bread artificially low—to 10 cents, for example. Of course, the shelves would constantly be empty. So it goes with charter schools.”

Considers ESAs Best Policy

DeAngelis says education savings accounts (ESAs) are ideal for maximizing student achievement.

“Privately funded ESAs are the optimal education choice policy we have available today,” DeAngelis said. “By allowing families to customize their children’s educations, ESAs take advantage of the fact that schooling is but one channel to achieve an education. While vouchers are school choice, ESAs are education choice. And education is what we really want.

“In addition, ESAs are more closely aligned with economic theory because families have an incentive to spend less than the maximum amount on their private school,” DeAngelis said. “That is not the case with vouchers, as families do not get to keep unused voucher funds for other expenses. In other words, vouchers create price floors in the schooling market, while ESAs allow for price variation. Price variation provides private schools with the information and incentives they need to succeed.”

‘Countrywide Effects’

Patrick J. Wolf, a distinguished professor at the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform, says the Cato study offers a unique global perspective.

“The study produces an unbiased estimate that increased access to private schooling in developed countries causes student test scores to go up in reading, math, and science.”

Patrick J. Wolf

Professor

University of Arkansas

LEARN MORE

Great Hearts Charter Network Makes Classical Education More Accessible

By Ashley Bateman

A n increasingly popular network of classical schools illustrates why the number of charter schools across the United States is now nearing 7,000, serving more than three million school children across the nation.

From work-study to character development, the arts, and civics education, charters provide an alternative to traditional public schools and have soared in growth and popularity, with enrollment tripling in the past decade.

‘Big Ideas of Human History’

Great Hearts Academies is a nonprofit network of public charter schools “dedicated to improving education nationwide through classical preparatory K–12 academies,” the organization’s website states.

Devoted to fully classical and liberal arts education, Great Hearts was founded more than a decade ago in Arizona. It now serves nearly 15,000 students at 28 schools across Arizona and Texas and has become Arizona’s largest nonprofit charter school network. No other network in the nation has more classical “brick and mortar” schools.

“What we offer is an education in the big ideas of human history,” said Jake Tawney, vice president of curriculum at Great Hearts. “Our goal is to help students become intellectually, morally, and aesthetically alive by providing them with an education in truth, goodness, and beauty. At the core of this is our Great Books program, wherein students read the best that has been written in literature, philosophy, and history. Surrounding this program is a set of rigorous courses in mathematics, science, and the fine arts. The liberal arts, after all, include all of this, presented as a beautiful whole to the student.”

‘Classical Education Is Vital’

Jay Heiler, Great Hearts cofounder and board chairman, says the network’s goals have remained consistent.

“When Great Hearts was founded, our dual intention was the same as today: Restore classical liberal arts as the standard of excellence in American education and make it broadly available to everyone in a tuition-free, public school setting.”

JAY HEILER, COFOUNDER AND BOARD CHAIRMAN, GREAT HEARTS ACADEMIES

“'A nonprofit, mission-driven, and community-supported organization, Great Hearts will continue to expand for the purposes of bringing a world-class, classical liberal arts education to as many children and families as possible ...”

JAY HEILER, COFOUNDER AND BOARD CHAIRMAN, GREAT HEARTS ACADEMIES

SAT scores than those attending elite, expensive private prep schools, Heiler said.

Continued Growth

Heiler says Great Hearts’ success is a product of high standards.

“We have accomplished the growth and scale thus far realized through sound execution across a wide, interdisciplinary range of competencies, ranging from the core academic offering to real estate and finance to public affairs to marketing,” Heiler said.

‘We Feel a Moral Imperative’

Heiler and Tawney say the Great Hearts model is designed for growth.

“Because we believe what [the philosopher] Mortimer Adler said, that ‘the best education for the best is the best education for all,’ we feel a moral imperative to provide this model to as many students as we can,” Tawney said. “Great Hearts is always looking to expand, both within the markets in which we already operate—Phoenix, Dallas/Irving, and San Antonio—and into new markets.”

“A nonprofit, mission-driven, and community-supported organization, Great Hearts will continue to expand for the purposes of bringing a world-class, classical liberal arts education to as many children and families as possible.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Schools Receive Washing Machines and Dryers to Clean Kids’ Clothes

By Kenneth Artz

A few dozen schools around the nation are receiving washing machines and dryers so school staff members can wash children’s clothes for them.

“Care Counts,” a program created through a partnership between Teach for America and Whirlpool Corporation, “installs washers and dryers in schools to improve attendance by giving kids access to clean clothes,” a video on the Whirlpool website states. The program has installed washing machines and dryers in 10 districts and 58 schools, including six Chicago Public Schools (CPS) locations, the Chicago Sun-Times reported in January.

‘No Easy Solutions’

Lennie Jarratt, project manager for the Center for Transforming Education at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says the Care Counts program is compassionate but won’t solve the underlying problem.

“This is a sad situation and highlights the rampant poverty levels in our urban centers,” Jarratt said. “This project fills an immediate need for students in these underserved areas, helping them stay in school and continue their education.

“There are no easy solutions, however, and education alone cannot solve this problem,” Jarratt said. “There are steps that can be taken to help lift these students out of poverty, and the best long-term solution is full educational choice: expanding the educational options students can access, especially those in poverty.”

‘Pattern Is Unsustainable’

Vicki E. Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute and author of Failure: The Federal “Misedukation” of America’s Children, says CPS should focus on improving classroom education if it wants disadvantaged children to succeed.

“The donation of washers and dryers at six Chicago public schools is a testament to the generosity of the private and nonprofit sectors to help meet the most basic needs of disadvantaged students,” Alger said. “But helping disadvantaged students escape a life of poverty requires a candid look at what happens after the spin cycle.

“In spite of notable recent improvements in student achievement, test scores of CPS elementary- and middle-school students indicate they are up to one-and-a-half grade levels behind the national average,” Alger said. “Alarming achievement gaps among low-income and minority students also persist. Meanwhile, CPS costs are rising even as enrollment declines. This pattern is unsustainable for students and the taxpayers in their communities.”

Calls for More Choice

Alger says education choice programs would help impoverished children tremendously.

“Programs such as Illinois’ Invest in Kids tax-credit scholarship program for low-income and disadvantaged students expand their educational options to higher-performing and safer schools for thousands of dollars less [than what CPS spends per student],” Alger said.

“Education savings accounts put parents and guardians in charge of their children’s education funding so they can purchase the online curricula, tutoring, special education therapies, tuition, and other approved educational services that best meet their children’s unique needs. These programs, operating in Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee, empower parents to customize their children’s learning at unprecedented levels.

“Putting parents and guardians in charge of the children’s education works and encourages a greater diversity of providers to better ensure that students find the educational fit that works best for them,” Alger said.

Kenneth Artz (kennethcharlesartz@gmx.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.

KU Crime Down 13 Percent, No Weapons Violations in Year One of Campus Carry

It’s been several months since the University of Kansas (KU) began to permit students and staff to carry legally owned weapons on campus, and over that period, there has been a 13 percent drop in crime compared to data from one year ago.

In 2017, 671 criminal offenses were reported to KU police, compared to 770 in 2016. The number of thefts dropped the most among all reported criminal offenses. There were 56 thefts in 2017, down from 213 in 2016. There were only two auto thefts in 2017, down from six the year before.

It would be rash to argue the fears held by would-be thieves of armed defense increased after just one year of the policy, but it is entirely reasonable to suggest the law did not empower thieves to step up their game. It would be equally rash to tell virtue-signaling KU professor Kevin Wilmott that he no longer needs to wear a bulletproof vest, but it is not too early to tell Wilmott that he rendered himself needlessly uncomfortable for however many days he has worn the vest since campus carry became law.

Wilmott made a national splash in August 2017 when he showily appeared on campus in his bulletproof vest. “Try to forget that I’m wearing a vest,” Wilmott said at the time to his imagined critics, “and I’ll try to forget that you could be packing a .44 magnum.”

No Weapons Violations

According to the KU Office of Public Safety, there were zero weapons violations in 2017. Despite a near meltdown on campus by those who are indifferent or hostile to the Second Amendment, including Wilmott, eight months have passed without incident since the law went into effect on July 1.

In this regard, 2017 was something of an anomaly. There were 14 weapons violations on campus from 2008 to 2016.

During his 15 minutes of fame, Wilmott worried that having guns “welcomed” on campus could “obstruct the free flow of ideas in classrooms when controversial topics like race and religion are discussed.” What most certainly did obstruct the free flow of ideas was having the professor wear his biases on his chest.

This article originally appeared in The Sentinel and is available at https://sentinelksmo.org. Reprinted with permission.
The New York State Education Department ordered a school district that has been failing students for nearly 30 years to create an improvement plan.

Hempstead School District in Nassau County on Long Island has nearly 8,000 students, 70 percent of whom are Hispanic. Approximately 40 percent of the district’s students are not proficient in English.

“…district and ordered it to create a plan,” Schaus said. “Districts like Hempstead demonstrate precisely why this system-first mentality is so dangerous.”

Ignoring Parents, Students
Schaus says government-school reform efforts focus on bureaucracy, not people.

“Sadly, the conversation in many underperforming districts ignores the single most important aspect of successful reforms: the parents and the students themselves,” Schaus said. “Rather than talking about what bureaucratic institution ought to have more power, oversight, or control, we should be discussing ways to empower parents.

“Giving parents a choice in where and how their child is educated is, by far, the most empowering reform we could implement for students in underperforming districts,” Schaus said.

‘Give Students an Escape Hatch’
Schaus says the best reform for kids being failed by the system is to make it possible for them to get out.

“Currently, the public school system has a monopoly over the vast majority of children,” Schaus said. “For whatever reasons a public school might fail, it behooves those who truly care about education to allow children an escape hatch, a way to pursue alternative educational options that are more results-oriented.

“Even if the state can ‘fix’ things in Hempstead, it won’t be an immediate or permanent solution,” Schaus said. “And in the meantime, how many lives are being ruined because parents and students can’t seek alternative educational environments?”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Acclaimed College History Professor Leaves after Ideological Attacks

By Jane S. Shaw

A n acclaimed history professor is leaving his decades-long post at a prestigious private college after enduring years of discrimination for his conservative views.

Robert L. Paquette, a prizewinning history professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, decided to leave the campus after teaching there for 37 years, frustrated by what he deemed “marginalization” by other faculty and lack of support by the administration.

Stromy History

Paquette, whom Reason magazine labeled “the only conservative professor at Hamilton” in 2016 after he objected to the school’s new “diversity requirement,” has had a stormy history at Hamilton.

In 2006, Paquette and two colleagues tried to form the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization on campus. A college trustee and donor to the college, Carl Menges, committed $3.6 million to establish the institute, but college faculty members opposed it and overturned Paquette’s agreement with the college.

Paquette was not deterred. With the support of Menges and other alumni, he bought a building a mile from campus and created an independent organization, the Alexander Hamilton Institute (AHI). “Inspired by Alexander Hamilton’s life and work, the AHI promotes excellence in scholarship through the study of freedom, democracy, and capitalism as these ideas were developed and institutionalized in the United States and within the larger tradition of Western culture,” the organization’s charter says.

AHI programs include lectures on constitutional law and military history, an entrepreneurship club, undergraduate fellowships, a student-managed publication called Enquiry, and continuing education courses. Each year the institute holds a colloquium on a major topic such as “Western Civilization, Diversity and the Liberal Arts in the 21st Century.”

‘I Was Marginalized’

While AHI thrived, Paquette’s relationship with the college deteriorated. Paquette says he was shunned for his viewpoints and conservative endeavors.

“I was marginalized within my own department and prohibited from participating in departmental [faculty] searches,” Paquette told School Reform News. “The opposition, a majority faction in the department, succeeded in taking over the department.

“My punishment occurred with the trustees’ full knowledge, and let me stress, not a dollop of academic due process was granted me on a totally bogus charge of violating confidentiality in a previous search in which a libertarian colleague was treated unfairly,” Paquette said. “I had hoped that Hamilton’s new president, David Wippman, would move expeditiously to remove this prohibition. He did not.”

Acusations of Racism

The most recent incident of harassment was a student protest last October against a speaker Paquette brought to campus: Paul Gottfried, emeritus professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College. Gottfried, who has published numerous books on intellectual history and ideological movements, discussed conservatism and fascism in two classes. Student protesters claimed Gottfried was a racist. Later, faculty members echoed the student protestors’ charges, without specifying any evidence.

The college president then wrote a letter stating Gottfried had made “claims of racial hierarchy based on spurious notions of genetics,” which Gottfried says is untrue. Wippman also said AHI “should not invite speakers to address subjects on which they have little or no relevant expertise.” Gottfried responded he is an expert in the subjects he was invited to speak about.

Quick Surrender

George Leef, research director at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says the Gottfried incident is representative of a typical occurrence in contemporary academe.

“The way the administration bowed down to the ‘progressive’ students—who didn’t actually have any grounds for complaint about Paul other than the fact that he isn’t one of them ideologically—is emblematic of Bob Paquette’s whole time at Hamilton,” Leef said. “Once the leftists aired their displeasure, the school had to placate them rather than standing firm. That is hard for a serious scholar to tolerate.”

‘In the Belly of the Beast’

Paquette says he has endured enough at Hamilton and has many reasons for leaving.

“Given that situation [the administration’s refusal of support], the fact that as an outspoken conservative I have lived in the belly of the beast for far too long, that Hamilton has structural problems that cannot be easily addressed, and that the time has come for me to devote full time to the Alexander Hamilton Institute, I decided to negotiate what I call an exit agreement from the college,” Paquette said.

“I leave being unable to recommend Hamilton College to any conservative high school student who might be thinking of matriculating there,” Paquette said.

Although he says he has lost hope for Hamilton, Paquette says he thinks some schools can “be salvaged under competitive pressures, with the right leadership and with the help of alumni and other benefactors who understand what has gone wrong in higher education.”

‘Showed Raw Courage’

Paul Markson, a former student of Paquette who is now a finance manager for a global agriculture company, says his professor “knew how to bring the history lessons to life through his engaging lectures.

“His passion for history and history’s characters was evident and inspired his students to feel the same,” Markson said.

Regarding the Alexander Hamilton Institute, Markson said Paquette “showed raw courage in the face of fierce opposition from many elements of the Hamilton community.

“Given what has happened at other universities, the independence of the AHI from the college may be a blessing in disguise,” Markson said.

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

The North Carolina legislature is making changes to the state’s higher education system.

About one-tenth of the state’s budget goes to the system of 16 public universities. Recent legislative actions have not been as extensive as in K–12, where the legislature has introduced merit pay, reduced tenure, and expanded school choice, but they are disrupting a university system that observers say has been complacent.

Since 2012, when Republicans gained majorities in both houses of the state legislature and took the executive mansion for four years, the state has enacted laws protecting free speech and students’ due process, cutting tuition, and streamlining university governance.

Free Speech Protections
After several incidents around the nation in which student protests forced speakers offstage, the legislature passed a law in 2017 requiring campuses to protect free speech and instructing them to punish students who prevent others from speaking.

A 2013 law gives students the right to a lawyer if charged with nonacademic offenses, and in 2015 the legislature stopped funding the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Founded by former Democratic vice-presidential candidate John Edwards, the center was, in the view of the legislature, in the view of the legislature, excessively partisan and nonacademic.

Tuition Cuts
On the financial side, the legislature lowered in-state tuition to $500 a semester at three campuses that had been losing students to neighboring South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The lower tuition begins in the fall of 2018, and applications for admission have already increased in anticipation of lower costs.

In another dramatic move to reduce tuition and expand access, the state began a partnership with Western Governors University, a nonprofit online school that charges about $6,000 a year. WGU North Carolina expands students’ educational opportunities and provides competition to brick-and-mortar schools.

Governance Reforms
In 2017, the legislature began increasing the efficiency of the university system’s governing body, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governors. It is gradually reducing membership from 32 to 24 people and is choosing more reform-minded members.

The board has taken on several controversial tasks. It stripped away the ability of UNC–Chapel Hill’s Center for Civil Rights to sue other state bodies. It did this by requiring all campus centers to be academic, not political.

Working with UNC system president Margaret Spellings, a former U.S. secretary of education, the board is considering how to bring greater diversity of opinion to UNC campuses. Board members have visited the James Madison Center for American Ideals and Institutions, an openly conservative Princeton University center that engages students in active discussion and debate with those holding other perspectives.
COMMENTARY

Schools Increasing Emphasis on Student Mental Health Treatment

By Ann Marie Banfield

The current federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, pushes schools to emphasize treating children’s mental health, and schools across the nation are responding with a big increase in these efforts. This is something I take very seriously because some children come to school having to deal with all kinds of personal and social problems. Unfortunately, I’ve seen well-intentioned counselors in some schools do more damage than good when treating students.

Public schools weren’t set up to become mental health clinics for children. Children who need those services should have highly qualified licensed practitioners treating them, just as you would want a doctor who specializes in cancer treating your child if he or she were diagnosed with a serious disease.

Just a Few Days’ Training

Teachers have enough trouble just trying to teach children to read and write. Now the government wants them to become child psychologists, with just a few days’ training.

Would you want your child’s teacher getting a few days of training in order to treat your child’s cancer? Of course not. We see how absurd that would be. But that’s exactly what we are now doing with children and their mental health.

Teaching ‘Social Thinking’

Recently, I read an e-mail from Jennifer Katz-Borrin, director of special education at Alton Central School in New Hampshire, explaining to parents the school system would be teaching “social thinking.” She included a link to a product the school would be using to put this plan into action. I went to the website and found things that caused me some concern.

The site stated, “At Social Thinking, our mission is to help people develop their social competencies to better connect with others and live happier, more meaningful lives. We create unique treatment frameworks and strategies to help individuals as young as four and across the lifespan develop their social thinking and social skills to meet their personal social goals. These goals often include sharing space effectively with others, learning to work as part of a team, and developing relationships of all kinds: with family, friends, classmates, co-workers, romantic partners, and more.

“We are clinicians who create quality educational products and services that help parents, professionals, and others break down the social learning process to more effectively teach social thinking and related social skills. . .”

Those are essential things to know about social and emotional learning (SEL), and they indicate why there is controversy over this product being sold to schools.

Expert Consultation

I decided to take this information to an expert in child psychology, someone with solid credentials and expertise in the field. I wondered how three days of training could possibly qualify someone to treat a child’s mental health. Should this kind of treatment be provided to all children? Should it be provided to special education students? Should this be part of a school program, or did these children deserve expert-quality treatment from licensed professionals who’ve had years of education, training, and experience?

‘Secretary Duncan Committed Fraud’

I asked Gary Thompson, Psy.D., cofounder of the Early Life Child Psychology and Education Center. I knew he had been treating children for years and had the education, training, and experience to analyze this program. His analysis was an eye-opener, tying the SEL agenda to the Obama administration’s push for the Common Core State Standards.

“A little over two years ago, then U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan initiated a nationwide program/rules which eliminated accommodations for special education kids taking the experimental Common Core tests, as well as emphasizing that the new Common Core Standards work well for every child, regardless of special education/mental health status,” Thompson wrote to me in an email. “Secretary Duncan and his staff [published] the new rules, and cited an impressive amount of peer reviewed research to support what amounted to be the complete destruction of special education as we knew it.

“What we found was shocking in nature: The cited ‘research’ supporting these purely agenda based massive changes to our most vulnerable children, was used by Secretary Duncan in a manner that would get him expelled from any graduate school in the nation. The research cited absolutely had ZERO to do with the proposed rule change. Bluntly put, Secretary Duncan committed fraud in order to bring about agenda based social change on our nation’s most vulnerable children.

“Our only response at this point, was to prepare the clinic for the coming onslaught of parents [with financial means] whose kids were being destroyed by this agenda, and save our community one child at a time. The writing was on the wall: This agenda was here, and it was here to stay. We also knew three years ago that special education programs would be replaced with ‘Social-Emotional Learning Programs’ in the not so distant future. When that day came, we also knew that when it was rolled out, it would be rolled in the same propaganda-based manner that Mr. Duncan’s rule changes were rolled out.”

Quality Concern

As our schools shift to becoming mental health centers, it’s important that parents understand the quality of care their children are receiving may resemble quackery rather than authentic mental health services. Our schools are struggling to do their job educating our children. Now they are going to delve into the world of mental health.

Ann Marie Banfield (abanfield@nhcornerstone.org) is education liaison for Cornerstone Action in New Hampshire. This article was originally published by girardatlarge.com. Reprinted with permission.
Florida Considers Allowing Districts to Write Own Standards, Though Testing Would Remain

By Jenni White

The Florida Legislature is considering bills to enable school districts to write their own academic standards.

Florida’s current Next Generation Sunshine State (NGSS) standards are based on the Common Core State Standards, which were developed at the national level and launched in 2009. Like most other states attempting to address citizen pushback against Common Core, Florida consented to a rewrite of the standards in 2013.

House Bill 825 and Senate Bill 966 would, according to the bills’ language, establish the NGSS standards as the “minimum baseline standards for core content of the curricula” and would allow each school district to write its own standards provided they are “equivalent to or more rigorous than the NGSS standards, or courses offered in the district for the International Baccalaureate program.”

The bills were introduced at the start of the legislative session in January. As of late February, neither bill had moved into committee.

Lifting the Bar

Karen Effrem, executive director of the Florida Stop Common Core Coalition, says the bills could finally bring about positive reform of the state’s standards.

“There has been a long history by the pro-Common Core, Jeb Bush-controlled establishment of preventing real change to the standards in Florida,” Effrem said. “This bill is a way to improve on the [NGSS] standards by using them as a minimum baseline instead of a ceiling.”

Effrem says the legislation is an “interesting concept” by which states could satisfy the federal Department of Education by maintaining minimum state educational standards while allowing districts some flexibility, though her outlook remains guarded.

“The standards have not shown improvement academically, have become politically toxic, were responsible in large part for [Jeb] Bush’s [presidential] campaign failure, and there are several people in Florida running for higher office or rumored to be running in the 2018 election cycle, so we’ll have to see,” Effrem said.

Common Core Hangover

Jamie Gass, director of the Center for School Reform at the Pioneer Institute, says Common Core is still having its effect in states where it has ostensibly been ended.

“In an ideal world, states would develop their own higher-quality standards and aligned tests,” said Gass. “The problem is that the Common Core has damaged and corrupted the academic quality of many states’ standards, which then require state legislators, conscientious educators, and parents to seek local remedies and workarounds in the hopes of securing a better-quality, non-Common Core education for schoolchildren.”

Still Tied to Tests

Ze’ev Wurman, a senior fellow at the American Principles Project and a former U.S. Department of Education official under President George W. Bush, says passing these bills would make little difference because state tests are based on state standards, and all Florida students must take the state tests.

“The Florida bill, even if it passes, will make little impact unless it also offers the option of those districts to adjust the state assessment in some way to match the modified standards,” Wurman said. “Otherwise, Florida laws force local districts to certify that their instructional materials are aligned with the Sunshine State Standards and their students must take the regular state test, so who really cares that the district adopted some different—even if better—standards?”

Wurman says there could be an argument students taught a higher standard would do better on state tests based on lower standards, but the way students are expected to answer the test questions would nullify this advantage.

“Most post-[Common Core] tests stress the way and the specific vocabulary students use to solve questions, rather than focus largely on correct facts, correct answers, and their rigorous objective analysis,” Wurman said. “Consequently, students who know much more and in greater depth can still be at a disadvantage when taking the state test, as they may be unfamiliar with the jargon expected of them.”

Jenni White (jlwpplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
In his explosive new book, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money*, author Bryan Caplan argues the primary function of education today is not to enhance students’ skills but to certify their intelligence, work ethic, and conformity—in other words, as Caplan says, to signal the qualities of a good employee.

Although the author and I both attended and enjoyed Princeton University and went on to jobs we love (Caplan is a professor at George Mason University), he argues we are among a lucky few. Caplan maintains the vast majority of students are bored and care little for what they learn if they are not planning to be doctors, lawyers, or engineers.

There are 85 pages of notes and references supporting hundreds of studies Caplan details to convince the reader of his premise. Many of the sources, however, conflict with each other. The medium of following Caplan through statistic after statistic makes the reader hopeful of a final summary before being buried under still more data. Unfortunately, this can be what many academics think is required of them.

**Rightly Criticizes Govt. Education**

Caplan criticizes public education in general, and the book’s dedication states his two sons are homeschooled. Caplan goes on to advocate three major policy changes for government-support education at all levels and allow fees and charities to finance education.

**Money for Nothing?**

Caplan facetiously labels a section of his book “The Handsome Rewards of Useless Education,” stating, “In 2011, holders of advanced degrees made almost three times as much as [money] high school dropouts. Each step up the educational ladder seems to count.”

I think even a high school dropout would have known that bit of trivia, but Caplan supports it with numerous studies, citing research documenting incomes for people at every level of the educational ladder. Each time, he largely dismisses the knowledge gained and tells the reader the money arrives because education levels “signal” things unrelated to what the student learned.

Caplan cites several surprising studies indicating one’s choice of a college is less important than most people think. What you study appears to be more important than where you study, he states. “While sending your child to Harvard appears to be a good investment, sending him to your local state university to major in engineering, take lots of math, and get a high GPA is an even better investment,” Caplan writes.

**Against Indoctrination**

Caplan pulls no punches politically. He is a dedicated libertarian who decries leftist universities taking pains to indoctrinate today’s college students in the ways of socialism and ills of capitalism. This may be the best reason to avoid college today.

Caplan supports this very sound premise with nearly 50 pages of philosophy at the end of the book. He argues uninspired teachers at the college level deserve much of the blame for students not maximizing the opportunity for a useful education.

**Fascinating and Depressing**

For the academic in me, Caplan’s book is fascinating but also depressing. Who wants to believe the education value of college is insignificant other than the money it gets a graduate in the job market? I reject that premise, and I doubt this book will convince anyone desiring a college education not to pursue one.

As a recovering academic, I mined the book for fascinating information I had not previously seen. Caplan could have made a much stronger case with a book half as long. Often, as most of us have learned, less can be more.

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**Review by Jay Lehr**

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Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director at The Heartland Institute.
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The Heartland Institute
3939 North Wilke Road
Arlington Heights, Illinois 60004
312/377-4000
e-mail think@heartland.org