Pa. Looks at Vouchers, Parent Trigger

By Ashley Bateman

Pennsylvania lawmakers and advocacy groups say they hope to funnel students toward universities and productive careers instead of prison and indolence by introducing school vouchers and a Parent Trigger this legislative session.

“We have more than 100,000 kids trapped in 144 failing and violent schools here in Pennsylvania,” said Jay Ostrich, director of public affairs at the Harrisburg-based Commonwealth Foundation. “We have more than doubled spending in education in the past years, from $13 billion to $26 billion, and we’ve seen

Occupy Wall Street Moves to the Schoolyard

By Rachel Sheffield

The Occupy Wall Street protest movement turned its attention towards education to “Occupy Sesame Street,” as one protestor cried, during a speech by News Corp. CEO Rupert Murdoch at a school reform conference in San Francisco.

Approximately 100 protestors banged drums and chanted slogans outside the Foundation for Excellence in Education’s annual summit in October. The conference promoted reforms such as school choice and digital learning.

Demonstrators condemned those reforms as a corporate takeover of U.S. schools, holding signs bearing slogans such as “Hey Murdoch! Our Schools are Not for Profit.” OWS protestors have rallied repeatedly with teacher unions in New York City.

“The ‘tyranny’ [protestors] should be concerned with is the tyranny of the status quo,” said Matthew Ladner, a senior fellow of the foundation.
Pennsylvania Looking at Vouchers, Parent Trigger

Continued from page 1

test scores stagnate and violence rise. We know we’re failing, and we’re hemorrhaging money to fail.”

Gov. Tom Corbett (R) said a voucher plan is one of his top priorities this fall, but disagreements between the state House and Senate may cause the plan to fall through again.

Though the Senate Education Committee approved a voucher and Parent Trigger bill (Senate Bill 1) in the spring of 2011, the measure failed to move further. Several senators are working to reformulate SB 1 this session.

Giving Poor Parents Options
In an October news conference, Corbett proposed vouchers for students in the bottom 5 percent of the state’s schools, currently about 140 Pennsylvania schools. Families earning up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level, or $29,000 in annual income for a family of four, would be eligible.

The governor also suggested expanding the state tax credit for businesses underwriting scholarship programs.

In the 2008–09 school year there were more than 3,000 assaults on teachers and children in Pennsylvania, including seven rapes and more than 150 robberies in the state’s worst 5 percent of schools.

“Vouchers are incredibly important because [they] allow parents who don’t have options right now to have their children educated in a safe place,” Ostrich said. “Vouchers would help open up tens of thousands more opportunities for children. We’re not giving our children enough opportunities.”

‘Getting Closer’
“In late April we sent [SB 1] back into the education committee because at that point it was clear that we still had additional negotiations with the governor and the House. Our hope is that we’ll be able to resolve any remaining disagreements before the bill advances through the Senate. We’re getting closer,” said Erik Arneson, communications and policy director for Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R-Delaware).

SB 1 focuses on “persistently low-achieving” public schools, defined as the lowest 5 percent of public schools in the state. Between the state’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program and vouchers, or “opportunity scholarships,” students in the failing districts would receive state funding to attend a higher-achieving school.

The most likely bill to come from the negotiations would increase the tax credit, which funds private scholarships through tax deductions, said Otto Banks, president of the REACH Alliance, a Pennsylvania school choice advocacy group helping form the legislation. Legislators have discussed creating a sliding scale based on family income to determine the amount a voucher recipient would receive, he said.

Including vouchers and expanding the EITC will open more funding for middle- and upper-income families, since low-income children who currently receive EITC scholarships would no longer need those under the voucher system, Banks said.

Prioritizing Vouchers
“My preference for a voucher plan is that it be far more generous on the means-testing and get away from just limiting it to poor families—that it be able to be used for any school a parent wants,” said Jake Haulk, president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

Vouchers would net taxpayers a much better return on their education spending and increase the choice parents have to pick schools that fit their child best, Haulk said. “Last year, this died on the vine. I think the governor’s job will be to convince the House, because it needs to pass this year. They need to do it this fall if they’re going to do it, before a new election year.”

Sense of Urgency
The biggest division between legislators seems to be over which funding streams to convert to vouchers and which family income levels will determine eligibility.

“We’re making progress,” Arneson said. “The range of issues has been narrowed, but we have not yet reached an agreement. We are optimistic that we will be able to work out the remaining differences and get a bill to Gov. Corbett.”

While suggesting amending Pennsylvania’s teacher evaluation system because 99.2 percent of teachers received a “satisfactory” rating in 2009–10, the governor also selected natural gas regulation, liquor privatization, and transportation as additional legislative priorities. Some observers worry these supersede vouchers.

“We missed an opportunity in the spring, and we can’t miss an opportunity again this fall, because we are condemning thousands of citizens to failure,” Ostrich said. “We have some tremendous leaders in the House who have recognized very clearly that though these problems don’t reside in their own districts per se, they come back to affect every Pennsylvanian.”

That sense of urgency may determine how SB 1 fares in its second go-around, Ostrich said.

“You’d think with a Republican House and Senate they could all get together and say this is what we’re going to march through while we have control here,” Haulk said. “But evidently there’s a lot of friction between the Senate and the House, so things are not happening as they should. These opportunities come along rarely in a ‘blue’ state like Pennsylvania.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
“These misguided people are trying to defend a system that watches helplessly as about a third of our students drop out of school,” Ladner added. “Our Hispanic and black students who do stick it out graduate with an average level of academic achievement roughly comparable to the average eighth-grade Anglo.”

Momentum Generates Pushback

More states implemented choice programs such as vouchers, education tax credits, online offerings, and charter school expansions in 2011 than in any previous year. With 12 states and Washington, DC implementing such laws in 2011, school choice is gaining momentum.

That’s frightening school choice opponents. Condemnation of private, for-profit education providers has increased in intensity recently, popping up in states such as California, Michigan, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

Although government engages the private sector on other critical social issues such as health care and energy, it does the opposite on education, an October 2011 American Enterprise Institute report noted.

“[Fear of] ‘corporatization’ is a poorly founded misconception,” said Russ Simnick, president of the Indiana Charter Schools Association. “It is designed to elicit a certain response from people with the underlying implication that somehow these schools are putting profit ahead of kids. Every school in America hires private businesses like textbook manufacturers and snow removal, and purchases computers from them.

“I work for a nonprofit, and I get a paycheck,” Simnick continued. “Last I saw, schools pay real American dollars. If the school is getting results, does it really matter if the management organization is for-profit or not-for-profit? Absolutely not.”

Research Supports Competition

Research rejects the notion that school choice and private providers hurt education, said Lance Izumi, director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

“The best research available overwhelmingly demonstrates that widespread competition from private schools, whether through vouchers or other school choice instruments, significantly improves the performance of public schools, which makes them better and stronger competitors,” Izumi said. “Sweden’s universal voucher system has improved its education because public school headmasters, referring to their private school competitors, now say, ‘If they can do it, so can we.’”

Other research indicates similar success. For example, more than 90 percent of students who receive a school voucher in Washington, DC’s program graduate, compared to 70 percent of their peers with similar characteristics.

“When parents have the opportunity to choose a school that is in the best interest of their child, not only is that child’s life changed but the parents become more involved and engaged …”

VIRGINIA WALDEN FORD, FOUNDER
DC PARENTS FOR SCHOOL CHOICE


News Corp. and Education

News Corp. has expanded into education recently by acquiring several technology startups and hiring personnel. It has contracted with public and private providers for services such as aggregating student test scores and tech-based curriculum. Murdoch’s speech focused on education reform’s transformative abilities for American students and the country’s future.

“The front pages of the New York Times will tell you that technology’s promise has not yet been realized in terms of student performance,” Murdoch said. “Of course not. If we simply attached computers to leeches, medicine wouldn’t be any better today than it was in the nineteenth century, either. You don’t get change by plugging in computers to schools designed for the industrial age. You get it by deploying technology that rewrites the rules of the game.”

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Utah to Look at Public School Education Savings Accounts

By Rachel Sheffield

Legislation expected to be introduced in January in Utah would replace state education funding with savings accounts of up to $6,000 for parents of high school students to spend among a variety of public school options including online classes, courses outside their school district, or charter schooling.

State Rep. John Dougall (R-American Fork) calls the accounts “student-focused funding” where “the money is following the child,” similar to health savings accounts. He said he will propose education savings accounts (ESAs) in January 2012 to replace traditional state education funding, which transfers automatically to a student’s local high school and prevents personal education choices.

“This [proposal] is a truly visionary concept that could allow parents to design the best possible education according to the individual needs of the child,” said Matthew Ladner, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Excellence in Education who has studied ESAs.

The legislation estimates the typical high school class costs a school district approximately $700. The ESA would fund up to eight classes a year, or a full course load, and allow any remaining money to roll over to the next year.

Complete Customization
ESAs give parents “the ability to completely customize their child’s academic path,” said Derek Monson, director of policy at Utah’s Sutherland Institute.

“A parent will be able to enroll their child in a math class from one public high school with the best math program, an English class from a different school with the best English program, …”

Derek Monson, Director of Policy Sutherland Institute

“…enabling families to provide a quality, personally tailored education during a student’s high school years while preparing that student financially and academically for college,” Dougall said.

“From parents, I generally hear very favorable comments,” Dougall said. “[The proposal] lets them have greater control over their child’s education. They like the opportunity that says, ‘Oh, if I can save now, I can save money for college.’”

Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow in education at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, says ESAs offer “an incentive for parents to plan ahead for the education of their children,” because “money put into such an account accumulates tax-free, which confers a great advantage for those who want to provide for their children’s education.”

Restructuring for Freedom
ESAs restructure education by giving families, rather than government, the greatest authority over a student’s schooling, Hanushek said. They give students flexibility in deciding which classes to take and expand students’ options beyond the doors of the local high school.

Empowering families to choose the education that best fits them and their child will naturally encourage more and better options to proliferate, Monson said, because education providers will have to distinguish themselves to attract students.

“When parents can truly exercise their natural right to direct their child’s education, the options available to them will multiply to meet their child’s needs,” Monson said.

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Senate Moves on No Child Left Behind Reauthorization

By Lindsey Burke

The U.S. Senate is considering an 860-page bill and 868-page amendment by Sens. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Mike Enzi (R-WY) to reauthorize No Child Left Behind. The proposal passed the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee on October 19, and received a hearing on November 8.

During the committee mark-up, Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) complained committee members had been given only 48 hours to digest the amendment before committee chairman Harkin required their votes. Paul noted the HELP Committee had not held a single NCLB hearing in 2011. He invoked a rare procedural tactic to request further consideration before the bill passed out of committee.

“[Senators] have not had enough time to allow teachers, superintendents, and principals in our states who specialize in educating our children to review this legislation,” Paul said.

The bill eliminates adequate yearly progress (AYP), the federal provision requiring all students to rate “proficient” in reading and math by 2014. It replaces AYP with a requirement for states to adopt “college and career-ready” standards in math and English. That closely fits the Obama administration’s “blueprint” for reauthorizing NCLB, calling for states to identify and turn around their lowest-performing 5 percent of schools and 5 percent with the largest achievement gaps.

The Senate has not moved to examine or vote on other NCLB-reauthorizing bills, including one from four Republican senators and those passed by the House. NCLB was scheduled for reauthorization in 2007, and in the meantime the Obama administration has been waiving the law for states that adopt policies the administration favors. At least 39 states have said they will apply for waivers.

Better than Nothing?

“[Harkin-Enzi] is a significant and healthy retreat from the overreach of NCLB,” said Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. “It’s far from an optimal bill, with far too many prescriptions on issues like teacher qualifications and school improvement strategies, but it’s a decided improvement over the status quo.”

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says the proposal doesn’t reduce the federal education footprint.

“It does seem like [the bill] would significantly decrease the rigid prescriptive-ness of NCLB, but it doesn’t fundamentally reshape the federal role,” he said.

Common Core Concerns

Although NCLB represented the federal government’s first foray into dictating states’ testing frequency (every year in grades 3–8 and once in high school), the Harkin proposal is the first to wade into curriculum, with its “college and career-ready” standards requirement.

“The language is vague enough, and enforcement authority lacking enough, that this strikes me more as a rhetorical device than anything else,” Hess said. McCluskey, by contrast, calls the requirement “extremely dangerous.”

“The Harkin-Enzi bill would dictate one outcome and give only two ways to meet it, [which] moves us closer to a federal curriculum,” McCluskey said. “But let’s be fair—that movement started with NCLB requiring ‘proficiency’ for all kids.”

NCLB Proposals Proliferate

The Harkin/Enzi proposal follows a slate of five bills, introduced in mid-September by four Republican senators, which would reform particular aspects of NCLB. They include changes to Title I federal funds for poor students and clarifying Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s waiver authority.

The two Senate bills contrast proposals introduced by House Education and Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) and Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA). Kline introduced a proposal to provide states with increased flexibility in how they spend federal education money. Hunter introduced a bill to eliminate and consolidate 43 of 80 NCLB programs.

“There is no indication that either the full Senate or House is in a rush to take up NCLB,” McCluskey noted.

Uncertain Future

The Harkin/Enzi proposal will likely reach the Senate floor before Thanksgiving, but the widely differing Senate and House proposals create an uncertain future for any near-term NCLB reauthorization.

“I think the House is likely to move at its own pace,” Hess said. “Freshman Republicans didn’t go to Washington to pass a big federal education law. A sufficient portion of the Republican caucus would have to be convinced that this law dramatically curtails the federal role. I’m not sure this bill will ultimately go far enough, and I’m not sure any bill that did go far enough would pass muster with the Obama administration.”

There remains wide disagreement over how to amend the law, with civil rights groups complaining the Harkin proposal reduces federal requirements for schools and some Republican groups joining the National Education Association in opposing federal requirements that teacher evaluations include student test scores and letting states propose their own turnaround strategies for their worst schools.

“A better alternative to NCLB is to drastically reduce the federal government’s role in education, return authority and decision-making power to state and local governments, and expand programs that have consistently demonstrated positive results: charter schools, voucher programs, and tax credits,” said Michael Wille, an education policy analyst at the Illinois Policy Institute.

“Parental choice in education can change the lives of our students and put them on the path to a brighter future filled with opportunities.”

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

“A better alternative to NCLB is to ... return authority and decision-making power to state and local governments, and expand ... charter schools, voucher programs, and tax credits.”

MICHAEL WILLE
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
ILLINOIS POLICY INSTITUTE
Iowa Governor Proposes ‘Systemic’ Education Reforms

By Joy Pullmann

Iowa’s governor and lieutenant governor have released a preliminary blueprint for “systemic” education reforms designed to make Iowa once again the nation’s top education state and equip its students to compete better internationally.

They say they will submit the proposal to the state legislature in 2012 after allowing for public and educator comment and negotiating with lawmakers.

“Our schools need to be kicked in the posterior to be world-class quality. But people don’t want to hear that, to think their neighbor who is a teacher isn’t cutting it,” said Don Racheter, president of the Public Interest Institute in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. “Only if the governor levels with people and makes a serious attempt to sell [the plan] will he develop the support necessary to motivate legislators.”

Budget Hike Being Considered

The ideas include a tiered system granting teachers more pay for increased mentoring responsibilities and filling positions teaching high-need subjects, “value-added” teacher evaluations that include student test scores, ending “social promotion” for third graders, increasing teacher starting pay, expanding charter schools, and undoing “last in, first out” layoff policies.

“This is a good blend of some ambitious systemic change at the state level with opportunities for innovation at the local level,” Gov. Terry Branstad (R) said.

Jason Glass, director of the Iowa Department of Education, emphasized the need to implement changes comprehensively, not as “a series of options to be cherry-picked based on special interests.”

Iowa spends 58 percent of its state budget on education, and Branstad said his plan might require a funding increase.

“You don’t we take money from the parts that aren’t working rather than allocating more?” Racheter asked.

Three Priorities

Branstad and Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds (R) outlined three priorities in overhauling education: “great” principals and teachers in every school; high expectations and clear measures; and innovation.

They said they expected their reforms to be phased in over about three years.

Iowa students’ average math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have risen since leading the nation in 1992, but the national average increased faster, landing Iowa’s scores in the middle of the pack. Average reading scores in the state have dipped slightly since 1992.

“Over the last decade or so, we have not put in place some of the reforms that other states and some nations have adopted, such as high expectations for all students, so we have slipped in national education rankings,” Reynolds said.

Tiers for Teachers

The blueprint lists myriad changes intended to attract and retain talented teachers and principals. These include raising GPA requirements for teaching programs, testing prospective teachers for content knowledge, accepting teaching licenses from other states, and implementing peer evaluations.

It also suggests creating four categories of teachers: apprentice teachers, those with less than five years’ experience; career teachers, with three to five years’ experience and “demonstrated effectiveness”; mentor teachers, who apply through a competitive process to coach their peers; and master teachers, who apply competitively and spend half their workdays coaching teachers.

Current teachers could choose between this system or their current arrangements, commonly known as “step and lane” for rewarding years spent teaching rather than effective performance. All new teachers would enter the new system.

Retains Government Monopoly

Racheter said the governor should have included bolder reforms such as education tax credits or vouchers so parents “can choose the school that works best for them, not entrench the government monopoly.”

Though the plan includes measures to expand charter schools, he said the lack of detail on that point indicated “a lack of understanding of the need for flexibility and customization in education.

“You need to get away from having all students crammed into government schools and let every parent choose what is best for their children,” Racheter explained, drawing on his 40 years of teaching. “One child might be good at sitting at their desk and learning the standard way, while another might need more hands-on learning or a Montessori school.”

Curriculum Alterations

Branstad also called for Iowa to follow Florida’s lead and end social promotion for third graders, requiring those who cannot read or do math at grade level to repeat that grade.

“If a student hasn’t mastered reading by third grade, they’ll be handicapped in their education all forward,” Branstad said.

The proposal calls for the state to raise education standards above the recently adopted Common Core “to put Iowa’s standards on par with the highest-performing systems in the world.” It would implement exit tests for core high school subjects such as U.S. history and algebra and require all 11th graders to take the ACT or SAT.

Branstad and Reynolds said they will now travel across Iowa to discuss their ideas with parents and education leaders. They plan to send an amended comprehensive proposal to the legislature before the 2012 session. Branstad said he expects further changes after submission.

“You could present to the legislature the Magna Carta and they’d amend it,” he said.

Iowa’s legislature is divided between Republican control in the House and Democratic control in the Senate, meaning each chamber has “vastly different ideas for education reform,” said Tim Albrecht, Branstad’s communications director.

“There is no silver bullet in terms of education reform,” Albrecht said. “Everybody has ideas. Some are very good, and we want to incorporate as many positive ideas as possible to reach that consensus.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is the managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
By Ben Boychuk

The United Teachers Los Angeles teachers union is demanding the Los Angeles Unified School District use a $55 million budget surplus to rehire 1,200 teachers laid off in the past year.

“This is a serious, serious matter, and the money is there to alleviate it,” UTLA President Warren Fletcher said. “The school board and the superintendent need to act now. We have already burned a month of school. We can’t burn a whole school year.”

Los Angeles school district officials already agreed over the summer break to tap some of that $55 million budget surplus to restore several hundred non-teaching jobs. But the teachers union claims a new state law requires rehiring teachers as well.

New Law Bars Layoffs

Assembly Bill 114, which Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed in June as part of the state budget deal, bars school districts from laying off teachers to mitigate mid-year budget shortfalls. UTLA insists the law clears the district to rehire thousands of teachers let go in the past year.

The law requires districts to assume the same level of funding as last year and maintain staffing levels consistent with that budget number. Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare at the Reason Foundation in Los Angeles, says UTLA’s demands “ignore the fiscal realities of L.A. Unified.”

“Spending what may well be a onetime budget surplus on hiring ‘spells financial disaster for every district in the state,’” Snell explained.

District officials “know there will be midyear cuts,” she said. “But [districts] have no contingencies. They’re not supposed to consider anything beyond right now. It’s like spending all of your money today without thinking about your house payment due next month.”

Fletcher spoke to reporters on October 6 in front of Manual Arts High School, a South Los Angeles school facing overcrowding and management problems. Approximately 3,000 students are enrolled in the school, which was built for 1,000.

The school is currently operated by L.A.’s Promise, a nonprofit charter management organization under investigation by the district for alleged mismanagement.

Lance Izumi, a Koret Senior Fellow and senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute in Sacramento, says AB 114 will do little more than exacerbate ugly trends.

“Using AB 114 to go back to the status quo ante at failing schools like Manual Arts High will do nothing to improve student achievement,” he said. “The UTLA is once again offering up a false solution to a real problem. Putting back blatantly ineffective staff will do nothing to improve student performance.”

Lagging Before Layoffs

Teachers union officials say the district needs to rehire teachers to address classroom overcrowding.

“We have gigantic class sizes. We have Algebra 2 classes with over 50 students. We have P.E. classes with over 80 students,” Fletcher said. “If you’re a seventh-grader and you’re in one of those ridiculously overcrowded classrooms. ... Well, you don’t ever get to be in seventh grade again, so it is something that needs to happen now.”

Izumi, however, points out that in 2009, before the layoffs, more than 95 percent of students at Manual Arts who took the algebra 1, geometry, or algebra 2 state exams “failed to achieve at the proficient level.”

Given the district’s poor track record in low-income and minority neighborhoods, officials would do more good by offering parents more educational options, Izumi says.

“LAUSD should copy the district voucher program in Douglas County, Colorado and give parents and their children at failing schools like Manual Arts an immediate exit ticket to better-performing schools in the private sector,” Izumi said.

‘Artificial Fixes’

Kyle Olson of the Michigan-based Educa-
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SOME NOTEWORTHY PRESENTERS

DR. FREDERICK HESS, American Enterprise Institute Director of Education Policy Studies
Keynote speaker and author of:
The Same Thing Over and Over: How School Reformers Get Stuck in Yesterday’s Ideas (2010)
Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling (2010)
Eight new edited books

DR. TERRY MOE, Stanford University William Bennett Munro Professor of Political Science
Keynote Speaker and author of:
Special Interest: Teacher Unions and America’s Public Schools (2011)

DR. KEVIN DONNELLY, Director of Melbourne-Based Education Standards Institute

DR. CHARLES GLENN, Boston University
Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control.
Native American/First Nations Schooling: From the Colonial Period to the Present.
African American/Afro-Canadian Schooling: From the Colonial Period to the Present.

DR. JAMES TOOLEY, Director: E.G. West Centre
The Beautiful Tree, a story of school choice in developing countries. (2010)

DR. PATRICK WOLF, School Choice Chair, University of Arkansas, Dept of Education Reform
Panel Title: School Vouchers at a Crossroads: What’s Next for Policy and Evaluation?

DR. CLAUDIO SAPELLI, Chilean School Choice Scholar
Paper Title: The Consequences of Forced School Switching on Student Performance in Chile: Comparing Peers that Choose Private and Public Schools

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Federal Budget Cuts for Education Seen as Likely

By Jim Waters

P roponents of higher federal education spending could end up happier with the stopgap bill Congress passed in early October than whatever the Joint Deficit Reduction Committee proposes later this year.

Congress passed another Continuing Resolution to fund the federal government with $1 trillion through November 18. It trimmed federal education spending by $2.4 billion, or 3.5 percent of the $69 billion it allotted to education for fiscal year 2012. Congress appropriated $71.4 billion to education for fiscal year 2011.

The debt ceiling deal Congress passed in August automatically triggers $3.5 billion in education cuts if the Joint Deficit Reduction Committee can’t agree on an alternative by December 23.

Few Cuts in 2012 Budget

The House 2012 budget would end projects such as Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant program and eliminate 31 education programs. That budget would cut federal education funding little, however, instead redirecting about $2 billion in cuts to increases in Title I funding for poor districts and special education.

The House Appropriations committee has not yet held hearings on the 2012 education budget. The 2012 fiscal year began October 1.

‘Bleak’ Fiscal Outlook

The fiscal outlook for the nation’s 14,000 school districts is “bleak—not just for next year, but for a half decade or more,” says a recent American Enterprise Institute report.

The school funding storm involves lagging property tax revenues due to the recession and pressure on state budgets from increasing Medicaid enrollment, underfunded pension obligations, and expiring federal bailouts. States provide nearly half of all local school districts’ revenues, compared to approximately 8 percent from Washington.

Poor and disabled students receive a larger share of federal education spending, so they will necessarily be more affected by funding cuts, said Neal McCluskey, a Cato Institute education analyst.

McCluskey cites National Assessment of Educational Progress data demonstrating little positive effect on student outcomes from provisions in the No Child Left Behind law that make public detailed information about the performance of minority, poor, and disabled children. Similarly, myriad other programs over the past 50 years aimed at improving outcomes among those populations have achieved few positive results.

“Since those dollars haven’t been doing any good, losing them won’t do any real harm,” McCluskey said. “Washington has greatly increased funding for programs like Title I for decades without any meaningful evidence doing so improves outcomes.”

Shielded from Severe Cuts

Although the number of state government employees overall has declined by about 2 percent since December 2007, the number of state education employees increased more than 2 percent, the AEI report notes. The gap is even larger between local education employment, which fell by less than 1 percent during that time, and private-sector employment, which declined 7 percent.

Between 1970 and 2010, federal per-pupil spending rose 375 percent, according to the Digest of Education Statistics. While American schools cut student-teacher ratios from 23–1 in the early 1970s to about 15–1 today, “this massive increase in staffing has shown no evidence of academic benefits,” the report states.

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Best U.S. Schools Barely Compete with Global Peers

By Rachel Sheffield

The highest-scoring U.S. school districts are mediocre compared to their international counterparts, reports a new study examining national and international student test scores.

“Most individuals know there is an achievement gap within certain large cities, and that broadly speaking we aren’t as competitive internationally,” said Kerri Briggs, director of education reform at the George W. Bush Institute, which published the report. But the situation is even worse than that, she notes, as the finding contradicts widespread perceptions that wealthy, suburban U.S. school districts graduate well-educated students.

Although students in affluent districts almost always perform better than their inner-city peers, compared to their actual peers and future market competitors across the globe these students at best sit up and pay attention to these studies,” said Greg Forster, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

‘Relevant Comparison’

“Existing state accountability systems encourage people to compare their public school districts with others in their state,” said Greene, a fellow at the Bush Institute and head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. “But the relevant comparison is not how suburban districts are doing relative to big cities; it is how our advantaged suburban districts are doing relative to students in other developed countries against whom our graduates will be competing for top-paying jobs in an increasingly globalized market.”

That comparison, Greene said, “Shows that even our advantaged suburban students are often struggling to keep pace with the average student overseas.”

Drilling Down to Districts

The GRC analyzes nearly every district in the United States as well as international test scores, and its Web site allows visitors to use its data to compare their own district internationally. It’s the first such report to “drill down to the district level,” Briggs said.

“All previous international comparisons have stopped at the state level,” she noted.

Using state accountability test results from almost 14,000 of the nation’s school districts, the researchers adjusted the scores based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also called “the nation’s report card” and widely considered the most reliable U.S. test. Next, they compared the scores with those of students in 25 developed nations including Australia, France, and Singapore, based on results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Twenty-three of those nations have lower per-person gross domestic product than the United States, meaning their countries produce less national wealth per citizen.

Outranked, Outflanked

The data show students in Beverly Hills, California rank at the 53rd percentile in math when compared internationally. In Falls Church, Virginia—recognized by Forbes earlier this year as the richest county in the United States—public school students rank at the 58th percentile in math. In Bellevue, Washington, one of the wealthiest communities on the West Coast, students are at the 64th percentile in math.

Among the 20 largest U.S. cities, the authors note, not one ranks above the 50th percentile in math. Forty-eight percent of students in a typical developed country outrank U.S. students from the nation’s 50 most affluent suburbs on math.

The authors computed both math and reading results across nations, but in most comparisons they focused on math results because those are easiest to compare across languages and cultures and most closely correlated with national economic performance.

Translating Test Results

Most feedback and commentary on the report has been positive, Green said, because “a lot of people recognize what a useful tool it is and how alarming our suburban student performance often is.”

The GRC is “like a big thermometer that tells us where we have problems and how severe they are,” although as a report card it was not designed to suggest specific policy changes to help improve education, he added.

A Rutgers University professor complained no one would rank tennis players or soccer teams in this way, and some have requested more analysis from the authors using international tests other than PISA.

“Our method is conceptually very similar to how we rank sports teams, like the [Bowl Championship Series] for college football,” Greene said in response. “The problem of how you rank teams that don’t play each other is similar to how you compare student achievement when not all students take the same tests. The imperfect but necessary solution is to translate performance across different tests, or in the case of sports, from one match to another.”

Suggested Remedy: School Choice

“Every school in America, not just the schools that are obviously failing, needs the enterprising drive for improvement that only universal school choice can deliver,” Forster said in addressing the problems indicated by the study.

With U.S. school districts continuing to slide not just when compared with each other but also internationally on nearly every measure and study, Forster said, increasing school choice becomes “critical.”

“School choice is by far the best-proven policy for improving public schools,” Forster said. “Nineteen high-quality empirical studies show that school choice improves outcomes in public schools, while none finds public schools are harmed by choice.”

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Pervasive grade inflation in U.S. university education departments contributes to low standards for educators and the nation’s K–12 education decline, says a new study.

University education departments consistently award higher grades than all other academic departments, and K–12 teachers receive overwhelmingly positive evaluations despite mediocre test scores by their students, said report author Cory Koedel, a professor of economics at the University of Missouri.

“The data consistently show that education departments award exceptionally favorable grades to virtually all their students in all their classes,” Koedel said. “Education majors score considerably lower than students in other academic departments on college entrance exams.”

The trend has held nationwide since the 1960s, the study notes.

Regarding the trend’s underlying causes, the American Enterprise Institute report states, “There is not a competitive market forcing schools and districts to be efficient. If a school hires mediocre teachers and produces mediocre outputs year after year, there is no mechanism to meaningfully penalize the school or its workers.”

**‘Pervasive Problem’**

“I know lots of professors in education who give nothing but A’s,” said George Cunningham, a retired University of Louisville education professor. “Grade inflation is a pervasive problem throughout education, but it’s worse in higher-education schools.”

Education students commonly graduate with a 3.7 or 3.8 GPA, Cunningham said, a perception confirmed by the report’s comparison of education-major GPAs at the University of Indiana and the University of Missouri. Those averages were 3.7 and 3.8, respectively, in 2007–08.

“I’m hopeful this trend can change, but it will be politically challenging from the outside,” Koedel said. “It would be easiest for it to happen from the inside, but education professors don’t see this as a problem.”

**Inflationary Pressures**

To gain tenure, professors must excel in research, service, and teaching. Research and service contributions are objective, but student evaluations weigh heavily in the teaching score.

“Teachers don’t want to do anything to lower these scores,” Cunningham said, noting several of his professor friends were denied tenure for receiving poor student evaluations in retribution for handing out low grades. “It’s very tempting to give good grades.”

Students who receive B’s or C’s often complain to the dean and make professors defend their grading decisions.

“Giving A’s equals ease and comfort,” Cunningham said. “My advice to a new professor would be to give A’s. That’s my pragmatic advice.”

**Self-Esteem vs. Standards**

Universities are businesses that exist to make money, Cunningham noted, and they therefore want to attract students to increase profits. Lower grades can mean fewer students.

“College leaders must value education more than revenue,” said George Leef, president of the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy. Leef said he felt administrators’ pressure to inflate grades when teaching at the university level in the 1980s.

“When all the other professors give high grades for average work, those who deviate often end up punishing students because C’s no longer denote average, but failing, work, Koedel said.”

“I try to maintain standards, but it’s hard as an individual professor to deviate from the rest of the department,” Koedel said. “There is some wiggle room, but otherwise you just punish the students in your class.”

Students protected by self-esteem efforts over the years expect and demand higher grades, and professors usually take the path of least resistance, Koedel said. One solution is for universities to adopt standard grading policies, he said.

**Effects on Education**

Students in classes that grant “easy A’s” do not work as hard, the study says, so inflated grades mean students do not learn they may be unsuited for a particular career or course of study.

“The education sector is notoriously ineffective at identifying high- and low-quality workers, making it difficult for the labor market to penalize students from education departments that produce low-quality teachers,” the report states. This “dramatically” harms the nation’s K–12 education system by causing it to retain poor teachers.

“The fundamental problem is simple: There is no pressure from competitive markets in education,” the report finds.

**‘Manic Push’ for Enrollments**

Many U.S. education schools have adopted watered-down curricula to comply with national goals of increasing college graduation rates, Leef said.

“The United States has this manic push, starting with the president, to get students enrolled in college,” Leef said. “We’ve already scraped the bottom of the barrel for kids with the talent or inclination to go to school. There is less interest in serious academic work. To keep students enrolled, schools water down their expectations.”

Leef said the solution is to “separate school and state” so schools can pursue policies that best fit their students and respect academic integrity, instead of complying with foolish external mandates in exchange for taxpayer dollars.

**Potential for Change**

There is no external advocacy group for higher teaching standards and too many self-interested parties involved, so Koedel says he doubts teaching quality will improve soon.

The report recommends two “external forces” “meaningfully intervene”: university administrators instituting strict grading criteria, and K–12 administrators implementing accountability by measuring the effectiveness of teachers each training institution graduates.

“In the absence of administrative action, external accountability in K–12 schools will likely lead to higher standards in education departments over time, although the pace of change will be slower,” the report concludes.

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**INTERNET INFO**

“Grade Inflation for Education Majors and Low Standards for Teachers,” by Cory Koedel, American Enterprise Institute: [http://www.aei.org/outlook/101072](http://www.aei.org/outlook/101072)
Idaho May Require Online High School Classes

By Rachel Sheffield

Idaho’s State Board of Education has approved a rule requiring all high school students to take at least two online courses in order to graduate. After a 21-day period for public comment in October, the board is again considering the matter. If it approves the measure once more, the rule will move to the state legislature in January 2012, said Melissa McGrath, public information officer for Idaho’s Department of Education.

Although there has been considerable public debate, McGrath said, “many in Idaho are supportive because they understand it will only be two of the 46 required credits students take in high school.”

Online education is nothing new for many Idaho families. Approximately 15,000, or 5 percent, of Idaho students currently take online courses, many through the Idaho Digital Learning Academy (DLA), a virtual charter school, or the Idaho Education Network, a virtual school. Online enrollment has risen every year since DLA, the state’s first foray into digital education, was established in 2002.

“Idaho is doing students a favor by getting them ready for twenty-first century learning. All continuing training nowadays, whether for the job market or higher education, has a virtual component.”

BRIANNA LECLAIRE
EDUCATION POLICY ANALYST
IDAHO FREEDOM FOUNDATION

Twenty-First Century Approach

Forty-eight states and Washington, DC currently provide some type of online education, and roughly 1.5 million students are enrolled in online education nationwide.

“By 2019, research suggests an estimated 50 percent of all high school courses will be delivered online,” McGrath said.

Learning online is critical for students to function in today’s world, says Tom Vander Ark, chair of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

After high school “every student will learn online, ... whether on the job, in the military, or in college,” Vander Ark said, calling Idaho’s proposed requirement “a great idea.”

“Idaho is doing students a favor by getting them ready for twenty-first century learning,” said Brianna LeClaire, an education policy analyst at the Idaho Freedom Foundation, because “all continuing training nowadays, whether for the job market or higher education, has a virtual component.”

The new rule will not displace Idaho teachers, McGrath said, because “every online course will be taught by an Idaho-certified teacher.”

Greater Access to More Classes

Beyond preparing students with technological skills, online education can expand schooling options for students, opening access to courses previously unavailable.

“In a rural state like Idaho, online learning provides opportunities for learning that have never existed before, period,” LeClaire said. “Students living on remote ranches or on mountaintops will no longer have their learning restricted by geography.”

Earlier this year, Utah passed similar legislation, allowing students to use some state education dollars for online courses in place of traditional public school classes.

“A Utah student can now take the best math class from one online provider, the best English class from a different online provider, and the rest of their classes from their traditional local public school,” said Derek Monson, director of policy at Utah’s Sutherland Institute. “With these new options, parents can choose the set of online and traditional classes that is personalized for their child’s individual needs, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.”

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Indianapolis Opens ‘Charter Incubator’

By Joy Pullmann

A nonprofit organization and the City of Indianapolis will spend $5 million to nearly double the number of charter schools, currently 23, in the metro area by 2016.

The Charter School Incubator will begin granting $1 million each to three to five teams in June 2012 to seed expansion of charter school networks.

“Indianapolis is becoming the educational capitol of America,” said Robert Enlow, president of the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “So we need to bring high-quality charter operators into the marketplace.”

Indianapolis’s mayor is the only one with authority to grant and oversee school charters. Eight of the city’s charter schools have opened since 2008 under Mayor Greg Ballard (R). Ballard is fighting a close election race, and education is one of its hot topics. Ballard’s opponent, Melina Kennedy (D), has focused on early childhood education and said she supports charters, though she suggests restricting them.

Ballard has made charters a focus of his term and candidacy. Indianapolis’s surrounding Marion County contains 11 school districts, of widely varying quality, and none under mayoral control. Four of the five schools seized by the state this year for consistently abysmal performance are Indianapolis Public Schools. Ballard is preparing to request that the state give his office oversight of these “turnaround schools.”

Indianapolis charter schools have a等待 list of 2,386 students, more than 100 for each school. Approximately 4 percent of Marion County students attend charters. “We’re moving to a place where education reform is possible and welcomed,” said Beth Bray, the mayor’s director of charter schools. “We have a very reformed-minded state superintendent and governor, so meaningful impact and change are very possible.”

Contingent on city council approval, the city will contribute $2 million of the initial incubator funds to its oversight nonprofit, The Mind Trust, with the rest coming from private individuals and foundations. “Our deep roots in the community [will] provide a network of support” to grant winners by connecting them with government officials, potential board members, and financial support, said David Harris, founder and CEO of The Mind Trust.

“We’re able to provide a lot of value to people as opposed to just an investment.” Charter operators tend to concentrate within particular geographic areas, Harris noted, so the incubator’s goal is to root “the next generation of charter school operators here [in] Indianapolis.”

That has been a primary Mind Trust goal since the organization’s inception in 2006. Harris was Indianapolis’s first charter schools director under the first mayor to wield charter-granting authority.

“The conditions under which great schools emerge are the conditions that charter schools create,” Harris said. “You empower talented people to have authority over schools—specifically over staffing, budget, and curriculum—and you hold them to high levels of accountability.”

Incubator grant winners will spend about two years preparing to open their initial school, while completing their charter application with the mayor’s office. Ballard’s office has approved 23 percent of the 50 charter applications it has received in the past four years. The mayor assigns to every charter an accountability coordinator, who attends board meetings and visits the schools each month.

“We want to ensure we can screen on the front end as opposed to closing them on the back end,” said Christine Marson, director of the mayor’s Office of Education Innovation.

The most recent scores on Indiana’s achievement test, from 2009, show Indianapolis charter students achieving above-average academic growth. The longer students were enrolled in a charter, the better their pass rates, with 81 percent of students passing if enrolled for four or more years.

More than half of all Indianapolis students are African-American. The average IPS student scores worse than 70 percent of the state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading tests. IPS’s four-year graduation rate is 58 percent. A recent study of California charters discovered they were more successful than any state district at closing the minority achievement gap.

“Our goal is to create such a concentration of high-quality talent and high-quality schools that the system fundamentally changes,” Harris said.

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These charts show the average performance of Indianapolis charter school students compared to traditional public schools they were assigned. The top figure is of elementary schools, the lower figure of secondary schools.

HOW TO READ: Blue bubbles represent the traditional public school students would have been assigned to attend if they did not attend a charter school. The horizontal axis line represents the average ISTEP+ performance in Marion County, while the vertical axis line represents the average improvement. Schools located above the horizontal axis had better-than-average performance, while schools located to the right of the vertical axis showed better-than-average improvement. The green bubble represents the average performance and improvement of all assigned schools, and the orange bubble represents the average performance of mayor-sponsored charter schools as a group. The size of each bubble is proportional to the number of MSCS students who would have attended the school.

Source: Indianapolis Mayor’s Office.
Mo. Lawmakers Repeal, Replace Teacher ‘Facebook Ban’

By Ashley Bateman

A Missouri law prohibiting teachers from private online conversations with students has now been repealed and a substitute signed by the governor after multiple lawsuits and a court’s decision to stay the law.

Senate Bill 54 was initially developed to protect students from sexual assaults by teachers and other school staff and increase the visibility of staff communication, said its sponsor, state Sen. Jane Cunningham (R-West County). It was slated to go into effect August 28, but lawmakers repealed it and introduced Senate Bill 1 after public outcry and a legal injunction.

“This is a complicated, delicate issue,” said John Chasnoff, program director of the Eastern-Missouri American Civil Liberties Union.

SB 1 requires school districts to develop online communication policies and submit them to the state by March 1, 2012. The measure passed 139–2 in the House and 33–0 in the Senate. Gov. Jay Nixon (D) signed it October 21.

‘Chilling Effect on Speech’

SB 54’s broad language on social media and electronic communication sparked lawsuits from the ACLU and the Missouri State Teachers Association, among others.

“The breadth of the prohibition is staggering,” said Cole County Circuit Judge Jon Beetem upon approving an injunction against it in August. “It clearly prohibits communication between family members and their teacher parents using these types of sites. The statute would have a chilling effect on speech.”

Cunningham sponsored both bills and has worked for several years to develop an online communication law. No other states have passed similar laws, Cunningham said, particularly the provision to hold school districts liable for sexual assaults perpetrated by staff.

Honing the Law

“The legislature thought it could do better in terms of protecting students from abuse,” said Patrick Ishmael, a Show-Me Institute policy analyst. “The legislature’s role is to protect the rights and interests of those that elect them, and they seem to think that additional protections were required.”

Though SB 54 passed with little resistance in the spring legislative session, the broad language used in the social media and electronic communication section of the bill became a widespread concern.

SB 54 prohibited a situation where “the information available on the website is available only to the owner (teacher) and user (student) by mutual explicit consent and where third parties have no access to the information on the website absent an explicit consent agreement with the owner (teacher).”

“The revision seems to have soothed objections,” Ishmael said. “It was just crafting of the language itself that was imperfect and imprecise. It was and is well-intentioned legislation.”

The lawsuits against the state cost taxpayers unnecessary time and money, Cunningham said.

Prohibiting ‘Hidden Communication’

“We were only trying to prohibit hidden information and communication between a teacher and a minor,” Cunningham said. “A teacher can be Facebook friends with a student, the teacher can post things on his or her wall. ... There was purposeful misinformation broadcast around.”

SB 54 also banned teachers from establishing, maintaining, or using a work-related Web site unless school officials and students’ guardians could access it. Similarly, a teacher could not use a non-work-related site, such as Facebook, to communicate privately with a current or former student if the former student was still a minor.

“The [bill’s] language banned teachers from using Facebook altogether because [Facebook] had the possibility of exclusive conversation,” Chasnoff said. “We felt that it was very restrictive of the First Amendment.”

SB 54 stated, “Nothing in this subsection shall be construed as prohibiting a teacher from establishing a non-work related internet site, provided the site is used in accordance with this section.”

‘Well-Intentioned Legislation’

Cunningham collaborated with organizations and educators to rewrite the social media section of the law for SB 1. One clarification was changing the focus from “teachers” to “all educators and staff.”

“We felt that it was important to clarify the language and have no ambiguity,” Cunningham said. “We worked on language that made it very concise and basically kept the intention of the first bill, that local school districts would write their own policies in regards to communication, including electronic communication between teachers and students.”

After the court’s injunction, Nixon added the law to the agenda of a special session he called, which began September 6. He requested the legislature repeal the law and not replace it with another. Instead, they sent him SB 1.

“This bill is not as good as it should be, but to veto it would return us to a bill that would be far worse,” Nixon said in a written statement.

Similar Georgia Bill Praised

The ACLU is fighting the new bill and had asked the governor to veto it.

“Social media provides really more safeguards now than it has in the past—a phone call has no record, so we don’t know what was involved,” Chasnoff said. “Facebook creates a record, so we don’t really understand why people are upset about it as they are.”

Beetem said the evidence presented in the preliminary injunction hearing showed social media are one of the main communication methods Missouri teachers use.

Related legislation in Georgia would make a better prototype for Missouri’s bill, Chasnoff said.

“The general thrust [of Georgia’s bill] was educating teachers and students about appropriate use of social media,” Chasnoff said. “Anything that attempts to restrict causes First Amendment problems.”

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Innovative Schools Shift Seat-Centered Academics

By Emily Johnston

While some education reformers are focusing on performance-based incentives and curriculum changes, others are trying to shift the very structure of schooling.

Students traditionally attend school from September to June, five days a week, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., with occasional holidays and shortened days. New “time-oriented” education takes many alternate forms, including homeschool co-ops, online learning, hybrids of different instruction types, and boarding schools. Some reduce lesson time, while some expand it.

University-Model K–12 Schools

University-Model Schools (UMS) combine elements of homeschooling with traditional classroom teaching, reducing traditional classroom time.

Elementary students receive professional, classroom-based instruction two days a week and are homeschooled for the remaining three days. In junior high, students take three days of classroom study and two days of home study. High schoolers enjoy a university-style schedule with some Monday/Wednesday/Friday classes and some Tuesday/Thursday classes.

The National Association of University-Model Schools, Inc. has currently certified 30 schools. Fourteen others are transitioning to this model, and four are candidates for certification. The largest number of university-model schools is in Texas, with others across the country from California and Arizona to Florida, Georgia, Illinois, and other states.

‘Created to Be With Family’

Other hybrid programs have developed recently. In San Luis Obispo, California, the San Luis Obispo Classical Academy has adopted an education structure similar to that of UMS.

Susie Theule said she started the private, hybrid classical school because she was dissatisfied with the large class sizes and extensive downtime in some public school classrooms.

“My degree [in psychology] affected my conviction that we were created to be with family, which is why the homeschool days are so valuable,” Theule said. “[The school] has allowed [my family] time together [for] talking, laughing, and arguing. It has also allowed me to model dedication, perseverance, and what you do in [times of] weakness.”

At the Classical Academy, students spend two days a week in classrooms, studying at home the other three weekdays. Living history days, held at the end of every semester, bring classroom learning to life. These elements help place each subject in its cultural context and allow students time to complete long-term, personalized projects.

“The school [serves] a great blend of all aspects of the child—educational and social. I was attracted by Susie’s, and the staff’s, enthusiasm,” said Martin Indvik, a member of the academy’s board of directors and long-time educator at two local junior high schools.

Extended Teaching Programs

Other schooling options increase students’ classroom time. For example, KIPP schools, SEED Foundation schools, Rocketship Academy, and MATCH charter school in Boston keep students on campus longer than traditional public schools. Many bring children to school on Saturday and start the school year early and end it late, and almost all keep students past 3 p.m.

The schools have shown impressive academic results, but it’s difficult to tell whether their success is due to the extra teaching time, said Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the free-market American Enterprise Institute.

“Extended time is a good thing if the students are at a good, safe school engaged in learning, especially if they are going home to a bad situation,” Hess said.

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter school network focuses on maintaining high expectations and teaching choice, commitment, and leadership skills using longer classroom hours. There are currently 109 KIPP schools in 20 states and DC, serving 32,000 students.

The SEED Foundation offers a boarding school for urban children to encourage 24/7 teaching time in a safe environment for at-risk youngsters.

The Guild Method

Kimberly Bredberg has developed a new approach to education she calls “the Guild Method.” It combines parental involvement with classroom workshops, which usually last three hours.

“This structure takes the weight off [teachers and students having] to perform within 50 minutes. Children need to be allowed to practice the right elements over time to discover the intrinsic value of the work at hand,” said Bredberg, a founding member of Blackbird & Company Educational Press and a teacher at homeschool co-ops and private schools for 15 years.

People naturally invest years in their interests, Bredberg said, and this is how the Guild approaches teaching. Bredberg’s book Habits of Being: Artifacts from the Classroom Guild, published in July, explains the benefits of teaching a subject for longer periods to cultivate creative critical thinking.

“The focus is on the individuality of every child and putting those talents forward,” said Sara Evans, the book’s editor. “We really try to understand each subject. It’s never about the time; it’s about creating passion.”

In the Guild’s observation workshops, students observe an object—perhaps a snake, pomegranate, or starfish—paint it, then write an essay. Evans said this structure is especially valuable for children gifted in music, art, or dance because it allows longer practice times to foster growth and deeper passion.

Once, Evans said, she took a whole year to teach Lewis and Clark’s expedition. Students built a tepee and toured part of the explorers’ trail.

In January, a tenth-grade girl enrolled in Bredberg’s school after leaving public school with a 1.8 grade point average. Bredberg let her unwind for three months by doing what she loved—art. After one semester, the girl writes and reads constantly and has even developed a summer science program to teach her younger sister.

“My heart is that [children] would know that their ideas matter,” Bredberg said. “Every child has been endowed with genius.”

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Merit Pay for Teachers Has Economic Flaws

By Arnold Kling

Proponents of pay-for-performance in K–12 education contend good teachers should receive higher pay than mediocre ones, and poor teachers should be dismissed. Opponents say test scores do a poor job of measuring teacher quality and that the incentive to “teach to the test” will have adverse consequences.

I agree with both of these points of view. I believe good teachers should be rewarded, and I also believe test scores are not the right metric for evaluating teachers.

Using test scores as the determinant of teacher pay misses what economist Friedrich Hayek called “tacit knowledge” and “local knowledge.” Many factors affect student test scores, meaning scores are a noisy indicator of teacher performance. People closest to the teacher, including peers, principals, and parents, have more information about teacher quality than what can be obtained by remote administrators relying on test scores.

Drawing from Private Sector
Managers in the private sector understand that simple, objective measures of employee performance are flawed. Software companies do not pay computer programmers by the number of lines of code they write. Accounting firms do not pay auditors according to strict formulas. Accounting firms do not pay programmers by the number of lines of code they write. Accounting firms do not pay auditors according to strict formulas. Accounting firms do not pay programmers by the number of lines of code they write. Accounting firms do not pay auditors according to strict formulas.

In the private sector, there is less objectivity but more accountability. Ultimately, a firm can be generous with pay only if it is satisfying customers. Pay is usually, however, based on subjective as well as objective measures. Within boundaries, your immediate supervisor has discretion in allocating bonuses and setting compensation. This allows the supervisor to use his or her tacit knowledge of all the ways in which the employee affects organizational performance.

Yes, it allows corporate politics and favoritism to creep in, but the advantages of using supervisory discretion usually offset this weakness.

Simple formulas can be “gamed.” That is, employees learn to achieve the objectives in the formula while failing to work toward the longer-term goals of the firm. On Wall Street, we have seen how bonus formulas proved dysfunctional. The older, partnership form of organization appears to have provided better incentives.

A government-run system of teacher compensation, based on test scores, would in some ways be the worst of all worlds. It would create incentives for teachers to “game” the system. It would give too much weight to a noisy indicator of performance. As a result, it would do little or nothing to improve accountability or reward better teachers.

A Wiser Alternative
A better system of teacher compensation would have the following elements.

1. Teacher compensation should be determined by their supervisors, the principals. An important factor should be customer satisfaction, as measured by parent evaluations.

2. “Customer satisfaction” should not be purchased by lenient grading. Accordingly, third-party evaluation of students would check the teacher’s own evaluations. That is, third parties should create and grade at least some tests. However, those tests should be tailored to the teacher’s curriculum and course objectives, rather than the other way around.

3. Parent satisfaction should be measured by their decisions regarding teachers. The ultimate sign that parents value a teacher is when parents try to have their children placed with that teacher. Conversely, when parents seek to avoid a teacher, it indicates customer dissatisfaction.

The best way to introduce accountability and pay-for-performance would be through a school voucher system. Such a system would enhance the power of parents. It would force principals to focus on teacher quality and to implement compensation methods aligned with that objective.

Anti-Empowerment System
Our current public education system is designed to take authority away from parents. Rather than give power to the people with the highest stake in results and the most immediate knowledge of how classrooms are functioning, we act as if teacher unions and remote administrators know more than parents, teachers, and principals about what is in the best interest of students.

In this context, test scores become just one more tool to keep power in the hands of bureaucrats. Test scores are a top-down method of control, when what is needed in education is more bottom-up empowerment.

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Conference Riles, Enlightens, Engages

By Bruno Behrend

When someone as controversial as Rupert Murdoch, founder of News Corp. and Fox News, says, “We need to tear down an education system designed for the nineteenth century and replace it with one suited for the twenty-first,” at a conference of policymakers and legislators, it indicates the education reform movement has shifted from “reforming” to “transforming” education.

Murdoch made that statement during his morning address to education reform luminaries at the Excellence in Action Summit on Education Reform, put on by the Foundation for Excellence in Education in Sacramento, California this October.

Content-Packed Summit

Hundreds of state general assembly members and policy heavyweights attended the sold-out conference. Speakers included online education innovator Salman Khan, philanthropist Melinda Gates, commissioners of education from various states, and the past and present mayors of Washington, DC and Los Angeles.

Many of these same people attend other “education reform summits” put on by various think tanks, but this conference was one of the more content-packed summits in recent history.

Some of the palpable excitement is a function of the accelerating change taking place in education reform. Another reason might be the star power former Florida governor Jeb Bush, the foundation’s founder, brings to the discussion.

Bush is credited with driving Florida to the top of the list of states enacting aggressive education reform. After leaving office, he created the foundation to transform U.S. education and increase the pace of change.

A look at the quality of presenters and the expansion of ideas and strategies at the recent conference indicates Bush’s campaign is moving forward quickly.

Khan Academy Presentation

Salman Khan, founder of khanacademy.org, gave the entire conference a lunchtime presentation that covered the founding of his online library of educational videos. Though low-key and self-effacing, Khan wowed the crowd by explaining how he is working with a nearby school district in Los Altos, California.

His demonstration of how technology is transforming the delivery of content gave the audience a glimpse of what a twenty-first century education system might look like. The Khan Academy provides free, easily accessible content and tests, and through its classroom dashboard teachers can see exactly where each student is on each subject. Students move through adaptive math software at their own pace while the software customizes the education experience by discovering and targeting student needs.

States in Financial Crisis

One has to appreciate the audacity of starkly naming a breakout session “Don’t Let a Financial Crisis Go To Waste.” The session featured as panelists Florida state Sen. Dan Gaetz; Hanna Skandera, secretary-designate of the New Mexico Public Education Department; and John Guthrie, director of education policy at the George W. Bush Institute.

They proceeded to lay out just how strapped most states are for money and how transforming education is one of the few avenues out of states’ financial messes.

The key message was that transforming education need not be a budget-buster, as have past layers of bureaucracy and “reforms.” Wisely allocating resources, such as expanding Florida’s virtual schools or matching curriculum to job requirements, allows states to spend less while providing better education.

Axing School Districts

Whether states should end the system built on school districts was the unspoken question behind the breakout session titled “How Can Locally Controlled Education Fuel a Global Economy?” The panelists were Anne Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association; Gene Maeroff, a school board member and author of School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy; and Joel Klein, former chancellor of New York City schools and CEO of News Corp.’s education division.

Moderator Chester E. Finn Jr., one of the deans of the education reform movement, moved the panel toward debating whether school boards were really necessary to educate children. Finn is part of a task force cosponsored by the Fordham Foundation, where he is president, dedicated to advancing this topic in the months and years ahead.

Bryant defended boards and districts as “an important and necessary element of local control.” Maeroff, whose book chronicles the failures of school boards, defended their existence, wistfully hoping for ways to “improve their processes.” This left it to Klein to explain that boards are rarely elements of local control and are instead captive to the bureaucratic interests that run the current education system. Boards are “not essential” to operating public schools, Klein argued.

Excitement in the Air

The Excellence in Action Summit on Education Reform followed a form similar to most other education summits and conferences, with many of the same people sitting on the same panels discussing similar issues. However, there was excitement in the air, driven by the composition and quality of the participants.

First, the conference seemed to have more state legislators and education department employees than ever. This included more Democrats, who traditionally have been opposed to transforming education because of their alliance with teachers unions.

Second, and more importantly, nearly all the presenters and keynote speakers were noticeably more forceful in their presentations. They had a message for legislators, delivered both implicitly and explicitly.

The explicit message was, “The current, nineteenth-century education system is too expensive and is failing too many children. Better alternatives are available, and we have the data to prove it.” The implicit message was, “As a legislator, it is your duty to start transforming education.”

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Nevada is implementing a new data system to track student progress over time and pinpoint the state’s best and worst teaching practices and teachers.

Measuring student academic growth through successive grades and classes differs from measuring “proficiency” in one subject at one point in time. State educators and lawmakers hope to use the Nevada Growth Model of Achievement (NGMA) to learn more about which educational practices work best and for what students, and to inform future policy decisions.

“In the last 50 years, Nevada has nearly tripled inflation-adjusted, per-pupil spending while educational achievement has remained stagnant,” said Victor Joecks, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute. “Properly implemented, the Nevada Growth Model offers schools a chance to increase student achievement without spending more, by identifying the best teachers and either improving their worst teachers or encouraging them to find a different profession.”

Approximately ten states use a growth model of student assessment, and another “ten to 15” are considering the same, said Damien Betebenner, a senior associate at the Center for Assessment, who is helping develop the model. Clark County School District, the state’s largest, unanimously agreed to use the growth model this year.

Measuring Student Growth
Assembly Bill 14, passed in 2009, required the Nevada Department of Education to create a statistical model for grades 3 to 8 measuring student growth year-over-year. NGMA will be integrated into the state’s current assessment system.

Since fall 2009 the department has been developing its model, applying it to math and reading for elementary and middle school students, and beginning to determine growth targets. Starting this fall, the department will expand the model to high school and PreK–2 and evaluate potential uses for the resulting information.

Impacts on Teachers, Teaching
Gov. Brian Sandoval (R) has appointed a Teachers and Leaders Council to apply the model to teacher evaluations. The council will submit recommendations by June 2012, and the State Board of Education must adopt related regulations by June 2013.

“Because teacher quality is the most important, school-controlled factor in student achievement, it is imperative that we know who our best teachers are,” Joecks said. The council may yet blunt the model’s potential for accurate evaluations, however, by instituting low or nonexistent standards, he said.

Sandoval said he will continue pursuing education reforms; several were shunted in the last legislative session.

“Ultimately, we need school choice, like opportunity scholarships, for every child, to allow parents to pick the best school for their child,” Joecks said. “Since every child has unique educational needs, the government shouldn’t try to force students into a one-size-fits-all school system.

“Giving parents a choice in where to send their kids to school would increase student achievement,” he continued, “by getting a student into the best school for them and encouraging all schools to do their best to try and attract students.”

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