Poll: Millennials Strongly Support School Choice

By Ashley Bateman

A new poll confirms millennials strongly support school choice.

The survey, conducted by GenForward and published by USA Today in September 2017, found among millennials, 79 percent of blacks, 76 percent of Asian Americans, 77 percent of Latinos, and 66 percent of whites support vouchers. In addition, 65 percent of millennial-age blacks, 61 percent of Asian Americans, 58 percent of Latinos, and 55 percent of whites support policies to allow charter schools.

Millennials are loosely defined as the generation born between 1982 and 2000.

The poll results support research published earlier in the year. A Beck Research poll in January 2017 on behalf of the American Federation for Children (AFC) found 75 percent of millennials support school choice.

Only a small fraction of American students are using a government-funded education choice program.

MILLENNIALS, p. 4

Trump Commits $200M to Expand STEM Ed

By Harry Painter

President Donald Trump signed a memorandum pledging to devote hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to expanding STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and computer science education in schools across the nation.

The presidential memorandum dedicates at least $200 million per year in funding to STEM and computer science in K–12 and higher education programs. The president justified the September directive by citing statistics showing close to 40 percent of U.S. high schools do not offer physics and 60 percent lack computer programming courses. Trump also cited racial, geographic, and gender gaps in access to computer science classes.

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Did you know?

National School Choice Week is the world’s largest annual celebration of opportunity in education. In 2017, National School Choice Week featured 21,392 events!
Unionized Schools Plagued by Chronic Teacher Absences, New Study Finds

By Michael McGrady

Teachers in traditional public schools are nearly three times as likely as those at charter schools to be chronically absent, a new study reports.

“Nationally, 28.3 percent of teachers in traditional public schools are ‘chronically absent,’ meaning they miss more than ten school days a year for sick and personal leave,” David Griffith wrote in Teacher Absenteeism in Charter and Traditional Public Schools, released in September 2017. “In contrast, only 10.3 percent of teachers in charter schools are chronically absent.”

“School systems have been generous in supplying teachers with excuses absences,” Griffith wrote. “On average, teachers get more than twelve sick and personal days per year, though only one-third of US workers are entitled to ten or more sick days, even though the latter have a longer work year (up to 60 days more). For the most part, these generous leave policies are negotiated by teacher unions and school boards and incorporated into contracts (or sometimes state law). These policies explain why more than one-quarter of public school teachers in the United States are chronically absent—meaning they miss more than ten days of school per year due to sick or personal leave. In some states, the numbers are truly shocking. For example, three-quarters of teachers in Hawaii are chronically absent.”

More Unions, More Absenteeism

“The chronic absenteeism gap between charter and traditional public school teachers is largest in states where districts must bargain collectively but charters aren’t required to,” the report states. “Nationally, teachers in unionized charter schools are twice as likely to be chronically absent as teachers in non-unionized charters. In every state with both unionized and non-unionized charter schools, teachers in unionized charters are more likely to be chronically absent.”

Green Dot, the only major charter network that has unionized, “has the highest teacher chronic absenteeism rate of any network in the country,” the study found.

Griffith, a senior research and policy associate at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, says unions are the main impetus behind chronic absenteeism.

“The patterns highlighted in the report suggest that much of the observed variation in teacher absenteeism is driven by collective bargaining, and in particular by the overly generous provisions in some districts’ collective bargaining agreements that give teachers as many as 15, 20, or even 25 days of paid sick and personal leave per year,” Griffith told School Reform News.

Calls for Reform

Griffith says reforming the rules on teacher absences could help curb chronic absenteeism.

“In theory, I think there are three steps we could and should take to reduce teacher absenteeism,” Griffith said. “First, we should reduce the number of paid sick and/or personal days teachers are guaranteed under state laws and district contracts. Second, we should incentivize improvement at the school level by including teacher chronic absenteeism in state accountability systems as a ‘nonacademic’ indicator of school quality. And finally, since charter schools have much lower rates of teacher absenteeism in almost every state, we should create more authentically independent charters that are free to set their own personnel policies when it comes to things like sick and personal leave.”

Unions Don’t Help at All

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says teachers unions are the root of the problem.

“Collective bargaining agreements need to crack down on the problem,” said Sand. “Teachers should be allowed fewer sick days. Districts could even give bonuses to teachers who are rarely if ever ‘sick.’ Every time a teacher is absent, the district pays the absent teacher as well as her sub. The bonuses could be paid from money used to pay the sub.

“Teachers unions don’t help at all,” Sand said. “Via collective bargaining, they fight for too many sick days, with no incentive for teachers not to be sick. Even with extensive absences, schools can’t do much about it, maybe a toothless oral or written warning. And in most unionized districts, the teacher will never be fired, so there is little motivation to change his ways.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Poll: Millennials Strongly Support School Choice

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Approximately three million students currently attend charter schools, and 500,000 use private school choice programs.

Consistent Support
Tommy Schultz, AFC's national communications director, says several polls have confirmed millennials’ approval of school choice.

“Our polling pretty consistently [shows] high support from millennials,” Schultz said. “Numerous other pollsters have similar results.”

Schultz says the popularity of choice among millennials has to do with how they were raised.

“Millennials inherently distrust institutions,” Schultz said. “We’ve grown up with lots of options in every aspect of our lives. If you look back over the history of education, even the last couple-hundred years, there were generally small tweaks to the system but nothing dramatically different. The millennial generation coming up [saw] the development of charter schools and voucher programs as we were about to start going to school.

“Research has shown that these programs are helpful,” Schultz said. “A larger extent of taxpayers are saying, ‘Why am I paying so much and not getting the best education for my child?’”

‘Personalized Consumer Culture’
Paul DiPerna, vice president of research and innovation at EdChoice, says millennials are accustomed to having choices in everyday life, which translates to wanting choice in education.

“My hunch is that millennials have been raised in an increasingly personalized consumer culture,” DiPerna said. “As they become parents, start having children, and begin their schooling years, they are likely to want more flexibility, mobility, and options, just as they have experienced in many other areas of their lives.”

Rising Influence
DiPerna says millennials may change the course of education.

“The influence of millennials, economically, socially, and politically, will increase slowly but steadily over the next several decades,” DiPerna said. “They now number more than 75 million, representing the largest generation in the United States, and will be rising through the workforce to leadership positions for many years to come. Based on recent surveys, millennials appear to be more open to education reform and school choice policies than other generations, and if those views persist over time, millennials could potentially shift the power dynamics in American education.”

Schultz says millennials’ opinions will become government policy.

“The largest generation right now is the millennial generation, and in a few years that will translate into political willpower and political action,” Schultz said. “They will be electing and demanding from their legislators that you enact and expand these choice programs.”

Reaching the Middle Class
Schultz says school choice programs, which typically exclude working and middle-income families, will probably expand in their favor in the coming years.

“I think there are going to be more and more programs enacted at the state level that will benefit middle-income and working families, and I think that will take time,” Schultz said. “So much of this system—current education and the current way of thinking on public education in general—is really being enforced by folks who are quite older and quite set in their ways and on keeping their grip of power on the system.

“We are much more disruptively constructive a generation,” Schultz said. “As we become parents and voters and more active politically, I think you will see more education choice.”

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

“Politically, when lawmakers are looking to pass policies like [school choice], they focus on low-income groups in urban areas, and the recipients are generally low-income families,” Schultz said. “They may have more friends go through choice programs. They see the benefits and options that the upper classes have had for decades, of moving to a better district or paying for better options. They want to take advantage of these programs.”

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Antifa Radical Remains Employed by Berkeley, California School District

By Teresa Mull

Yvette Felarca, a militant Berkeley United School District (BUSD) teacher whose mugshot has appeared regularly in the news over the course of the last year for her violent behavior at Antifa-led riots, has been breaking numerous rules at her workplace for years, court records show, yet she remains employed at taxpayer expense.

Petitions calling for Felarca’s dismissal have been circulating since at least June 2016. No other media outlet, as far as The Heartland Institute has been able to discern, has reported Felarca has been recruiting middle schoolers to join the militant left-wing group By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), putting them in harm’s way without their parents’ permission, and usually in direct defiance of the school principal, and has been caught lying repeatedly about these activities.

Felarca brought a lawsuit against the school district when it put her on paid leave to investigate her past misconduct. Felarca’s attorney, Shanta Driver, is BAMN’s national chair.

On its website, BAMN declares itself “a mass, democratic, integrated, national organization dedicated to building a new mass civil rights movement to defend affirmative action, integration, and the other gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and to advance the struggle for equality in American society by any means necessary.”

Incriminating History

Court documents show Felarca has been receiving official reprimands from her employer since at least 2009. She has recruited students to participate in protests facilitated by BAMN, transported them to protests without permission in her personal vehicle, and abused sick and personal leave by lying about her absences so she could attend riots. At one point, Felarca took a student to a protest and left him behind, claiming later he had “wandered off.”

Court records show Felarca has a history of insubordinate, antagonistic behavior, and despite numerous warnings, official reprimands, “Notices of Unprofessional Conduct/Unsatisfactory Performance,” and arrests (even the liberal BUSD worried she would “indoctrinate students and use them to support her own political agenda”), the district announced in September 2017 it was only “monitoring developments in [Felarca]’s case” and would “respond in an appropriate manner, in keeping with federal law, the California Education Code, and the BUSD collective bargaining agreement with our teachers.”

The district waited until 2016 to discipline her formally and put her on paid leave, only to reinstate her two months later. Felarca is a member of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers union.

Contradictory Accounts of Conduct

After she was placed on paid administrative leave in September 2016, Felarca filed a lawsuit against the district, claiming the involuntary leave violated her First Amendment rights. The district said its decision was unrelated to her most recent arrest and the placement on administrative leave was in response to her insubordination and “safety and liability concerns” over her refusal to stop taking students on unapproved field trips in her personal car.

The introduction to the lawsuit Felarca filed against BUSD states Felarca “has received only positive evaluations over her ten years of teaching with BUSD” and the defendants were conducting “a political witch-hunt against [Felarca].”

Students Confirmed Accusations

Felarca provided as evidence notices she received from her employer, one of which shows the district interviewed Felarca’s students, who said their teacher constantly solicited them to join her at protests. She took advantage of non-native English speakers, the records show, persuading them to agree to send their children to her protests when they didn’t understand the trips were not school-approved. She even showed up at a student’s house to “manipulate [the student’s father] into signing a document that related to whether the school district had the right to interview his son without his permission,” the documents show.

The notices also detail Felarca repeatedly lying about sick and personal leave, with the district later finding out she took the time off to attend political rallies. Her lawyer demanded she be repaid for time the district docked when they determined she was abusing her leave, and court documents show she was being paid more than $77,000 per year even though BUSD claimed in September 2017 she was a part-time employee.

Indoctrinating Students?

During the court proceedings, Felarca also presented copies of letters she said she received from supporters. The letters sound suspiciously alike and have a recurring theme of non-sequitur attacks on President Donald Trump.

One letter is attributed to “a Mexican 13 year old boy, who once lived and studied at Berkeley,” who writes, “[Felarca] wants justice, she wants to make better citizens. Isn’t that what what teachers are meant to be? I want to say that Donald J. Trump has a chance to win the presidency of the U.S. Trump is a racist man, a fascist, and in my point of view ‘the stupidest man alive’…. Like once Yvette Felarca said, and I quote: ‘We need to take them head on, confront them, but with as many people as possible.’”

BAMN members encouraged protestors to “fill the courtroom” for Felarca’s October 4 hearing and to bully the Sacramento district by “demanding” she drop the charges against Felarca. No plea was submitted during the October hearing. Felarca was scheduled to appear again in court in November.

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Adding to the federal subsidy, private businesses committed to invest $300 million over five years for the initiative. Trump’s daughter Ivanka traveled to Detroit, Michigan the day after the memo’s release to announce the private-sector investment. She was joined by Quicken Loans Chairman Dan Gilbert and tech executives from other companies, including Amazon, Facebook, General Motors, Google, Lockheed Martin, and Microsoft.

“Given the growing role of technology in American industry, it is vital our students become fluent in coding and computer science, with early exposure to both,” Ivanka Trump said at the event.

‘Could Help Prepare Students’

Gema Zamarro, an associate professor, and Katherine Kopotic, a doctoral student, both at the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, are researching STEM gender disparities. They told School Reform News in an email U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data project a one million increase in STEM-related jobs between 2012 and 2022. They say greater instruction in these fields could be valuable.

“From this point of view, investing in STEM education could help prepare students to meet this increasing job demand,” Zamarro and Kopotic said. “Finding ways to reduce these gaps would be important.”

Lauding Local Efforts

Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare at Reason Foundation, says local efforts to expand STEM would be more effective.

“The federal government has a poor record of driving resources to appropriate economic needs,” Snell said. “It is very difficult to drive specific change in education from the federal level. Whenever administrations pick new subjects to focus on, they have their own self-interested stakeholders and administrators. Local, state, and federal dollars should follow students and should not favor one instructional program over another.”

Forecasts ‘Minimal Impact’

Snell says the executive focus on STEM is common, but so is its failure.

“President Trump is following a long tradition of presidents partnering with the private sector to boost STEM in schools. STEM seems like an easy and politically popular win-win subject to champion. Yet federal resources are often distributed unevenly and probably have minimal impact on the students that most need access to STEM education.”

Harry Painter (harrypainter@gmail.com) writes from Brooklyn, New York.
Iowa Proposes Using Student Opinions in ESSA Plan

By Jenni White

The Iowa state government will incorporate feedback from a student survey to determine which public schools need improvement under the state’s proposed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan.

ESSA, a bill President Barack Obama signed into law in December 2015 to modify the previous administration’s No Child Left Behind education policy, requires states to submit plans detailing how they will meet requirements under the law. The Iowa Department of Education submitted its plan for federal approval in September 2017, revealing the state intends to use answers from the Iowa Youth Survey (IYS) in calculating school quality.

Students in grades 3–12 will answer IYS questions on “Conditions for Learning,” which include “Safety, Engagement, and Environment.” The Conditions for Learning index will constitute 5 percent of the state’s accountability index across elementary, middle, and high schools in 2018, and it will expand to 18 percent for elementary and middle schools and 8 percent for high schools by 2020.

Youth survey questions regarding safety will focus on physical and emotional safety, with the latter meaning how safe students feel from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion. Engagement will include questions about perceived respect for diversity, how well students collaborate, and the extent of student and teacher collaboration. Students will also provide opinions about school expectations and facilities, under the “environment” heading.

‘Students Are Immature’

Shane Vander Hart, editor of the education news website Truth in American Education and a former teacher, says the use of student surveys for such evaluations is a bad idea.

“I don’t want teachers graded on test scores, because I think there are a lot of factors that go into those,” Vander Hart said. “But subjective opinions about how the teacher is teaching from the student’s perspective aren’t going to help. Students are immature. They don’t always see things from the perspective of experience and understanding that goes on in preparing a lesson. How many kids are being honest on these questions, anyway?”

‘All the Rage’

Jane Robbins, a senior fellow at the American Principles Project, says her home state of Georgia uses a similar survey, developed by the Georgia Department of Education, the state Department of Public Health, and Georgia State University, to identify “safety and health issues that have a negative impact on student achievement and school climate.” Robbins says such surveys are becoming a fad.

“Student surveys like this are all the rage across the country, a trend bolstered by the ESSA, which encourages schools to include nonacademic measures in their accountability ratings,” Robbins said, quoting from a recent op-ed she had published in the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

States’ ‘Mother, May I?’

In a recent blog post on the topic, Vander Hart stated when ESSA was being debated in Congress, Republicans promised it would provide more flexibility than No Child Left Behind and allow a return to local control. This flexibility is a myth, Vander Hart says, because the U.S. Department of Education has already rejected some state plans.

“Since ESSA required states to submit plans to the U.S. Department of Education, we have yet another instance of states coming to the federal government and asking, ‘Mother, may I?’” Vander Hart wrote.

Probing Student Attitudes

The 2014 Iowa Youth Survey not only questioned students about how they perceive their schools and teachers but also asked them about nonacademic topics such as suicidal thoughts, smoking marijuana, binge drinking, and whether or not it’s against their values to have sex as a teenager.

Robbins says governments should not be asking students about their attitudes and feelings.

“Even if the surveys were valid, young people shouldn’t be exposed to them,” Robbins said. “In a world in which all boundaries of privacy are being erased, students should learn that no one other than their parents or, in some cases, their doctor, has a right to ask such questions, especially not the government. Nor are students’ mindsets and attitudes any of the government’s business.”

Opting Children Out

Leslie Beck, an education activist and member of Iowa RestorEd, says many parents don’t want their children answering such personal questions.

“Most parents are not tracking these issues until the issue is actually affecting their child, but parents who take the time to read the current Iowa Youth Survey will typically opt out their child,” Beck said. “There are four questions asking students about killing themselves, including one on whether they have made a plan to kill themselves. The survey has the potential to normalize these topics and desensitize students even more than they already are.”

Protecting Teachers

Vander Hart says under Iowa’s plan, teachers could be unfairly blamed for circumstances outside their control.

“If a kid isn’t motivated and doesn’t want to study and doesn’t have someone at home making [him or her] study, what’s a teacher to do?” Vander Hart asked. “One of the top indicators for success in school is how involved parents are in a positive way. A kid without parental involvement finds it just that much harder to succeed in school regardless of standards, tests, and even teachers. If they’re handicapped in that way, it’s going to be just that much harder for a kid to succeed.”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Arkansas Spends Millions to Implement Computer Science Courses

By Elizabeth BeShears

The state of Arkansas is spending $5 million to fund computer science (CS) initiatives in public school classrooms through 2019.

“In the spring of 2015, Gov. [Asa] Hutchinson worked with Arkansas legislators to pass Act 187, requiring that at least one high-quality CS course be offered in every public high school in the state,” Code.org reported in September 2016. “This legislation was the first of its kind in the United States. The governor then sealed the state’s commitment to CS by allocating $5 million to the effort, providing necessary funding that is often missing from educational initiatives. During the 2015–16 school year (the first year of implementation), the state focused on building teacher and school capacity for CS through grants.”

State administrators assembled a task force to create K–12 CS state standards, which Arkansas adopted in January 2016. The 74million.org, an education news website, reported in September 2017 the standards “are expected to be implemented in every elementary and middle school in the 2017–18 school year, whether in separate computer science classes or incorporated into the normal curriculum.”

‘Every Kid Learns Uniquely’

State Rep. Jim Dotson (R-Bentonville) sponsored a failed bill in spring 2017 to establish education savings accounts in Arkansas. Dotson says parents, not the state, should decide what topics their children learn, through their choice among education options.

“The parents are the ones who are closest to their child and know their unique needs, talents, learning styles, and that sort of thing,” Dotson said. “So for a parent to be able to customize the educational component for their child’s needs to tailor-fit how they can best learn and grow to fulfill their individual potential, it’s a much better route to [put] the money under the control of the person who is going to be receiving the benefit.

“My school choice efforts have been to try to put the decision-making power into the hands of the folks who oversee the educational life of a student,” Dotson said. “Every kid learns uniquely.”

Crowding Out Other Subjects?

Jane Robbins, a senior fellow at the American Principles Project, says initiatives focused so intensely on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) threaten other important subjects.

“The education establishment has decided that everything about education should be geared toward workforce training and STEM,” Robbins said. “The idea of teaching everyone computer science and coding and all of that starting as soon as they’re out of diapers is a fairly new concept, but it’s gaining popularity. That seems to be connected to this program in Arkansas.

“There’s certainly nothing wrong with making sure that kids have some knowledge of computers and that kind of thing,” Robbins said. “The problem is, that mindset crowds out everything else. It crowds out the humanities, English, history, and even science. With the next-generation science standards, they’re not really even teaching science anymore. It’s all to develop these technical skills in kids, many of whom aren’t interested.”

“‘Forces and Funnels Kids’

Robbins says programs like the one Arkansas is promoting are the results of “educrats” “aligned with corporations, politicians, and politically connected companies” using children for their own agendas.

“When the education establishment allies with the political establishment and the corporate establishment to make these decisions, it really forces and funnels kids into an area that might be really wrong for them,” Robbins said. “If you leave it to parents and local school districts, then they can decide what they want to do. They can decide how much weight to give that part of the curriculum.”

Empowering Local Authorities

Robbins says the best approach to education policy is to empower local entities.

“I think what they need to do is devolve as much authority as they can to the local system, because as long as they’re trying to make these decisions on statewide levels, then somebody has to decide what’s important, and it’s probably not going to be parents,” Robbins said. “If they do it on the local level, then each school district decides what to offer, with lots of parental involvement.”

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

The Oregon Secretary of State announced he is planning to conduct a performance-based audit on the state’s largest school district after the district sued two people over their public records requests.

Portland Public Schools (PPS) filed a lawsuit in March 2017 against Kim Sordyl, a PPS parent, and Beth Slovic, a reporter for the Portland Tribune, to prevent the women from accessing public records they requested containing the names of PPS employees on paid leave, information the district has released in the past. Slovic previously reported one district employee had been on leave for at least three years.

“PPS’s interim general counsel, Stephanie Harper, rejected the request, arguing that the records are exempt from disclosure due to the personal privacy of employees, some of whom are put on leave for disciplinary reasons,” Slovic reported in the Tribune at the time.

Oregon Secretary of State Dennis Richardson announced in September 2017 his plan to audit the district, saying, “We’re going to give the district an opportunity to show that the criticism is unfair.”

“Richardson specifically cited the district’s decision to sue public records requesters as one reason why it deserves an audit,” OregonLive.com reported in September.

‘It Needs to Stop’

Sordyl says the district has a history of wasting money.

“Education reporter Beth Slovic ran a story on Portland Public Schools placing a counselor on paid leave for three years,” Sordyl said. “In juxtaposition, [the district said], ‘Teachers are being cut. We have few electives. Our buildings are not safe.’ Yet, our tax dollars are being wasted on incompetence, and hiding incompetence. It needs to stop.

“After PPS sued me, Slovic also revealed that a teacher had been on paid leave for a year, all while he was in and out of jail,” Sordyl said.

‘A Lack of Transparency’

Steve Buckstein, a senior policy analyst and cofounder of the Oregon-based Cascade Policy Institute, says government schools keep their records sealed in order to hide persistent, widespread problems.

“Because of a lack of transparency, corruption in the public school system is often hard to uncover,” Buckstein said. “It has taken years for Portland Public Schools to do so many things wrong that the public is finally aware that something is significantly wrong in the district’s culture. Suing reporters and parents to keep information confidential was one of the last straws.”

‘Secretly, Wildly, and Irresponsibly’

Sordyl said she hopes the audit will result in “responsible spending that improves education for students.”

“Through public records requests and advocacy, I’ve learned that our district spends secretly, wildly, and irresponsibly,” Sordyl said. “Friends and family of district administrators and board members are getting rich on no-bid contracts. Money is being spent covering up incompetence of district administration. Our tax dollars seem to be spent in a way that best benefits the adults, and adult advocacy groups.

“I want the audit to shine a light on this practice and to pressure the district to start redirecting the money to benefit our students,” Sordyl said.

Tori Hart (tori.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Wilmette, Illinois.

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Study: Voucher Program Overregulation Homogenizes Schools

By Teresa Mull

Overregulating voucher programs reduces diversity of school options, a new study has found.

“Our results support our hypothesis that highly regulated voucher program environments induce homogenization in the supply of schools,” authors Corey A. DeAngelis and Lindsey M. Burke report in their study, “Does Regulation Induce Homogenization? An Analysis of Three Voucher Programs in the United States,” released in September.

“We employ school and year fixed-effects regression to determine the effect of voucher programs on the supply of private schools. In particular, we examine individual private schools in Washington, D.C., Indiana, and Louisiana as they transition into voucher program environments,” the researchers write. “We leverage the Private School Universe Survey to examine how schools self-identify before and after switching into voucher environments. We find that upon switching into school voucher programs, private schools in more heavily regulated programs are more likely to identify as less specialized than they were prior to entering the program, and that those schools in more lightly regulated environments continue to highlight their specialized approach to education.”

‘Balance the Costs of Regulation’

Lawmakers should weigh both the pros and cons of regulation, the authors conclude.

“Our estimates indicate that additional regulations could reduce specialization in the supply of schooling, and, as a result, fewer choices for families. If the diverse backgrounds, interests, and abilities of children are not matched with the available institutions, educational choice programs could fail to lead to improved outcomes.”

DOES REGULATION INDUCE HOMOGENIZATION? AN ANALYSIS OF THREE VOUCHER PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES

COREY A. DEANGELIS AND LINDSEY M. BURKE

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‘Balance the Costs of Regulation’

Lawmakers should weigh both the pros and cons of regulation, the authors conclude.

“Our estimates indicate that additional regulations could reduce specialization in the supply of schooling, and, as a result, fewer choices for families,” DeAngelis and Burke write. “If the diverse backgrounds, interests, and abilities of children are not matched with the available institutions, educational choice programs could fail to lead to improved outcomes. Consequently, decision-makers must balance the costs of regulation, such as homogenization in the supply of schools, with the benefits of regulation, such as perceived control, in order to design the educational choice policies that work best for families and society overall.”

‘They Need Diverse Options’

DeAngelis, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says voucher regulations do more harm than good.

“We theorized that heavy regulatory environments in voucher programs in the United States could actually have unintended consequences,” DeAngelis told School Reform News. “Our theory was that if government was telling the private schools in the voucher program to behave exactly like the public schools, then the private schools are in fact going to turn out looking like and operating like traditional public schools. We theorized this could be a negative impact, because of the fact that children are unique and they need diverse options for schools.”

DeAngelis says the data show over-regulation, in addition to decreasing alternatives for students, could also reduce academic achievement.

“There is some evidence that suggests having a highly regulated school choice program actually decreases student outcomes,” DeAngelis said. “For example, in Louisiana, this was the most heavily regulated program that we found, offering the lowest number of various choices for children, and this was the first experiment in the United States, or in the world actually, to find a negative statistical impact on student test scores within the first couple of years.”

Flaws of Test-Based Accountability

Will Flanders, research director at the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, says one helpful choice would be for policymakers to avoid overemphasizing standardized testing.

“The number one thing [I would advise lawmakers to do] would be to shy away from test-based accountability,” Flanders said. “I think more than any other factors, threatening schools with closure if test scores aren’t high enough and things of that nature can have a severe negative effect on the diversity of the private school sector and lead to that homogenization that the paper is talking about.

“Financial accountability that just makes sure the schools are good stewards of taxpayer money is sufficient and actually leads to better test outcomes as well,” Flanders said. “Lawmakers should really keep the regulatory burden as light as it can be.”

‘Leave a Minimal Footprint’

Ben DeGrow, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center, says lawmakers should realize their own limitations in regulating schools.

“Creating a voucher program that heavily regulates private schools until they all look the same is just another way of depriving students and parents of having real options,” DeGrow said. “Part of the strength and vibrancy of educational choice comes from allowing for innovative approaches that could help certain children learn more at an effective cost. As lawmakers look at adopting or updating an educational choice program, they should leave a minimal footprint on the schools whose doors they are opening to more students who might benefit from their teachers and programs.”

“Setting basic standards and guidelines is fine, but lawmakers should be wise and humble enough to recognize that there are multiple ways to measure school quality and that parents provide the most effective form of accountability,” DeGrow said.

Letting Parents Decide

Flanders says school choice programs work best when they put parents in charge.

“The important thing is to let the deciding factor, the ultimate accountability, be the parents and families,” Flanders said. “Having a test score available that can be compared across schools isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Where I have a problem is where the government says the test score is the end-all, be-all and the school is going to be closed if you fail to reach a certain threshold. There are other important factors as well.

“The important thing is to allow parents to be an informed consumer by providing testing information, safety data, and any sort of information the parent would want to know about the school,” Flanders said.

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

LEARN MORE

Homeschooling Group Sues NYC over ‘Systematic Mistreatment’

By Ashley Bateman

A homeschooling advocacy group is suing the government of New York City (NYC) for “systematic mistreatment of homeschoolers” because the city’s slow processing of paperwork has resulted in homeschooling families being falsely accused of crimes and harassed by government agencies.

Accused of Neglect

New York City mother Tanya Acevedo withdrew her child from a government school to homeschool him in 2016. After she completed the multistep paperwork process to comply with state laws, which included seven separate documents covering individualized plans for multiple subjects and quarterly progress reports, a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigator visited her apartment because of a report of “educational neglect.”

Acevedo had the documentation to prove she had completed and submitted the required paperwork. The home instruction office was so behind in its work, however, it hadn’t processed her materials. Acevedo contacted the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) for advice.

“After many phone calls, another visit from the CPS investigator, considerable inconvenience, and much unnecessary anxiety for Tanya and her son,” Tj Schmidt [HSLDA’s contact attorney for New York] persuaded the case worker to close the investigation,” the HSLDA website reported in December 2016.

‘Injustice Against Homeschool Families’

HSLDA talked to other families in the city and reported, “Family after family have found themselves in legal limbo because the central office simply cannot or will not follow the timelines in the regulation.

“The injustice against homeschooling families in New York City can no longer be tolerated,” HSLDA stated. “On December 5, [2016,] HSLDA filed a civil rights lawsuit against New York City public schools over their systematic mistreatment of homeschooling families. We are asking for money damages and for a court to order the New York City bureaucracy to simply follow New York’s homeschooling regulation.”

‘On December 5, [2016,] HSLDA filed a civil rights lawsuit against New York City public schools over their systematic mistreatment of homeschooling families. We are asking for money damages and for a court to order the New York City bureaucracy to simply follow New York’s homeschooling regulation.”

‘Homeschoolers Are Frustrated’

Laurie Spigel, creator of homeschool-nyc.com and a former home educator who has a paralegal background, summarizes the law and simplifies the paperwork on her website. Spigel says New York makes homeschooling difficult.

“Most homeschoolers are frustrated with New York state homeschooling regulations,” Spigel said. “The New York state homeschooling regulations tend to cause panic in new homeschoolers. It looks so overwhelming that it’s intimidating.

“I know of parents who have moved out of New York City, just across the river to New Jersey, simply to avoid the burdensome paperwork and the feeling of intimidation from the DOE [Department of Education],” Spigel said. “In New Jersey, you have to file once a year, which is true in many states. In New York you have to file six times a year.”

‘An Ongoing Issue’

Schmidt says New York City authorities often seem not to understand the laws they are supposed to enforce.

“When these families are investigated by the Administration for Children’s Services [ACS], there is a very real possibility that ACS will not understand what is required and file a petition in family court,” Schmidt said. “We believe this should not happen when the primary issue is a paperwork issue that is entirely within the power of the Central Office of Homeschooling to resolve if only they would simply follow the timeline laid out under New York law.

“This has been an ongoing issue with the Central Office of Homeschooling with similar families [to the Acevedos],” Schmidt said. “A lawsuit was necessary after we complained in writing for several years, went up the chain within the New York City DOE, and even attempted to meet with school officials at all levels, with no success.”

Lawsuit Continues

Schmidt says he believes HSLDA is close to concluding the lawsuit.

“We believe we are close,” Schmidt said. “We are waiting for the New York City DOE to provide us with an agreement. We were mainly asking for the New York City DOE to follow the New York homeschool regulations, to basically process the paperwork in a timely manner so that parents who pull their children out to homeschool them and comply with state law are not in jeopardy of receiving an educational neglect investigation because of this delay.”

‘Common-sense Modernization’

“Even in our Internet Age, rather than making homeschooling paperwork available online or mailing it to the home, NYC requires parents to trudge down to the Central Office of Home Schooling on Seventh Avenue to pick it up,” HSLDA’s website states. In addition to recommending reducing the number of progress reports New York requires each year, HSLDA wants the city and state to make things simpler for homeschooling families, Schmidt says.

“We are working with the NYC DOE’s attorney to try and ensure that school officials follow New York law,” Schmidt said. “We are also continuing to pursue common-sense modernization of the homeschool regulation to make the appropriate homeschool documentation that a student is making adequate academic progress in a prompt and accurate manner without taking away from the actual education of the child or the other responsibilities that local school officials have.”

Schmidt says many other states make it easy for families to homeschool.

“While I can’t speak for all states, most are doing a far better job than New York,” Schmidt said. “The fundamental thing is people are being educated. Many states have figured out a way to confirm without overburdening families and the school system.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.aa@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Academic Journal Withdraws Article on Colonialism

By Jane S. Shaw

With college campuses having been wracked by protests against conservative speakers in the past year, the fight against free speech has taken a new turn with the withdrawal of a column in a scholarly journal upon threats of violence against the editor.

"The peer-reviewed academic journal Third World Quarterly published "The Case for Colonialism," by Portland State University professor Bruce Gilley. The article, which is no longer available on the journal's website, received immediate outrage when it was posted in September, and an online petition signed by more than 10,000 people demanded its retraction. Fifteen members of the journal's editorial board signed a letter of resignation after publication of the article.

The journal, published by UK company Taylor & Francis, withdrew the article, citing "threats of personal violence." Toward the editor who published the piece, Shahid Qadir.

Threats of Violence

In response to the uproar, the author requested the journal retract the article, InsideHigherEd reported, so the issue could be studied in a more "civil and caring" manner.

The journal said in a statement on its website, "The journal editor has subsequently received serious and credible threats of personal violence. These threats are linked to the publication of this essay. As the publisher, we must take this seriously. Taylor & Francis has a strong and supportive duty of care to all our academic editorial teams, and this is why we are withdrawing this essay."

Angry editorial board members initially claimed the journal had not conducted the proper processes of peer review. The journal's publisher refuted the accusation by posting a detailed chronology of the review process for the article.

Argued Benefits of Colonialism

As the title suggests, "The Case for Colonialism," which appeared in the journal's "Viewpoints" section, spoke favorably about colonialism. It recommended a form of colonialism be tried again in "failed states," especially in former colonies now subject to corruption, civil war, and poverty. Gilley's article stated post-colonial independence has taken a "grave human toll."

The article presented documentation showing living conditions had improved in most areas under Western colonialism. Indigenous people in the colonies "moved closer to areas of more intensive colonial rule, sent their children to colonial schools and hospitals, went beyond the call of duty in positions in colonial governments, reported crime to colonial police, migrated from non-colonised to colonised areas, fought for colonial armies and participated in colonial political processes—all relatively voluntary acts," Gilley wrote.

In a Facebook post, the editorial board members who resigned denied they were trying to undermine free speech.

"We all subscribe to the principle of freedom of speech and the value of provocation in order to generate critical debate," they wrote. "However, this cannot be done by means of a piece that fails to meet academic standards of rigour and balance by ignoring all manner of violence, exploitation and harm perpetrated in the name of colonialism (and imperialism) and that causes offence and hurt and thereby clearly violates that very principle of free speech."

'Standard Behavior'

John Leo, editor of the Minding the Campus website and longtime columnist for U.S. News and World Report, says such firestorms are an all-too-common occurrence.

"This is standard behavior for many leftists in academe," Leo said. "Don't argue the issues, isolate the dissenter as a heretic, label him a 'white supremacist.' Get his article retracted or expunged. Make sure other potential dissenters notice what you did to him. Then pose as a respected scholar."

Gregory Rehmke, program director for the nonprofit organization Economic Thinking, says colonialism is a complex phenomenon requiring study from a full range of perspectives.

"History offers both colonial success stories like Hong Kong and Singapore and colonial disasters like the Belgian Congo," Rehmke said. "How can scholars further investigate the many challenges and problems of development economics if they can't publish on the mixed accomplishments and failures of colonial powers?"

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) is School Reform News' higher education editor.
New College Ranker Claims Others Have Bias Toward Wealthy

By Jane S. Shaw

A new college ranking system reflects increasing complaints about previous listings as being biased toward the wealthy.

As college rankings grow in number, criticism has increased. The grandfather of all college rankings is the annual listings of best colleges by U.S. News and World Report, which began in 1987. The Wall Street Journal (working with Times Higher Education) and Forbes also rate colleges.

The online magazine Politico took aim at the U.S. News rankings in September. “A Politico review shows that the criteria used in the U.S. News rankings—a measure so closely followed in the academic world that some colleges have built them into strategic plans—create incentives for schools to favor wealthier students over less wealthy applicants,” Benjamin Wermund wrote.

Specifically, U.S. News considers such criteria as how well a school’s freshmen scored on SAT and ACT tests, how few applicants it admits, its reputation with guidance counselors at highly ranked high schools, and its level of alumni support. These factors tend to encourage well-off students to gravitate to those schools, and they discourage or exclude those in families with low income, Wermund wrote.

Emphasis on Resources

Politico’s criticisms represent a new twist on an old critique.

“The U.S. News system is overwhelmingly based on measurable inputs, including financial resources, faculty attributes, and student selectivity,” George Leef, director of research at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, wrote on the organization’s website more than a decade ago. “None of those, however, necessarily tells us anything about educational quality.”

Economist Richard Vedder designed a different method of evaluating top schools for Forbes magazine in 2008. At the introduction of the rankings, Forbes said it chose criteria that “put itself into the student’s shoes.” Assuming students wanted to know a school’s success record, Forbes included elements such as how a school’s alumni ranked in Who’s Who and prizes such as Rhodes scholarships, what percentage of students graduated, and how much debt students held upon graduation.

In spite of those efforts, Vedder recently wrote for the website Mind the Campus there is “monotonous stability to the rankings,” saying they merely shuffle the elite schools. Sometimes Harvard is on top, sometimes Princeton, but they rarely change much.

“The top American universities resemble far more the old British aristocracy than the business institutions that ultimately provide them with most of their wealth and resources,” Vedder wrote.

Measuring Upward Mobility

The new system, “Mobility Report Cards,” addresses the concerns about bias toward the wealthy.

Designed by Raj Chetty, a Stanford University economics professor, the ranking system is intended to identify which schools provide upward mobility, measured by the number of entering students in the lowest income category who reach the top 20 percent of income in their thirties.

Chetty and his colleagues concede the actual mobility of elite or “Ivy-Plus” schools is high, with 60 percent of low-income students moving to the upper-income category. Chetty, however, sought out schools that have large numbers of low-income students and still provide mobility.

The result is a completely different list. At the top is Cal State University, followed by Pace University—New York and SUNY—Stony Brook. Sixteen percent of the students who attend Stony Brook are low-income, compared with just 4 percent at “Ivy-Plus” colleges. Fifty-one percent of Stony Brook’s students from the bottom 20 percent reach the top 20 percent, compared with 60 percent at “Ivy-Plus.” Most of Chetty’s list consists of public schools.

‘Asking the Wrong Questions’

The new ranking has aroused both interest and skepticism.

Jay Schalin, director of policy research for the Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says Chetty’s system is based on the false assumption schools do the work of making students economically successful later in life.

“I was a little surprised to see how well SUNY–Stony Brook’s students do, but there are problems with using averages rather than more granular data,” Schalin said. “Furthermore, it appears that Chetty and his co-researchers are asking the wrong questions. It is not the school one attends, but one’s inherent abilities, drive, and choice of majors that determine future income.”

Calls for More Research

John Merrifield, a professor of economics at the University of Texas at San Antonio, says the Mobility Report Card is interesting and should spur more research.

“The idea behind the Report Card, it seems, is that some schools do more to admit slightly less-qualified applicants to boost their status and income,” Merrifield said. “But it should measure and count the tradeoff created by bringing in more students at the low end ability-wise, who may experience failure when they would succeed in a less selective university.”

Jane S. Shaw (janesshaw5966@gmail.com) is School Reform News’ higher education editor.
Student Publishes Comparison of ACT and Classic Learning Test

By Teresa Mull

A homeschool student who took both the ACT and the Classic Learning Test (CLT) says ACT disfavors students with no Common Core experience.

The ACT and SAT college entrance exams are tied to the Common Core State Standards, a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. CLT was developed in 2015 to give students an alternative to ACT and SAT. More than 80 colleges and universities accept CLT for college admission.

ACT ‘Unfair’ to Homeschoolers

Olivia Dennison, a homeschooled student from West Virginia, took ACT and CLT within a week of each other. Dennison says ACT was biased toward students who studied Common Core-aligned curricula.

“I have no experience with Common Core,” Dennison told School Reform News. “I’ve always been homeschooled, and so all I know about Common Core is what I’ve researched about it, and I’ve read that the ACT is very based on Common Core. The ACT is very unfair to students who are growing up in differently styled classrooms. Whether that be a homeschool, a Christian school, a charter school, whatever it is, students with no Common Core experience can definitely be [at] an unfair disadvantage.”

‘Working to the Test’

Dennison says ACT stresses test-taking skills, whereas CLT emphasizes full comprehension of learning materials.

“The ACT is based on students working to the test and not on students being lifelong learners, which is the point of education,” Dennison said. “Some pros [with CLT] would be that I thought there were a perfectly balanced number of passages on creationism and evolutionism. I think this is necessary, because students need to hear all sides of an argument, and that will help them form and strengthen their opinions.”

“Existing standardized tests focus too narrowly on sterilized texts without allowing students to consider broader implications of decisions, ideas, and discoveries found in the rich and abundant variety of sources ranging from St. Augustine to Kant,” the CLT website states. “The CLT reintroduces this variety by focusing on sources and materials that draw upon a strong tradition and challenge students to analyze and comprehend texts that are not just concerned with one small, narrow topic but rather represent the scope and complexity of Western tradition.”

Says ACT Lacks Balance

Dennison says ACT gravitates toward trendy subject matter, unlike CLT.

“I really, really love classic literature, and I think the ACT makers had this opportunity to choose these passages from classic literature and benefit students, but instead they chose these modern passages that are more about life events for an author instead of quality material that could benefit a student’s mind, and that almost made me cringe,” Dennison said.

Says Schools Feel Pressured

David Wagner, CLT’s chief executive officer and cofounder, says his company encounters schools that feel the need to conform to standards and sacrifice their unique identity.

“People recognize it is inherently not fair that the only two options for college entrance exams are both Common Core-aligned, really public school assessments, that all kids are required to take,” Wagner said. “It’s amazing the consistency, when we talk to headmasters, that they feel the pressure from parents who say, ‘I like all the classical stuff you’re doing, but what really matters is if [my children are] going to be seeing what’s on the SAT.’ With that they feel this pressure to conform to a testing standard that is very disconnected from their values and their principles and their own curriculum as a school.”

More Colleges Adopting CLT

Wagner says CLT is experiencing great early success.

“Our strategy has changed a little bit,” Wagner said. “CLT was really born with a Catch-22 problem, where we want to have widespread college adoption, but in order to get that, you need students using it first to really interest the colleges. At this point, we’re probably seeing two to three college adoptions a week. One school actually dropped the ACT and SAT altogether.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Require Citizen Naturalization Test for Graduation, Organization Urges

By Harry Painter

A n initiative to require students across the nation to pass a civics exam in order to graduate from high school is making headway in the states.

New immigrants to the United States must pass a test of 100 questions on American civics in order to be naturalized. The test includes questions ranging in difficulty from “Name the current president” to “What was the main concern of the U.S. during the Cold War?”

The Arizona-based Joe Foss Institute created the Civics Education Initiative two years ago to advocate every state enact legislation requiring students to pass a test based on the U.S. naturalization exam as a condition of graduation from high school. Some states have adopted the program minus that condition.

The original goal of the campaign was to have laws enacted in every state by September 17, 2017, the 230th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. As of October 2017, the institute claimed success in only about half the states. Lucian Spataro Jr., chief academic officer and vice president of legislative affairs at the Joe Foss Institute, told School Reform News he believes the initiative can reach success in every state by the end of 2019.

Initial State Success

The Civics Education Initiative has persuaded eight states to require students to pass a test to receive a diploma, according to a September report from the government-chartered Education Commission of the States (ECS). The ECS report found 17 states had adopted a test, but not all require a passing grade for graduation.

The ECS report stated the campaign failed to pass legislation in an additional 18 states where it attempted to do so. According to ECS, states that rejected the legislation did so largely because of concerns about imposing more tests or the usefulness of the proposed tests. States declining to adopt an exam were worried it would encourage “teaching to the test,” the report stated.

Spataro says the CEI test wouldn’t encourage such practices.

“Teachers don’t teach to the test unless it’s a standardized test that is tied to some metric or salary or something like that,” Spataro said.

‘Civics Has Become Secondary’

Part of the Joe Foss Institute’s vision for the civics initiative is to instill the ideals of the nation’s founding, which Spataro says schools have lost.

“Civics has become a secondary or less important discipline in the eyes of kids, teachers, and schools,” Spataro said. “That’s not how Thomas Jefferson had established schools. That’s not his idea of what schools were set up to be.”

Cites Widespread Ignorance

Robert Holland, a senior fellow at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says polling data illustrate the urgent need for stricter civics requirements.

“History and civics are linked subjects, because to understand how our government works, it is necessary to understand the founding principles of the American Revolution as brought to life by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,” Holland said. “It is appalling that only about one-fourth of our high school students know that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are the absolutely crucial Bill of Rights, which protects our individual liberties from governmental intrusion.”

Progressive Changes

Holland says progressive educators are at fault for bunching together history and civics with other disciplines under the umbrella term “social studies” long ago.

“Knowledge of history and civics began going downhill many decades ago when progressive educators began shoveling those basic subjects into a mishmash—including psychology, sociology, global studies, and much more—called ‘social studies,’” Holland said. “Today, very few states require a major in history as a prerequisite to teaching history to high school students. Many new teachers lead history or civics classes without having had even one standalone course in those subjects.”

‘A Warning Device’

Holland says administering the U.S. naturalization test to high school students would help guide curriculum improvement.

“Administering high school students the same test given to candidates for citizenship would be one good way to document glaring deficiencies in civic and historical knowledge that ought to be corrected,” Holland said. “Most of the questions are simple. For example, ‘Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?’”

Harry Painter (jharrypainter@gmail.com) writes from Brooklyn, New York.
Family Combines Learning and Travel in ‘Road Schooling’

By Teresa Mull

A family for whom travel is a way of life incorporates learning into that lifestyle through a form of homeschooling they call “road schooling.”

‘Experience-Based’ Learning

Caroline Makepeace, a former teacher who instructs her two elementary school-aged daughters while traveling, says she makes use of traditional teaching methods while they’re on the road. “[Road schooling] is a word families have chosen to use who are homeschooling as they’re traveling,” Makepeace said. “It’s probably a little more flexible than homeschooling, and a lot of the lessons, etc. are experience-based and are related to the different travel experiences we’re having. I also incorporate sit-down work every day, to really focus on that skill-based learning: math, reading, spelling, writing, those really, really important foundational skills.”

Started with Distance Education

Makepeace and her husband began a form of road schooling in 2013 when they traveled around Australia. The family’s method of learning has evolved since then.

“What I did then was called ‘distance education,’ and it’s a lot more structured than road schooling,” Makepeace said. “I think it’s something we only have in Australia, where it was designed originally for children in the Outback who couldn’t get to a school because schools were too far away. They have a teacher who can teach them over the radio. Australian children who are traveling either around the country or internationally can register in a school. They have a teacher, they have a class, and the teacher sends out units of work and lessons.”

‘It’s a Lifestyle Decision’

Makepeace says she found a more flexible way of educating her children works better for the family’s lifestyle.

“I decided, coming over to the U.S., based on the experience of traveling around Australia and doing distance education, to do this road schooling format,” Makepeace said. “We’ve been doing that with the girls now for about a year. It’s a lifestyle decision. I’ve been traveling since 1997, so it is my lifestyle, and I know that I would continue to do that with the children. We have a business now that’s around travel as well, and we’re obviously traveling all the time, so it was just too difficult for us to manage that with the girls in traditional school, so the road schooling really works with our lifestyle.”

‘Fantastic Way’ to Learn

Makepeace says her girls benefit from experiences not found in traditional schools.

“It’s a fantastic way for children to learn,” Makepeace said. “They learn so much about the world around them, and they learn so much about themselves. They get to develop a lot of [abilities] that I think a lot of schools don’t do a really good job of teaching, [such as] how to make decisions, how to be independent, how to be responsible, confident, courageous. All those things, I think, travel really gives to my children, so I love that that’s a huge part of their day-to-day life.”

Hands-On Learning

The Makepeace family incorporates into their education hands-on activities such as visits to museums, art galleries, and national parks. They recently visited Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, where the girls learned about volcanoes, earthquakes, and rainforests while walking among lava fields. Makepeace says her daughters learn especially well through such activities.

“That’s just something they completely grasped and will remember forever,” Makepeace said.

The family recently returned from a journey to Tennessee, where they learned about music and culture, Makepeace says.

“It was a fabulous learning experience for [the girls] musically,” Makepeace said. “Tennessee has a great musical history and so many different forms of music, which we experienced at the Grand Ole Opry and down in Memphis. We went to a blues café and visited the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, which the girls really, really enjoyed.”

Outdoor Living

Fresh air and exercise are another important element of the family’s road schooling, Makepeace says.

“We’re very big on outdoor living, so we really take those experiences out when we travel, and they know the huge importance of exercise and good health and physical education, and my girls are getting that all the time,” Makepeace said. “They’re getting to learn, from a physical education standpoint, activities that they’re very interested in and want to do, such as rock climbing. We’ve become really big fans of stand-up paddle boarding, which is a wonderful family activity.”

‘Flexibility Really Is Key’

Makepeace says she has learned to accept the unpredictability of road schooling and that it’s important to make sure learning happens everywhere.

“Flexibility really is key,” Makepeace said. “One day you might be out exploring all day, and so that skill-based work might not be something you have time to do. Just accepting that that’s OK and letting that go and understanding that when you’re out exploring, they’re learning and gaining so much from that alone.”

Road schooling has helped make the Makepeace children self-directed learners, Makepeace says.

“The more I’ve done this, the more I’ve realized with this lifestyle that we’ve chosen, our children are really fantastic at taking care of their own learning and their own growth,” Makepeace said. “It’s really now just a matter of me making sure they’re engaging with every experience we have and they’re learning something from it. You can easily do that through conversation and being present with them doing that, and then just having that time to be able to do that schoolwork.”

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

"I decided, coming over to the U.S., based on the experience of traveling around Australia and doing distance education, to do this road schooling format. We’ve been doing that with the girls now for about a year. It’s a lifestyle decision. I’ve been traveling since 1997, so it is my lifestyle, and I knew that I would continue to do that with the children.”

CAROLINE MAKEPEACE
FORMER TEACHER

The Makepeaces blog about their road schooling adventures at https://www.ytravelblog.com/.
Dozens of Children Disenrolled from School Over Gender Presentations

By Cassidy Syf testad

Parents disenrolled more than 70 children from a California charter school after the school board disallowed them from opting their children out of lessons on gender identity.

A teacher at Rocklin Academy Family of Schools (RAFOS) read “I Am Jazz,” a story about an 11-year-old transgender student, aloud to a kindergarten class in June 2017. That same month, RAFOS Principal Jillayne Antoon presented a five-year-old boy to the child’s class as a “transgender reveal party” and identified him by a new name and sex, saying the boy had become a girl. Parents were not given advance notice of either event.

Angry Parents, Unyielding Board

The sensitive topics of the lessons and the school’s refusal to provide advance notice angered parents. Parents told School Reform News after hearing “I Am Jazz” read aloud, some of their five-year-old children returned home and expressed worries their gender might suddenly change.

Parents troubled by the forced teachings met with Antoon and other administrators and expressed their concerns at board meetings. Despite the parents’ protests, the RAFOS school board voted unanimously in September to disallow parents from opting their children out of such lessons.

“After a five-hour, highly charged meeting attended by more than 500 people [in September], the Rocklin Academy School board rejected a ‘model parental rights’ proposal put forward by parents’ rights groups [sic] Capitol Resource Institute and backed by the California Family Council, Pacific Justice Institute, and Alliance Defending Freedom,” LifeSiteNews.com reported. “The model proposal would allow parents to review sensitive material before it hits the classroom and to opt their children out of controversial lessons that are not sex education. California law requires parental notice and opt-out for sex education.”

Unconcerned About Departures

As of late September, 71 students from 40 families had disenrolled from RAFOS.

A RAFOS spokesman said the students’ leaving is “really such a shame,... but this is one of the highest performing charter schools in the state of California, with a wait list of over 1,300 children. We anticipate there are other kids who are going to step into those slots.”

‘Turned into a Political Rally’

A Rocklin Academy mother who requested anonymity says school administrators overstepped their authority and used political tactics to subvert their opposition.

“They made their position clear that they know what they are doing better than we do, even parents who are credentialed teachers,” the mother said. “They said that our children need to be sensitized to this subject. The LGBTQ community came out of the woodwork for [one of the board] meetings. They had 500 seats in an event center, and parents couldn’t get in because our school board meeting was turned into a political rally via Facebook. That just added fuel to the fire.”

Out of the 108 individuals who publicly commented, only 38 RAFOS parents were heard, because of the statements made by LGBTQ activists, atheists, and Indivisible CA-04 [a progressive activist group],” the mother said. “Of the 38 parents from RAFOS who did speak, 28 supported parental notification.”

Ignored Parents’ Concerns

Another parent, who pulled two of his children from RAFOS for curriculum-related reasons, says the school dismissed parents’ concerns and kowtowed to outside interest groups.

“The administration and board left us no other choice after the dog-and-pony show they facilitated on behalf of LGBTQ activists,” the father said. “They told concerned parents that their rights are subordinate to the rights of narrow, left-wing special interest groups. [The administration] used a kindergarten class to bring a culture war to our community and then picked sides.”

‘It’s All Political’

Lance Izumi, senior director of the Pacific Research Institute’s Center for Education, says the educational elite doesn’t care about children.

“The bottom line is that it’s all political,” Izumi said. “It’s not about science or what’s best for the kids or families.”

Voting With Their Feet

Izumi says the lack of an opt-out policy at Rocklin Academy undercuts the notion charter schools are parent-controlled.

“Charter schools are supposed to be more responsive than regular public schools to the needs of parents and their children,” said Izumi. “That’s one of the selling points of charter schools.”

“The most effective way to get the message across, then, is to leave the schools,” Izumi said. “When those children, who represent money to the schools, are gone, the school will not receive its funding.”

Accused of Bigotry

John Jackson, president of William Jessup University (WJU) in Rocklin, California, defended parents’ rights in an op-ed for the Sacramento Bee.

Jackson told School Reform News he received an email response to his op-ed from a local public school superintendent who vilified WJU for “getting a Title IX Exemption allowing [his] institution to discriminate against other human beings for their sexual orientation.” The superintendent concluded his email with the line, “You, Sir, are a bigot....”

‘Not about Intolerance’

A parent who disenrolled her child from RAFOS says fellow parents just want a say in what and how their children learn.

“This is not about ‘intolerance’ or ‘bigotry,’ nor is it in opposition to measures taken to fight bullying, harassment, and discrimination,” the parent said. “I do not, nor do the parents I know, condone hate or intolerance, bigotry, bullying, harassment, or discrimination. We simply want to be able to broach sensitive topics like that presented to our five- and six-year-olds in a manner and timing that is best for our kids. That is at the center of this controversy.”

Cassidy Syf testad (cassidysyf testad@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.
BOOK REVIEW

New Book Presents Long History of Criticism of Government Schools

Review By Jay Lehr

The editors of Critics of State Education: A Reader have compiled 15 brilliant essays on education from nineteenth-century Europe, opening the book with a marvellous introduction explaining how they chose these pieces. Readers of this wonderful book, and even of my review alone, will likely be astounded to learn how many brilliant scholars in England, more than 150 years ago, feared government control of children’s education.

A History of Anti-State Sentiment

The authors first trace the origins of the concept of state-controlled education, finding them in the works of Plato and Aristotle, using ancient Sparta as the initial model. In Sparta, the Greeks subordinated the individual to the demands of the state.

In England, by contrast, elementary education progressed without substantial state aid or interference until 1833, when new legislation was passed allowing government to interfere in schools. Long before that date, the well-known scientist Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen, wrote in opposition to any state involvement, saying, as the authors recount it, “Education is an art, and like any art, it requires many experiments and trials before it can approach perfection. To bring government into education would freeze this art at its present stage and thereby cut off its future growth.” Education, he said, “is already under too many legal restraints. Let these be removed.”

Priestley argued education was a civil liberty that should never be sur-rendered to the hands of a magistrate, and that the right of conducting it should always remain with the individual, the authors state.

Disavowing Government Schools

Each essay provides more evidence government schools have long been antithetical to what most parents want for their children. William Godwin and Thomas Hodgskin, writing in the early years of the nineteenth century, both argued government control of education would significantly increase the power of government and would produce homogenized people, not the stuff required for a nation to develop to its fullest.

Wilhelm Von Humboldt, writing in 1792 at age 25, said even if we did see education as an essential duty of government, it should be limited to encouraging the development of the individual’s faculties. Even then, he argued, it would remain impractical because “whatever is pervaded by a unity of organization invariably begets a corresponding uniformity in the actual result.”

Hodgskin, after a brief career as a naval officer in which he was offended by the harsh treatment of British sailors, wrote a book based on his experiences with national governments and their education philosophies. Focusing on Germany and influenced by the writings of Adam Smith, Hodgskin described the inefficiencies and waste characteristic of government projects. Regarding education he wrote, “A free people, like their property, will always be directed more beneficially for them when it is in their own hands.” Hodgskin went on to become editor of The Economist in 1848, a position he held for 11 years.

Education as National Religion

Prominent libertarian Herbert Spencer, in a series of letters published in 1842 as The Proper Sphere of Government, observed governments are most happy taking the task of instruction into their own hands rather than see the people educated by means over which the state has no control. Such government control naturally requires a uniform system of moral and intellectual training, which destroys the variety of character so essential to national growth.

Education, then, can ultimately become a national religion, which Edward Barnes Jr. described in 1847. Barnes stated firmly, “It is not the duty or province of the Government to train the mind of the people.” Moreover, Barnes said, it is also not the duty of government to feed the people, clothe them, or build houses for them. These things, he said, the people can and ought to do for themselves.

One of the more interesting takes on state-run education was presented by Algernon Wells in a lecture in 1848, in which he warned against seeking any money from government for education. Government subsidies to teachers and school administrators will generate a self-interested bias, Wells said. State employees are not likely to bite the hand that feeds them, so to speak, by criticizing the government school system, Wells argued.

Among the essays are comments on education in nearly every European country, most of which tried and failed at government-controlled education. In nearly all cases, it was found nonteaching, state-paid officials far outnumbered teachers, as is the case in the United States today.

A Revelation

This book is a true revelation for those interested in the history behind our nation’s education system and its current woeful condition. It is fascinating to read the old-fashioned, sometimes stilted and wordy English of long ago. It is a charming read for anyone who wants to understand the history of education.

A shorter summary of this 250-page book could become a serious weapon against Common Core, which is currently plaguing our education system. Had Bill Gates been privy to these great essays, he might never have financed so much of the Common Core disaster. Let’s hope someone sends him a copy and he takes the time to read it.

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The Heartland Institute is pleased to announce the release of the fourth edition of *The Patriot’s Toolbox*, coauthored and edited by Dr. Herbert Walberg and Joseph Bast, with contributions from 18 other distinguished policy experts.

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