Having students think about religion increases their political tolerance and ability to delay gratification, new research suggests.

The study's conclusions call into question choice programs that tend to favor public charter schools over private schools.

The study, titled “Losing My Religion? The Impact of Spiritual Cues on Noncognitive Skills,” published in October 2016, concluded, “Although difficult to disentangle its impacts from confounding variables, research suggests that religiosity is a positive predictor of educational outcomes. … We find that religious cues increase students’ self-regulatory capacities, a predictor of educational attainment, and opposition to the standards in May 2016 after primary challenger and outspoken Common Core opponent Jonathmann Johnson said, “Utah’s students will benefit greatly from more localization and personalization.”

Herbert wrote a letter to members of the Utah State Board of Education before the primary elections in May saying, in part, “I am asking the State Board of Education to consider implementing uniquely Utah standards, instead of the Common Core State Standards.”

Utah incumbent Gov. Gary Herbert (R) will begin his third term after switching positions on Common Core during a contentious campaign for the Republican nomination.

Formerly a proponent of the Common Core State Standards, a national program dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level, Herbert expressed
Don’t miss National School Choice Week 2017 (January 22 - 28). There are so many ways to celebrate and to raise awareness of effective education options for kids. Write and place an opinion piece, create a social media campaign, or plan any type of event, activity, or meeting of your choice. Sign up today for your free box of National School Choice Week supplies at SchoolChoiceWeek.com/MyMeeting.

Did you know?
National School Choice Week is the world’s largest annual celebration of opportunity in education. In 2016, National School Choice Week featured 16,745 events!
Texas High School Football Stadium to Cost $70 Million

By Jenni White

The price tag for the Katy, Texas, Independent School District’s (ISD) new high school football stadium has reached $70.3 million, far surpassing the $58 million bond voters approved in 2014.

Katy ISD is in a fast-growing suburb of Houston. It serves 73,000 students in 63 schools and has an operating budget of approximately $800 million. Katy ISD voters rejected a bond package in 2013 proposing a 14,000-seat stadium for $69.5 million.

Cost overruns on the approved $58 million stadium, which is set to open in 2017 and seat 12,000 people, “have largely gone unnoticed, in part because of how they have been labeled in board agendas,” the Houston Chronicle reported in October.

Paying for Administrators’ ‘Dreams’

Donna Garner, a retired Texas teacher who served on the National Commission on Migrant Education under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, says administrators push for big sports stadiums to make themselves look good.

“Administrators love to spend taxpayers’ dollars on these mammoths, Taj Mahal athletic complexes,” Garner said. “They combine them in various ways so that various other projects are thrown into the same bond issue, to satisfy potential voters, especially teachers, the largest voting bloc in nearly every school district in Texas.”

“The problem is that these bond issues are administrators’ dreams, because when they build these elaborate structures, it boosts their resumes so they can climb the ladder to higher-paid superintendent jobs,” Garner said. “The superintendent leaves to go to the next school district, leaving the expenses of the elaborate structures to be retired by district taxpayers.”

Garner says school administrators manipulate the system to get huge stadiums approved.

“The superintendents schedule rotating voting sites each year,” Garner said. “They also schedule early voting at one school this week and early voting at another school next week. These strategies make it very easy for teachers to come to the voting location during their conference period to vote: no driving to community voting locations and waiting in line. Of course, the large number of ISD personnel [voting] swamp the numbers from the fiscally responsible voters in the district and the bond issue passes.”

Football ‘an Innocent Bystander’

Kim Belcher, mother of a Katy ISD high school football player, says people shouldn’t blame the football teams for the cost of the stadium.

“Football is separate from irresponsible oversight of a school district,” Belcher said. “In this case, football is an innocent bystander being exploited by a board of trustees and superintendents who do not answer to the public but instead do the bidding of big [special-interest groups] like the Texas Association of School Administrators, School Superintendents Association, Texas Association of School Boards, Past Growth Schools Coalition, and Texas High Performance Schools Consortium.

“I have never seen a football coach campaign for a $58 million stadium or a $70 million stadium, or anything else for that matter,” Belcher said.

Facilities or Books?

Garner says the cycle for superintendents in Texas is “build a building, sell a bond, move on,” and it’s costing students.

“Meanwhile, huge amounts of money go to facilities while school districts say they don’t have enough money for students to have their own hardcover textbooks. Schools are so ‘broke’ that they have to increase the size of teachers’ classes and the number of periods in the school day, which increases the total number of student load per teacher, and on and on—all the things that harm academic achievement and make it less likely that teachers will have the time or energy to give students individual academic attention.”

Donna Garner
Retired Texas Teacher and
Former Member of the National
Commission on Migrant Education

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Jenni White (jlwpusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Study: Religious Education Has Benefits Secular Ed Lacks

Continued from page 1

boost political tolerance. These findings provide preliminary evidence to suggest that religious-based education provides benefits that their secularized equivalents cannot fully emulate.”

Rice University researcher Daniel H. Bowen and University of Arkansas researcher Albert Cheng, the study’s authors, randomly assigned 180 secondary students at a public boarding school to an experimental task with religious, secularized, or neutral cues.

“With our study, we attempted to simulate a regular occurrence that takes place in religious schools: the presence of subtle religious cues,” Bowen told School Reform News. “Since students were randomly assigned to this religious cue treatment, regardless of personal religious beliefs or family background, our findings suggest that the benefits that religiously educated students experience can likely be attributed in some part to these religious schools.”

Encouraging ‘Grit and Diligence’

Cheng says test scores aren’t necessarily better at religious schools, but religious schools’ students are excelling in other areas.

“These kids aren’t smarter per se, but something is going on in these schools,” Cheng said. “It’s a possibility that these religious private schools aren’t teaching more content knowledge or teaching it better, but [they are] affecting kids in these other important dimensions: non-cognitive outcomes like grit and diligence. We wanted to see whether we could isolate the impacts that these unique types of schools might have.”

Bowen says the study is different from similar studies conducted in the past.

“Our study is unique in that we experimentally manipulated, through priming, high school students’ exposures to religious cues to examine their impacts on their willingness to delay gratification and exhibit political tolerance,” Bowen said. “While many studies have been conducted in this area before, it was the first, to our knowledge, to have examined the impacts on secondary school students. Additionally, other studies in this field typically base conclusions on correlations between educational outcomes, religiosity, character building, and delayed gratification. We administered our study in a laboratory to assess a causal relationship.”

Religious Ed ‘Supports Good Behavior’

Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education, says religious schools provide benefits well beyond the teaching of facts and figures.

“Religious schools provide a comprehensive framework and worldview in which one’s life and behavior can be grounded,” McTighe said. “They reinforce the moral fabric of society, support good behavior, and inspire students to respect others. They develop character and instill an understanding that on this Earth, we have been given this life for a reason.

“The experiment seems to reinforce the common-sense notion that replacing religious schools with charter schools carries consequences,” McTighe said. “Religious schools can establish a particular type of culture and identity that charter schools cannot. The faith and religious teachings that inform those schools, and that help students tackle central questions about life’s meaning and purpose, are simply off-limits in charter schools.”

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

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INTERNET INFO

Utah Governor Renounces Common Core, Easily Wins Reelection

Continued from page 1
moving beyond the Common Core to a system that is tailored specifically to the needs of our state.’”

Herbert defeated his Democratic opponent, Mike Weinholtz, 67–29 percent in the November 2016 election.

‘Realized Something Wasn’t Right’
Alpine District School Board member Wendy Hart says Herbert won because he listened to his constituents.

“When he spoke with enough average people who were concerned about their individual children, he realized that something wasn’t right,” Hart said. “My hope is that he will realize that when moms are upset, it’s not that they are motivated by politics, but by a desire to help their children.”

Alisa Ellis, a member of the Utah State School Board (USSB), says Common Core was a primary issue in the election.

“As Common Core has been put in place, parents are really waking up to the reality of what’s going on in schools, and it became very obvious during the primary season that the battle was still continuing to rage against Common Core in the public,” Ellis said.

Parents ‘Ready to Take the Lead’
Of eight seats open on the USSB during the 2016 general elections, six anti-Common Core candidates ran and four won, three of whom are homeschool moms.

Ellis says the public voted to restore parental control.

“All of us ran on a parental-rights platform,” said Ellis. “Parents want to take back their parental right to direct the education of their children. Common Core is just one part of the equation. It’s a symptom of the larger problem of parents being left out of discussions that affect their kids.”

“We’ve let the state take our responsibility away and made the state’s role primary and the parent’s role secondary,” Ellis said. “This election shows that parents are ready to take the lead in their child’s education. It’s time we stopped talking past each other and start having conversations with each other, because when we sit down to talk, we often find we have much more in common than we think we do.”

Told Common Core Is ‘a Non-Issue’
Hart says she’s not surprised parents made their concerns known when voting for USSB members, because Common Core is hurting their children.

“In a conversation with a Common Core supporter, I was told that Common Core is really a non-issue, that it’s been long enough [and] we need to give up the fight and just get along,” Hart said. “My response was that it’s only a non-issue if you don’t have a child who is struggling. The advantage the pro-Common Core people have is that they have successfully branded anti-Common Core parents as protesting for no good reason or for their own personal ‘political’ agendas. The reality is that parents who don’t like Common Core don’t like it because their children are not thriving with it, and that’s not going away.”

Although a flip of six out of 15 USSB members doesn’t provide anti-Common Core parents with a majority, Hart says she considers it to be a “sizeable” representation of Utah’s anti-Common Core sentiments.

“As the one anti-Common Core candidate who did not prevail [in the primaries], but knocked out the current USSB chair in the primaries, Gary Thompson, says, ‘Parents are, and must always be, the resident experts of their own children,’” Hart said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Oklahoma’s Largest Online Charter School Sees Record Growth

By Jenni White

Enrollment in Oklahoma’s first online charter school has grown by nearly 200 percent during the past three years.

Epic Charter Schools, a state-accredited virtual charter school formed in 2011, currently enrolls nearly 8,500 students, almost triple the number enrolled during the 2014–15 school year.

“Epic officials predict enrollment will near 10,000 by mid-school year,” Oklahoma Watch reported in September.

Epic uses “unconventional efforts” to drive enrollment, such as giving out prizes to families for student referrals, Oklahoma Watch reports, and “by depositing bonus money into ‘learning fund’ accounts that families can use to buy their curriculum or computers or defray fees for extracurricular activities such as dancing, club sports, or archery.”

“Parents Are Happy”

Epic Charter Schools Superintendent David Chaney says satisfied customers are the reason for the school’s burgeoning student population.

“The biggest reason Epic is growing is that parents are happy with the service we provide, and they tell other parents, who in turn enroll their kids,” Chaney said. “People are becoming more comfortable with technology, so what may have seemed hard to grasp a decade ago is commonplace today.”

Chaney says recent technological advances allow for a much more personalized learning experience.

“Today’s technology allows for personalized, one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between a certified teacher and a student that occurs both through the computer and in person,” Chaney said. “It allows students to learn at the pace that’s right for them in an environment that’s comfortable for them.”

‘Virtual School Can Be a Lifeline’

Colleen Cook, national director of Public School Options, says this form of school choice can help those who need it the most.

“For many families, virtual school is the right option,” Cook said. “For students who were failing at their previous school, suffered at the hands of bullies, moved frequently with the military, or have to deal with a serious medical condition, virtual school can be a lifeline.”

Chaney says society is becoming more aware that the one-size-fits-all approach to education doesn’t work.

“At Epic, we serve many students with exceptional talents and life situations, such as serious athletes who need a flexible schedule to fully develop their potential and are able to get a high-quality education while working toward their dreams,” Chaney said.

Massachusetts Voters Reject Proposal to Lift Charter School Cap

By Jenni White

Thousands of Massachusetts students will have to remain in schools they want to leave, after the state’s voters rejected a ballot initiative that would have increased the number of charter schools allowed in the state.

The Massachusetts Authorization of Additional Charter Schools and Charter School Expansion Initiative, known as “Question 2,” would have allowed the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to authorize up to 12 new charter schools per year or expand enrollment in existing charter schools. There are approximately 32,000 students on charter school waiting lists in the state.

Question 2 opponents, led by the Massachusetts Teachers Association teachers union, said charter school expansion would defund traditional public schools.

Sixty-two percent of Massachusetts voters said no to Question 2 during the November 2016 election; 38 percent voted in favor of lifting the cap.

Not Causing Revenue Losses

Eileen McAnneny, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation (MTF), says MTF published research in September showing the claims of Question 2 opponents are false, and a study released by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau in April 2016 concluded, “Charter expansion has not been a revenue issue for Boston Public Schools.”

“Our study concluded that charter school funding is proportionate with its enrollment,” said McAnneny. “In 21 communities, there’s no consistent story to tell. In some districts, enrollment grew, but so did the public school, and the opposite [was true in other districts]. There was no consistent conclusion that could be drawn on the impact of charter schools, [except] that it hadn’t hurt public education funding. There’s a bigger pie for education in the commonwealth, and charter schools get that in proportion to their enrollment.”

Support from Governor

Gov. Charlie Baker supported lifting the cap on charter schools and appeared in an ad in favor of Question 2. Laura Keehner Rigas, communications director for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, says the governor’s administration will continue to work toward better education for all Massachusetts students.

“The Baker-Polito administration is proud to have made historic investments in our public schools, and over the coming months we will continue our expanded investments in career technical education, and we will explore new ways to take the lessons learned from our best charters to enable more district schools to succeed,” Rigas said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Study: Oklahoma Leads Nation in Education Funding Cuts Since 2008

By Kenneth Artz

Oklahoma has cut more from general education funding since 2008 than any other state in the nation, a new report has found.

The report, released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in October, says Oklahoma has cut state per-pupil funding by 26.9 percent since 2008, nearly double what was cut in Alabama, the state with the second-highest reductions.

While those per-pupil cuts may sound draconian, CBPP’s calculation of per-pupil cuts does not take into account federal K–12 funding. Researchers for The Heritage Foundation found federal spending on education increased dramatically between 1985 and 2008, the starting point for CBPP’s report.

‘Plenty of Funding’

Greg Forster, a senior fellow at EdChoice, says Oklahoma is spending more than enough on education.

“There is no shortage of public school funding in Oklahoma,” Forster said. “Given the state’s low cost of living and comparatively low incidence of major social problems that complicate education, there should be plenty of funding.”

Brandon Dutcher, vice president of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, says Oklahoma’s education cuts are not responsible for poor student outcomes.

“The disastrous results for students have been going on for several decades now,” Dutcher said. “Research has consistently shown there’s no necessary relationship between government spending on education and student performance. In any case, Oklahoma’s education system had $8.7 billion in total revenue [in 2015], the most in state history. Total spending per student was $9,724. If that’s not enough money to educate students, there’s something wrong with the grown-ups, not the kids.”

‘School Choice Saves Money’

Dutcher says school choice programs are a fiscally sensible solution to the poor performance of government schools.

“By now, it’s no secret that school choice saves money,” Dutcher said. “As Greg Forster’s comprehensive research summary shows, of the 28 empirical studies that have looked at school choice’s fiscal impact on taxpayers and public schools, 25 find that school choice programs save money, and three find that the programs they looked at are revenue neutral. Moreover, a fiscal analysis of the proposed education savings account legislation in Oklahoma also shows that the program would save money.”

Dutcher says the value of education choice goes beyond fiscal considerations.

“But in the end, money should not be the highest concern,” Dutcher said. “Parents, not government officials, have a moral right to determine their child’s upbringing. Policymakers should secure that right and stop penalizing parents financially for raising their children in accordance with their consciences.”

INTERNET INFO


INTERNET INFO


DOE Projects Further Rise in Federal K–12 Spending

By Michael McGrady

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) announced federal spending on K–12 schools is projected to reach record highs in the next 12 years.

“Current expenditures (e.g., instruction and support services) for public elementary and secondary education are projected to increase 21 percent in constant dollars (adjusted for inflation) between school years 2011–12, the last year of actual data, and 2024–25,” reports DOE’s “Projections of Education Statistics to 2024,” published in September.

DOE also predicts per-pupil spending will increase in inflation-adjusted dollars.

“Current expenditures per pupil in fall enrollment in constant 2013–14 dollars increased 15 percent from 1999–2000 to 2011–12 and are projected to increase 13 percent, to $12,500, from 2011–12 to 2024–25,” the publication reports.

‘Tremendous Growth’ in Spending

Gerard Robinson, a resident fellow in education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says the U.S. taxpayer has not received a good return on education spending, in terms of student achievement.

“Money matters as an expenditure issue,” Robinson said. “If you look at the facts, between 1930 and 2015, you have tremendous growth in the amount of money the federal government spends on K–12 education. Yet, between 1970 and 2015, you see a relatively flat return rate.

“If we have a dedicated amount of money, we have to be smart about making sure that it goes to places that we know it matters,” Robinson said.

Big Spending ‘Nothing New’

Terry Stoops, director of education studies at the John Stoops, director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation, says throwing more money at the system has not and will not solve the nation’s education problems.

“At this point, one would think that the American people would have realized that we cannot spend our way to a world-class system of public schools,” Stoops said. “Unfortunately, most Americans believe that funding is insufficient while paying very little attention to performance and the actual returns on that investment means that there isn’t any end in sight for the [increases in] money we spend on our public schools.

“And this is nothing new,” Stoops said. “We have been hearing complaints of insufficient funding for well over a century, and it is used as one way to explain our inability to raise student achievement.”
Number of Homeschooled Students Doubled Since 1999

By Michael McGrady

The number of homeschooled students in the United States more than doubled between 1999 and 2012, according to U.S. Department of Education (DOE) estimates.

“The percentage of students ages 5–17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through grade 12 who are homeschooled—the homeschooling rate—has increased over time,” states the study, titled “Homeschooling in the United States: 2012,” released in November 2016. “The homeschooling rate increased from 1.7 percent in 1999 to 3.4 percent in 2012. ... In 2012, there were an estimated 1.8 million homeschooled students in the United States, which is an increase from 850,000 in 1999, when estimates were first reported.”

The National Center for Education Statistics, a division of DOE, collected data on the number, percentage, and characteristics of homeschooled students through telephone and mail surveys conducted with parents and students from 1999 until 2012 as part of the National Household Education Surveys (NHES) Program.

“The 2012 survey was administered from January through August of 2012, by mail,” the study states. “Questionnaires were completed by the parents of 17,563 students, including 937 homeschooled students reported in the [Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey] Homeschool questionnaire.”

Numbers ‘No Different’
The study is out of date in its report of the number of homeschoolers because it reuses old data, says Brian D. Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI).

“What is interesting about this report is that they are reporting on data they reported three years ago,” Ray said. “The Department of Education does its report based on the NHES survey. In it, they get some data on education and on homeschooling from the spring of 2012. Then in 2013, they put out a report on education, including homeschooling data. However, here is the big deal: The numbers are no different than they were three years ago, as far as I can see.”

In a March 2016 report, NHERI announced, “There are about 2.3 million home-educated students in the United States.”

Homeschool Surge Post-Common Core
William Estrada, an attorney and director of federal relations at the Home School Legal Defense Association, says the years the study neglects were important ones for the homeschooling movement.

“The one caveat I would add is that this study goes up through 2012,” Estrada said. “As we all know, in 2013 and 2014, [the Common Core State Standards] went into full effect in public schools, including a rise in high-stakes testing. We just saw an explosion around the popularity in homeschooling [then].”

New Mexico Mandates Districts Consider Attendance in Teacher Evaluations

By Kenneth Artz

The New Mexico Public Education Department has changed its teacher evaluation system to mandate teacher attendance as a factor in rating teachers.

The Santa Fe New Mexican reported in November, “Public Education Secretary Hanna Skandera said the state has moved to a ‘more uniform’ evaluation system, and is now requiring both attendance information and surveys from all educators.”

Prior to the change, districts could use either attendance or parent and student surveys for 10 percent of a teacher’s evaluation. Now, attendance must count for 5 percent of a teacher’s evaluation. A teacher can miss up to three days of school without it negatively affecting the evaluation.

“A review in recent years showed Santa Fe teachers were absent an average of 17 workdays in a school year, compared to a national average of nine days at the time,” the New Mexican reported.

‘Not Just Lounging Around’
Lynda L. Hahn, a 7th grade teacher at Eisenhower Middle School in Albuquerque, says she has legitimate reasons to take days off.

“Wouldn’t life be easier if doctors, lawyers, bankers, accountants, therapists, dentists, etc. would take evening or Saturday appointments?” Hahn said. “It certainly would be for teachers in the State of New Mexico.

“I’m certain my students’ parents do not want me coming to school ill to spread the germs to their child,” Hahn said. “Frankly, some appointments cannot be scheduled outside of the duty day, and certain medical appointments must be first thing in the morning. I’m certainly not taking off just to lounge around. It is more work for me to prepare for a sub, because most substitutes are not highly qualified in our area of teaching, so I have to make a different lesson plan that is more student-directred instead of teacher-directed.”

Absenteeism ‘Cause for Dismissal’
Paul Gessing, president of the Rio Grande Foundation in New Mexico, says the public sector should imitate the private sector when it comes to employee absences.

“Clearly, in the private sector, absenteeism is cause for dismissal,” Gessing said. “Unfortunately, school districts, as government institutions, lack the ability to easily hire and fire employees in the same manner as do their counterparts in the private sector. And while there should be consideration for serious health issues and other problems that are out of educators’ control, it is fair for attendance to be factored into teacher evaluations.

“The best solution is to have a more market-based school-choice model to hold teachers and schools accountable and provide financial incentives to top performers,” Gessing said. “Unfortunately, gains in those areas have been slow to come by, in large part due to powerful unions that both inhibit school choice and encourage preservation of the jobs of lower-quality teachers. However, if imposed reasonably, factoring attendance into overall teacher evaluations is a common-sense solution to absenteeism.”

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Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Oregon Voters Approve Funding for Outdoor School

By Kenneth Artz

Fifty thousand Oregon 5th and 6th graders will attend Outdoor School each year now that voters have approved a ballot measure allocating state lottery money to the program.

Oregon’s Outdoor School, which sends middle school children to camp to learn about the outdoors, launched in 1957. Some districts chose to reduce or eliminate the program over the years, and participation dropped from about 90 percent of all middle school students to 50 percent.

Measure 99, the Outdoor School Lottery Fund Initiative, passed during the November 2016 general election by a 65–34 percent vote. Four percent of state lottery revenues, but no more than $22 million, will be dedicated to sending students to a week of Outdoor School each year.

Money Was Already Allocated
State Sen. Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose) says proponents of Measure 99 misrepresented where the money to pay for Outdoor School will come from. “I think the way it was portrayed to the voters suggested lottery money is unallocated and simply waiting for some lofty purpose to be appropriated for, and that’s not true,” Johnson said. “The way this was described was that it was money put there by people who gambled and played the lottery, which suggested it had some taint to it and it was just sitting and waiting to be appropriated for lofty purposes. My first concern was the money is already functionally appropriated and it is not just money waiting to be tapped.”

Johnson says there are better uses for the lottery money. “My second concern is why we would pick a camping experience over other enrichments,” Johnson said. “Why not art for all, why not music for all, why not advanced physics for all, why not advanced calculus for all? Instead, we’re sending kids to camp, and I’ve got to be honest with you, to put out an opposition to sending kids to camp is not a particularly popular place to be, but I wanted to call attention to the fact this money is already subscribed and we are already taking it from very noble purposes and sending all the little kids to camp.”

Lottery a ‘Slush Fund’
Steve Buckstein, a senior policy analyst and founder of the Cascade Policy Institute in Oregon, says the state should get out of the lottery business. “The lottery is just a slush fund, basically, that people tug at,” Buckstein said. “Originally it was for economic development, and now it’s for a whole bunch of other things, including education, veterans’ programs, and now, apparently, outdoor schools. We’ve advocated that the state shouldn’t be in the lottery business, period. They should privatize the lottery and get rid of the legal prohibition and monopoly the state has for those kinds of games. We don’t like that they run a lottery, and it’s sort of an official wish list for other people to find things they like, and the legislature puts it on the ballot and people say, ‘Yeah, that’s a great idea!’”

‘Prefer Parents Have School Choice’
Buckstein says school choice would resolve the debate over Outdoor School. “We much prefer parents have school choice so they can decide if they want to send their kids to a school with outdoor education or any other opportunities,” Buckstein said. “What this [vote] basically says is every kid should have an outdoor experience, so let’s mandate it.”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Oklahoma voters rejected ‘Teacher Caucus’ candidates

By Jenni White

Oklahoma voters voiced their support for education choice in November 2016, rejecting most of the candidates running on a platform of limiting choice to public schools only.

A group of 31 public education proponents, including parents and current and former teachers the media labeled the “Teachers’ Caucus,” ran for state office, but only seven won.

The American Federation for Children (AFC), a school choice advocacy group that spent $210,000 in Oklahoma legislative races in 2016, listed 14 pro-choice school candidates the organization supported who were elected or reelected.

Voters also rejected State Question 779, which would have increased the state sales tax by 1 percent to spend more on public education and give public school teachers a $5,000 pay raise.

‘Lost in Big Numbers’

AFC National Communications Director Matt Frendewey says the anti-choice lobby’s tactics ultimately failed.

“The narrative they spun was all these teachers were fed up [with] not getting paid enough and not being supported, so they all rose up and ran for office,” Frendewey said. “It sounds great. It’s a very good story, [and] it’s something that you’d love to be able to believe, but it’s just not true. The reality is this: Folks who support public education and support only public education at the expense of students who need school choice, got together, recruited a couple teachers [and] school administrators. They recruited only the pro-public school, anti-school choice candidates and ran them across the state. They didn’t even vet them, and they lost in big numbers.”

A few days before the election, Joy Hofmeister, Oklahoma state superintendent of public instruction, turned herself in at the Oklahoma County jail and was released on bond after being charged with colluding with the activist group Oklahomans for Public School Excellence to take illegal donations in 2014.

“Just a week before the general election, [Hofmeister]—who was not friendly or very supportive of private school choice—as well as the executive director of the Oklahoma Education Association and the executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association—were all indicted for colluding with one another and illegally funneled money to each other in a previous election cycle,” Frendewey said.

“That speaks volumes to the extent the anti-school choice lobby will go to try to win elections,” Frendewey said. “Not just cheating, but breaking the law to the point that they’ve been indicted.”

‘More Hateful than Normal’

State Sen. Rob Standridge (R-Norman), who in November won his second term in the Oklahoma Senate against 2016 Oklahoma “Teacher of the Year” Shawn Sheehan, says the race was “very partisan, very ideological, and very hateful.”

“Because I was up against the top educator in the state, maybe that made some teachers more hateful than normal,” Standridge said. “Some teachers got extraordinarily hateful, calling people names and things. I’m a big boy and it doesn’t bother me, but it’s almost like cyberbullying, the way they treat people that don’t agree with them. I know it’s been a rough year, but that doesn’t excuse the rhetoric. How do they speak to others? Are they teaching kids to bully?”

“I don’t want to paint all teachers with that brush, but if your kid gets that teacher, a private, Christian school looks pretty good,” Standridge said. “If you’re a single mom, that’s not an option. I hope we come out of a year like this and say that school choice is right for Oklahoma. Oklahoma needs to step up to the plate and give parents a little more flexibility.”

Parents Support School Choice

Brandon Dutcher, senior vice president at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, says despite the partisan campaign rhetoric and legal charges emanating from the education establishment, Oklahomans strongly support school choice.

“We know from voluminous survey data that parents’ appetite for school choice is still strong,” Dutcher said. “Heck, a month before the election, a SoonerPoll survey discovered that nearly four in 10 Oklahoma teachers would choose a private school or homeschooling for their own children.

“Rather than continuing to penalize parents financially for raising their children in accordance with their consciences, it’s time for Oklahoma policymakers to enact and expand policies—vouchers, tax credits, ESAs, and more—which secure parental rights,” Dutcher said.

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

“The momentum for giving parents robust school-choice options continued to grow in Oklahoma today with the election of more school-choice supporters to the Oklahoma Legislature.

“In race after race, when Oklahomans had a clear-cut choice between a candidate who supports giving parents more education options for their children and a candidate who does not, voters consistently elected the school choice candidate,” said Betsy DeVos, chairman of the American Federation for Children (AFC). “The American Federation for Children applauds these candidates for standing up for the rights of parents and children.’

“Among the champions of school choice elected today is Rep. Elise Hall, an Oklahoma City Republican who co-authored legislation this year to give Oklahoma parents Education Savings Accounts funded with a share of their child’s per-pupil allotment. Parents could use that money for tutoring, online services, or private school tuition, depending upon their child’s needs.”

Publicly funded private school choice programs save taxpayers billions of dollars when students leave government schools, a study reports.

“Depending on the assumptions applied, the 10 programs analyzed in this report generated cumulative net savings worth between $1.7 billion and $3.4 billion from when they were launched to 2014,” the report concludes. “These savings represent between $1,650 and $3,000 per scholarship student. Total cumulative savings from the 10 programs analyzed in this report grew every year as programs expanded.”

Martin F. Lueken, director of fiscal policy and analysis at EdChoice, analyzed the fiscal impact of 10 tax credit scholarships in seven states, representing 93 percent of all scholarships awarded in tax credit scholarship programs today.

“In general, tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits when they donate to nonprofits that provide students with private school scholarships,” states the report, titled “The Tax-Credit Scholarship Audit: Do Publicly Funded Private School Choice Programs Save Money?”

The study was released in October 2016.

**Pennsylvania Is Biggest Winner**

Pennsylvania’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program (EITC), one of two tax credit scholarship programs in the state, saved taxpayers the most of any of the programs analyzed in the study.

EITC “saved taxpayers between $720 million and more than $1.7 billion, or up to $5,800 per scholarship awarded, between 2002 and 2014,” the report says.

Lueken says one reason states such as Pennsylvania enjoy big savings is because their programs have few restrictions.

“Many factors can affect the level of savings that we observe among programs,” Lueken said. “Generally, what we see is that programs that experience significant savings tend to be substantially less restrictive than others with lower levels of savings, in terms of restrictions placed on program eligibility. And our report shows that these programs generate more savings the longer they exist and the more that they expand. One reason why Pennsylvania, in particular, has realized substantial savings is because the cost of educating students in district schools is very high relative to many other states.”

‘Non-Fiscal Benefits,’ Too

Lueken says school choice programs offer advantages beyond saving money.

“The way that these programs are usually funded, district schools actually end up with more resources on a per-student basis,” Lueken said. “But while there are fiscal benefits to these programs, we shouldn’t lose sight of all the non-fiscal benefits linked to school choice.

“The benefits attached to tax-credit scholarship programs are the same benefits that materialize in many other kinds of school choice programs like voucher programs, ESAs, and charter schools,” wrote Lueken. “A substantial body of rigorous research exists showing that not only do participants in these programs benefit in terms of academic outcomes and instilling civic values, but the students who remain in district schools also benefit when schools compete to educate them. Parents want many different things for their children’s education. A nice thing about private school choice programs is that they increase opportunities for families to find the best matches between their children and the education they receive.”

James Paul, a senior policy analyst at Pennsylvania’s Commonwealth Foundation, says children and their families are the true beneficiaries of school choice.

“I have seen the benefits of Pennsylvania’s tax credit scholarship program firsthand,” Paul said. “The results are impressive. EITC scholarship organizations such as the Joshua Group are changing lives in the city of Harrisburg. Private schools like the Logos Academy in York, which rely on EITC contributions, are providing alternatives to one of the lowest-performing school districts in the state. These scholarship programs play a vital role in increasing opportunity for all children in the commonwealth.”

**Barriers to School Choice**

Lueken says despite the clear benefits of school choice, many factors stand in the way of expansion.

“Three big reasons are the political challenges surrounding school choice, misinformation, and who has influence over our schools,” Lueken said. “I think a major obstacle is that parents have less influence on K–12 education than other groups, particularly bureaucrats and teacher unions, who have traditionally enjoyed immense political influence over K–12 education. While bureaucrats and unions have incentives to block or limit school choice, we know from our research that parents want more choice and that they are overwhelmingly happy when they are able to choose. We also know that lawmakers listen more to parents than lobbyists or interest groups. The key to expanding school choice is continuing to connect those who want to use choice programs with those who can design them.”

Paul says politics is standing in the way of children gaining access to the schools of their choice.

“The EITC has grown steadily since its enactment in 2001, but there is certainly room to grow,” Paul said. “With the EITC ‘currently capped at $125 million, politics are the only thing stopping Pennsylvania from doubling or tripling the program to serve thousands more students. Critics wrongly claim that EITC ‘drains money’ from public schools. That’s why the report from EdChoice is so important; it dispels a pesky myth and conclusively proves that school choice actually saves taxpayer funds.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Coalition of Professors Works to ‘Increase Viewpoint Diversity’ on College Campuses

By Jane S. Shaw

A budding coalition of professors has formed in an effort to protect free speech and foster a broader range of ideas and perspectives on the nation’s college campuses.

The group, which calls itself “Heterodox Academy,” states on its website, “We are a politically diverse group of social scientists, natural scientists, humanists, and other scholars who want to improve our academic disciplines and universities. We share a concern about a growing problem: the loss or lack of ‘viewpoint diversity.’ When nearly everyone in a field shares the same political orientation, certain ideas become orthodoxy, dissent is discouraged, and errors can go unchallenged. To reverse this process, we have come together to advocate for a more intellectually diverse and heterodox academy.”

Evaluating Universities

One of the group’s first projects is to evaluate universities on their openness to diverse views. In October, Heterodox Academy graded the acceptance of viewpoint diversity in every school in the leading 150 national universities, as ranked by U.S. News and World Report. The five most intellectually diverse schools were the University of Chicago, which has created and endorsed a set of free-speech principles, the College of William & Mary, Carnegie Mellon, George Mason, and Princeton.

The ratings incorporate rankings created by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which are based on the universities’ commitment to free speech, and rankings by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which lists campuses friendly to conservative and libertarian students.

The ratings also consider campus events, such as dis-invitations of controversial speakers (a negative) and the adoption of free-speech principles (a positive).

Heterodox Academy reported plans to expand its listings in December 2016 by evaluating schools on the presence of “bias response teams,” on-campus groups that collect reports of speech or conduct considered offensive. The group also wants to encourage student groups to make their schools “Heterodox Universities” by committing to acceptance of diverse perspectives.

Expanding Membership

Heterodox Academy debuted in 2015 with the publication of an article in The Atlantic, “The Coddling of the American Mind.” Authors Greg Lukianoff, president of FIRE, and Jonathan Haidt, professor of social psychology at New York University and a founder of Heterodox Academy, wrote college campuses are infected with “vindictive protectiveness, [that is] creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.”

In February 2016, when the group had just 27 members, an internal poll found Heterodox Academy members tended to be socially liberal and economically conservative and voted at similar rates for Democrats and Republicans.

The group now has 240 members, all of whom have signed a statement declaring, “I believe that university life requires that people with diverse viewpoints and perspectives encounter each other in an environment where they feel free to speak up and challenge each other. I am concerned that many academic fields and universities currently lack sufficient viewpoint diversity—particularly political diversity. I will support viewpoint diversity in my academic field, my university, my department, and my classroom.”

‘All Students Will Benefit’

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says the organization’s efforts could improve higher education.

“As a libertarian, I’m glad to see this group, because all students will benefit if libertarian ideas are a part of their education,” McCluskey said. “The timing may also be ideal, with the electorate seemingly voting for [Donald] Trump in part as a reaction against rampant political correctness. As long as they stick with persuasion—not pleas for laws to impose ‘balance’ or other government coercion—I’m all for them, and I think they’ll have a positive impact.”

Ideological & Philosophical Uniformity

George Leef, research director at the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, says the group calls attention to a problem college campuses are often afraid to address.

“Heterodox Academy reminds me of that adage that you can’t begin to solve a problem until you admit you have one,” Leef said. “What Heterodox Academy shows is that there are some professors who dare to admit—and this is what lawyers could call an admission against interest—that our universities are suffering from too much ideological and philosophical uniformity.”

GEORGE LEEF
RESEARCH DIRECTOR
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“In Failure, Alger makes a much-needed and well-reasoned case that returning the federal role in education to state and local governments and privatizing its role may bear more success in improving public education, especially the academic achievement of these children, than the 30-year history of an unaccountable but still growing federal bureaucracy.”—Sandra L. Stotsky, Professor Emerita of Education Reforms, University of Arkansas; former Senior Assistant Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Education

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
Several states have begun to provide students with access to tuition-free college, but the new programs have yet to show they help truly needy students in a substantial way or do anything to reduce overall tuition costs.

Minnesota, Oregon, and Tennessee have programs allowing qualified students to avoid tuition for their first two years of college. Tennessee pioneered free community college in 2014. Its program allows graduating high school seniors to apply for free college under the “Tennessee Promise.” The program pays “last dollar,” meaning the state pays remaining tuition costs after other sources of funding, such as federal Pell grants (but not loans), are considered. The program also includes special mentoring to help students obtain the scholarships.

Minnesota launched a $5 million pilot program in 2016 to offer free college instruction to 1,400 students at 30 community and technical colleges. About 6,000 high school seniors took advantage of the “Oregon Promise” program in 2016, attending community college for $50 per term.

High Tuition Remains
Mary Clare Reim, a research associate in education policy at The Heritage Foundation, says providing free college to some students does nothing to address this driver of tuition increases.”

‘Misusing Scarce Resources’
Stephanie Keaveney, a policy associate at the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, says free and reduced-price tuition programs don’t benefit those who need them most. “The problem with programs like the Tennessee Promise is that they disproportionately benefit wealthier students by filling in the gap after federal and state aid has been applied,” Keaveney said. “These middle- and upper-middle-class students are already much more likely to attend and succeed in college, so it may be that the state is misusing scarce resources to benefit an already well-off group.”

Education Problems Still Exist
Evidence suggests even without free-tuition programs, low-income students in many states can obtain a community college education at a low cost because of already low tuition rates, federal Pell grants providing qualifying students with subsidies for college they do not have to repay, and other support. The average community college tuition for in-district students was $3,201 in 2013–14, and the average Pell grant that year was $3,634.

Reim says a larger problem than students being unable to afford community colleges is only about 20 percent of all community college students obtain their degrees within three years. “It is not clear that removing any financial stake students may have in their education would encourage students to complete at higher rates,” Reim said.

J.E. Stone, a professor of education at East Tennessee State University and president of the Education Consumers Foundation, says making college more accessible tends to attract more unqualified students. “My problem is with the policy aim of simply drawing more students into community colleges when they are already flooded with applicants who are marginally or ill-qualified. It lends support to the popular fiction that a year or two of community college can make up for the learning deficiencies cumulated over the previous 12-plus years.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
By Jay Lehr, Ph.D.

In Why Knowledge Matters, E.D. Hirsch Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, provides an outstanding treatise on the growing failure of the U.S. K–12 education system, presenting considerable research proving learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and concept formation cannot be developed independently of information content.

These skills are intrinsically tied to the content of information being read. In fact, what is ravaging our children’s educations is the very lack of worthwhile content imposed by the Common Core State Standards and similar flawed education psychology ventures.

Testing Regimes

Hirsch offers a well-constructed chapter on the current wrongheaded approach to student testing, writing, “To mask the inherent unfairness of today’s tests, a fictitious alternative world has been devised in which meta-skills, which are strategies for processing new information, look as important as knowledge and vocabulary.”

Hirsch does not blame the teachers, whose enthusiasm has been the tragic victim of terribly flawed theories. These theories reflect the belief all children are innately smart in their own way. The result is incoherent classrooms and curricula supported by these dubious theories of individuality that have undermined academic performance.

The author explains building knowledge systematically in English language arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade to form a big picture over a period of years. Common Core, by contrast, demands students always find one specific idea in their readings, which is simply a boon to test-makers offering multiple-choice questions. The reliable way to achieve technical reading comprehension skills is for schools to stress knowledge front-and-center as the primary reading comprehension skill, Hirsch writes.

Data Collection Flaws

As Hirsch defines the faulty habits of current education, he recounts the history of education theory, showing modern theorists have reversed the positive trends and accomplishments in this field.

Hirsch relies on historic trends in France, where data collection is far more prominent, finding the French are making the very same mistakes educators in the United States have been making for decades. The same is true of Sweden, once a paragon of education leadership.

“The United States invented both the modern democratic nation and the common school that sustained it,” Hirsch notes.

The U.S. education system has historically produced a knowledgeable citizenry and social cohesion through shared knowledge, which has widely been believed to be required for young pupils if they were to have a good chance at success. Success is only achieved, Hirsch argues, if such a communal curriculum includes the sort of material Americans have long taken for granted, such as classical literature. Common Core has largely thrown this concept to the side of the road.

In the 1940s, the U.S. K–12 education system still ranked as one of the world’s best, Hirsch notes. Today, it is well below average. Hirsch attributes this change to the infiltration of socialism into American education, which he says began in the 1930s. By 1960, many high school graduates had been educated under such a misguided and destructive scheme.

Test scores declined compared to other industrialized nations from 1960 to 1980, and they have never recovered, which the author says is proof of the failure of progressive education. Hirsch’s book clearly explains the causal connection between the rise of poorly defined modern educational theories and the nation’s broader educational decline.

Breaking the ‘Intellectual Monopoly’

“We can start breaking free from that intellectual monopoly when the wider public understands that thinking skills, like critical and creative thinking and problem-solving, are not productive educational aims,” Hirsch wrote.

The reader must ask himself or herself how often thinking skills are independent of specific knowledge gained from worthwhile content. The author and this reviewer believe the answer is “rarely.”

Only a well-rounded, knowledge-specific curriculum can impart the information needed for all children, thereby reducing the inequality of opportunity in the U.S. education system. Hirsch’s book makes this clear for those who wish to dig deeper and understand why the nation’s schools should eliminate Common Core and the entire array of progressive educational techniques that have bred nothing but failure and frustration.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director at The Heartland Institute.

“Only a well-rounded, knowledge-specific curriculum can impart the information needed for all children, thereby reducing the inequality of opportunity in the U.S. education system.”
School Choice

Don’t miss National School Choice Week 2017 (January 22 - 28). There are so many ways to celebrate and to raise awareness of effective education options for kids. Write and place an opinion piece, create a social media campaign, or plan any type of event, activity, or meeting of your choice. Sign up today for your free box of National School Choice Week supplies at SchoolChoiceWeek.com/MyMeeting.

Did you know?

National School Choice Week is the world’s largest annual celebration of opportunity in education. In 2016, National School Choice Week featured 16,745 events!
The Metro Nashville Public Schools district announced it is expanding its after-school program to include dinner for students at 35 locations.

The district has been participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Child and Adult Care Food Program for three years. It announced in November it would expand the program from 12 locations to 35. Students in applicable after-school programs are eligible for the meals.

“After getting breakfast and lunch at no cost, this third meal ensures students are going home with supper and at no cost, this third meal ensures students are going home with supper and at no cost, this third meal ensures,” Jennifer Bell, Metro Schools’ director of extended learning, said in a statement.

“It is a full meal, touching all food groups required for a healthy dinner.”

**Making School ‘Center of Life’**

Shane Vander Hart, editor of *Truth in American Education*, says government officials are seeking to replace the home with school.

“This particular program and ones like it are part of a vision to make the school the center of community life,” Vander Hart said. “Tennessee’s own U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander has advocated in the past for a ‘new American school’ that would be open year-round from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and serve children from three months of age to age 18. Why? Because babies have needs, and those needs may have to be served by the school, at least according to Sen. Alexander.

“While we don’t want to see children fall through the cracks, schools become less effective academically if their focus is on providing social services,” Vander Hart said. “There are programs, both public and private, that help families in need. Keeping kids later, interrupting the family dinner, ultimately does not do these children any good. Kids succeed academically when their parents are involved. In order for parents to be involved, they need to have time with their kids, which gets supplanted by extending the school day and the school year. Schools should be focused on education, and let the feeding and parenting of kids be left to parents where it properly belongs. Parents can replace schools, but schools can never replace parents.”

**Cutting Out the Parents**

Julie Gunlock, a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum, says research shows more-involved parents raise healthier children.

“What’s very sad about that is that the best research on childhood obesity all agrees on one thing, and that is the more parents are involved in a child’s nutritional development, the healthier they are,” Gunlock said. “We can all talk about how it’s actually the television screen time or the sleeping, but any normal person, anybody with a shred of common sense, knows what those things all have in common: good parenting. You turn the TV off, you put them to bed, you make them a meal; these are all the basics of good parenting.

So, with [this extension of the food program,] you have a federal government that is pursuing a policy that is going to do the opposite of making kids healthy.

“It’s going to further detach parents from kids, and as such, kids will probably continue to have obesity problems,” Gunlock said.

Gunlock says policies should encourage parents to care for their own children, not rely on the government.

“This is not exactly a political hot potato,” Gunlock said. “No one wants to say, ‘And we’re cutting hot food for kids.’ The optics of it are terrible. But what the government could do, and what policymakers should be doing, is pursuing policies that encourage parents and point out the research to parents that shows them if you want healthy kids, get more involved in their lives.”

**Blaming Childhood Obesity**

Gunlock says expanding school meal programs was part of the Obama administration’s agenda to control children.

“The Obama administration actively encourages kids not to be fed at home, but to be fed at school,” Gunlock said. “I think they blame unhealthy-at-home eating habits for the childhood obesity problem, so I think Michelle Obama’s position on this is it’s easier to standardize feeding kids when you control it in schools.

“There was a provision in the 2010 school-lunch reform bill that not a lot of people talk about, which expanded the automatic enrollment of the school-lunch program, so instead of a kid’s parent signing him up for the school-lunch program, schools were able to figure out what children were already on the federal welfare programs and automatically enroll them in the lunch program,” Gunlock said. “This existed before, so it wasn’t just Michelle Obama’s school-lunch reform, but the school-lunch reform bill expanded it, and there were incentives: Schools could be rewarded if they [expanded] their enrollment in the school-lunch program. It’s because they think that the way to reduce childhood obesity is by controlling what kids are eating and the way you do that is to diminish the role of parents.”

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erob@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
“Gov. Bullock is just playing to the teachers union by maintaining a one-size-fits-all system. School choice is about providing options for at-risk students so that the 1,500 students who drop out of Montana’s schools each year will stay in school and complete their education. The governor talks as though an 86 percent graduation rate is a good thing. He needs to realize that 1,500 dropouts per year is nothing to brag about.”

Jeff Laszloffy, President, Montana Family Foundation

By Michael McGrady

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock (D), who said during a campaign speech he is against “privatizing education,” won a tight reelection race in November.

Montana has one school choice program, a tax credit scholarship enacted in 2015. All students in the state are eligible for the program, which had a $3 million cap in fiscal year 2016.

Montana’s teachers unions and the Network for Public Education publicly supported Bullock. Bullock said during a speech at the office of the Billings Education Association, a teachers union, in October 2016, “We support the right of all families to choose what they deem is best for their kids, but I don’t support any policy that’s going to take money from our public education system and privatize it.”

The Billings Gazette reported at the time Bullock “also chided his opponent, Republican candidate Greg Gianforte, for his stances on public education” and “called for continued focus on public schools and cited the state’s high graduation rate, 86 percent, as a barometer for success in the system.”

Gianforte said during his campaign he favored giving parents more educational options.

Bullock defeated Gianforte by 2 percentage points in November 2016.

‘Playing to the Teachers Union’

Jeff Laszloffy, president of the Montana Family Foundation, says Bullock’s stance favors teachers unions.

“Gov. Bullock is just playing to the teachers union by maintaining a one-size-fits-all system,” Laszloffy said. “School choice is about providing options for at-risk students so that the 1,500 students who drop out of Montana’s schools each year will stay in school and complete their education. The governor talks as though an 86 percent graduation rate is a good thing. He needs to realize that 1,500 dropouts per year is nothing to brag about.”

By Ashley Bateman

Boys living in poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee will be able to attend a new charter school in 2018, if a local couple’s plans receive government approval.

Ted and Kelly Alling have purchased two buildings and an abandoned field they hope to use for Chattanooga Prep, an all-boys school set to open in 2018 in the Highland Park area of the city. The proposed school will focus on serving underprivileged young men.

At press time, the Allings said they plan to file the school’s charter with the Hamilton County Board of Education in early 2017, and they say they will soon begin a capital campaign to raise funds. A significant portion of the funds have already been raised, Ted Alling says.

The Allings are partnering with the Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy (CGLA), a charter serving underprivileged girls in the city, to open Chattanooga Prep, which will be located next door to CGLA and operate as its brother school.

‘A Ton of Support’

Ted Alling says the community is excited about Chattanooga Prep.

“Since the announcement of [Chattanooga Prep], we have received a ton of support from the Chattanooga community, with many wanting to help in whatever capacity possible: mentoring, volunteering, or donating,” Alling said. “We already held one neighborhood meeting in the area where the school will be located, with an attendance of over 50 people. We have support from parents, future students, neighborhood folks, community, and educational leaders.”

Alling says his school will help many different boys, but the impoverished will benefit the most.

“I am laser-focused on our Chattanooga community, especially on the young men in underserved neighborhoods,” Alling said. “I have seen how CGLA has impacted the young women in our community that deserve more in education, and I look forward to now doing the same for the young men.”

‘Matters of Choice’

CGLA Executive Director Elaine Swafford says charter schools allow for greater creativity and choice.

“Curriculums are usually set by the state, but the pedagogical, outside-the-box-type things are matters of choice,” Swafford said.

Justin Owen, president and CEO of the Beacon Center of Tennessee, says charter schools have filled the void where traditional public schools have left children empty-handed.

“Charters are doing a great job serving those children who had previously been left behind by a system that forces them into bad schools based on their ZIP code,” Owen said. “Expanding those opportunities in Chattanooga and elsewhere in Tennessee is paramount. It’s time to stop picking our kids’ schools using the same five-digit number the post office uses to deliver our mail.”

By Ashley Bateman

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By Justin Owen

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Little birds are flying around everywhere these days, tweeting “school choice” as the last hope for education reform.

We find it praised on the editorial pages of Education Next, in a book by DC-based, self-styled education policy expert Chester Finn, and by Donald Trump, the next president of the United States. “Choice” was also the slogan for a question on the November ballot in Massachusetts asking voters to loosen the cap on charter schools in the state. (It went down in flames.)

But “school choice” does not directly address the type of choice most parents today might desire: classroom choice—a choice of classroom type, regardless of school management approach.

In one sense, the current embrace of school choice is not surprising. It is one solution to negative parent and teacher opinions about the Common Core project. Common Core is the most “successful failure” in education reform this country has ever seen, and by “successful,” I mean that no state that adopted Common Core or its own version of the Gates Foundation-funded and -promoted skills-based standards has been able to disentangle itself from the tentacles of the Gates Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education.

Common Core has been a massive failure, however, in the sense Common Core’s standards and tests have shown no credible evidence anywhere, in any state, of making all students ready for college coursework and closing “gaps.”

School Choice Not Widespread

The kind of school choice being promoted by policymakers and “reform” governors, such as Charlie Baker (R) in Massachusetts, is not available to most schoolchildren. The question on the Massachusetts ballot to lift the state’s charter cap failed on November 5 in part because the cap would have been lifted only in big cities, most of which have mayors who don’t want more charter schools.

Despite billions in assistance from wealthy individuals and foundations that think this form of choice strengthens public education (Bill and Melinda Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton family), school choice is available today chiefly to only a small proportion of the nation’s students (about 10 percent) and chiefly to the most disadvantaged children.

Charter schools didn’t start off that way. Many of the early ones—as well as a few of the newer ones—had distinctive programs of study, such as a classical curriculum or Chinese immersion, that appealed to specific groups of parents. Only school choice in the form of educational savings accounts (ESAs) has been of interest to a broad range of parents, although not very many have access to ESAs because in many states that allow them, parents must withdraw their children from a public school in order to set up an ESA.

Choice of Classroom Tech

The kind of choice that might attract many parents with a wide range of income levels is classroom choice: a choice between wired-up, plugged-in, high-tech classrooms with access to the internet and traditional classrooms that rely on textbooks and chalkboards. The tech-free schools that parents are attracted to can be found in many parts of the country, including in Arkansas, in Silicon Valley, and in Washington, DC.

Giving parents a choice of the kind of public school classroom their kids attend might help schools retain children whose parents homeschool them to protect them from overexposure to technology parents may be unable to use in their own homes.

Recent studies point to lower or unimproved educational outcomes for students experiencing a steady dose of high-tech teaching and learning. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study found, “Investing heavily in school computers and classroom technology does not improve pupils’ performance.” A widely reported study published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found higher grades were obtained in courses at the postsecondary level when students were not allowed to use high-tech devices in the classroom.

Although research is not yet clear on whether high-tech teaching and learning damages students, Nicholas Kardara, author of a recently published book on the topic, commented in a recent Time magazine article, “Students who have been raised on a high-tech diet not only appear to struggle more with attention and focus, but also seem to suffer from an adolescent malaise that appears to be a direct byproduct of their digital immersion. Indeed, over two-hundred peer-reviewed studies point to screen time correlating to increased ADHD, screen addiction, increased aggression, depression, anxiety and even psychosis.”

Classroom Choice in Action

There is a precedent for offering parents a choice of classrooms. It has been happening for more than two decades in schools offering “single-sex” classrooms. As long as parents have a choice of a “co-ed” classroom or a single-sex classroom, they are lawful, especially in schools that give both parents and teachers the opportunity to choose the type of classroom they want, as they have in Siloam Springs, Arkansas.

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By Sandra Stotsky

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