Most millennials view school choice programs favorably, a new study has found.

The authors of the EdChoice “2016 Schooling in America” report included an expanded sampling of millennials, those born between 1981 and 1997, “in an effort to better understand where this generation of current and future school parents compares with others (and the national average) on K–12 education policies.”

Millennials, the authors write, “are approximately 75 million strong, and the percentage of millennials that make up America’s school parent population is set to grow exponentially over the next 10 years.”

Sixty-one percent of millennials...
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!
Wisconsin Assembymen Consider Proposing Education Savings Account Program

By Ashley Bateman

Republicans in the Wisconsin State Assembly are considering introducing education savings account legislation, according to the 2017 Assembly Republican Agenda, which outlines the party’s legislative goals.

“We will explore implementing Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) to provide families with access to savings that can be used only for education-related expenses, including tuition, textbooks and tutoring,” the agenda’s authors wrote. “By giving parents greater autonomy to decide what kind of education their children should receive, they will have more opportunities to customize educational programs to best meet their individual needs, rather than expecting everyone to fit into the same traditional school model.”

Wisconsin currently has in place four voucher programs, with varying restrictions, and a tax credit/deduction program for families sending their children to private schools.

ESAs Offer ‘Enhanced Customization’

Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, says the state’s current school choice programs are too restrictive.

“The current options allow you to choose a brick-and-mortar building option or a fully virtual option. While we have some distance learning and course options, the numbers are low. For the most part, these are all-or-nothing proposals. What ESAs bring to the table is an enhanced customization of the educational process. That process is new to Wisconsin.”

Avoiding ‘Severe Limitations’

Bender says although ESAs can take many forms, they work best when they’re as inclusive as possible.

“There are multiple different options being discussed, from gifted and talented programs to special needs, to even rural-based efforts that focus on technology to connect students with [course] providers,” Bender said. “We are hopeful that there are not severe limitations on who is eligible. Unlike other school choice options, ESAs work best when there are many vendors to offer services. Even traditional district schools would need to make changes if they wanted to become course providers. Creating strong demand early will be key to having providers offer options.”

Uncertain Funding

Bender says the funding mechanism for ESAs is another concern lawmakers.

“We are nowhere near dollars following the student no matter where the student attends school,” Szafir said. “The [current school choice] programs are a patchwork of political compromises. These are good for the kids in the short term, but in the long term, how are we going to change the funding system to have the dollars follow the kid?”

Opposition and Optimism

Administration of an ESA program could be difficult in Wisconsin, Szafir says.

“Other states use their department of education, but in Wisconsin, the superintendent of public instruction is incredibly hostile to school choice and education reform,” Szafir said. “We’ve had multiple lawsuits against him on behalf of choice schools, so the natural reaction would be that we don’t want to empower him even more over these types of programs.”

Bender says the presence of important pro-choice lawmakers and influential leaders in Wisconsin increases the state’s chances of enacting ESAs.

“Many of the details are yet to be worked out, but [Gov. Scott Walker] is known for making bold proposals,” Bender said. “We are hopeful that new options can gain traction early in the session and quickly be enacted. Wisconsin is lucky to have some champions of education reform in the legislature, especially at the leadership level. That combination sets us up very well for the next session to expand opportunities for parents. The addition of ESAs to the educational landscape will further empower parents in finding the best solutions for their children.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Most Millennials Favor School Choice, Survey Finds

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said they favor vouchers, compared to a national average of 56 percent; 63 percent of millennials said they favor charter schools, compared to 59 percent among all age groups; and 57 percent of millennials said they favor education savings accounts, compared to 49 percent overall. Fifty-eight percent of millennials said U.S. education is on the wrong track, while 62 percent of the overall population agreed.

Baby Boomers vs. Millennials

Paul DiPerna, EdChoice vice president of research and coauthor of the study, says Americans, and millennials especially, strongly favor school choice.

“Americans are very supportive of school choice, whether it’s education savings accounts, school vouchers, charter schools, or tax credit scholarships,” DiPerna said. “The margins are wide, and so we can be confident about these positive findings. Millennials appear to be the generation most likely to support these different types of school policies across the board.

“We generally see across the board that Americans are supportive of various types of school choice policies, particularly education savings accounts, where there’s a significant gap in margin of difference between those in favor and those opposed,” DiPerna said. “Whether it’s about education savings accounts, vouchers, charter schools, or tax credit scholarships, the gaps are even wider when looking at the millennials.”

Millennials Used to Choice

Drew Catt, director of state research and policy analysis at EdChoice and a coauthor of the study, is himself a millennial. Catt says millennials’ support for school choice is a natural reflection of the option-rich lifestyle to which they’re accustomed.

“For me, even when I go grocery shopping, my parents went to one store and bought everything,” Catt said. “I go to the bakery to buy bread, the local ‘meatery’ to buy my meats and cheeses. I buy my produce from the local farmer’s market. I’m not necessarily going to one brick-and-mortar facility to get all my goods or services, but I’m looking at what’s the best available and the best for me and my preferences, my lifestyle, and my price range. Millennials are used to thinking about the world this way and deciding what’s best for them and their individual families or their student.”

DiPerna says millennials are used to having things customized.

“Technology has caused so much more ability to customize your lifestyle, and millennials came of age when the internet [allows] personalization of lifestyle, and being empowered with choice could carry forward even beyond to when they get older,” DiPerna said.

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

LEARN MORE

New York Students Do Worse in Math as They Get Older, Tests Show

By Jenni White

New York middle school students are now scoring much lower on state mathematics exams than those in earlier grades.

Results of 2016 state testing data indicate 44 percent of New York 3rd graders were proficient in math, yet only 24 percent of 8th graders reached proficiency.

The contrast is especially stark in Central New York, where “only 15 percent of eighth graders scored proficient in math,” Syracuse.com reported in October, while “third graders scored 40 percent proficient.”

New York State adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010. Publicized as more rigorous than previous mathematics standards, Common Core has shifted instructional emphasis from mastery of techniques to what its proponents call “conceptual understanding.”

Common Core Factor?

Denis Ian, a member of Stop Common Core and a 32-year New York State public school teacher, says the new standards have forced parents to get outside math help for their children.

“It is now a fact of New York primary school life that industrious students receive out-of-school tutorials to enhance their math performance,” Ian said. “Some Long Island parents spend as much as a few hundred dollars per week so that their child can shine in this new math environment.”

‘Greater Learning Gap’

Ian says children whose parents cannot afford to get them tutors will suffer.

“There will be a greater learning gap than ever before,” said Ian.

Nakonia Hayes, a retired teacher and principal and author of John Saxon’s Story: A Genius of Common Sense in Math Education, says less fortunate children need clearer learning standards.

“Math scores are dropping because the people in charge are making bad decisions about curricula that are needed for specific children’s needs,” Hayes said. “Children from affluent homes come to school ready to learn. Children from poverty homes do not. Curriculum for children of poverty needs to be structured and direct, to bring consistency and trust to these children who live with uncertainty every day.”

‘Never Critically Vetted’

Ian says the Common Core math standards were not tested well enough before implementation.

“The awful truth is that this new math was never critically vetted,” Ian said. “And the vetting it did undergo was meager. Its flaws forced the few in the know to resist signing their names to the finished product.

“Children, in effect, skipped learning the mental math of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing,” Hayes said. “This destroyed their chances to learn subsequent math topics, especially at the middle and high school levels.”

Study: Common Core’s Benefits to Students Remain Elusive

By Michael McGrady

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has primarily, and perhaps exclusively, benefited those who designed the standards and provided materials for its adoption, a new scholarly study has found.

CCSS is a set of national standards introduced in 2009 to dictate what students should know at each grade level. Forty-six states adopted the standards in 2010. Implementing CCSS has cost the nation more than $80 billion so far.

“Smart Money? Philanthropic and Federal Funding for the Common Core,” authored by Pennsylvania State University researchers and released in September, “examined federal and philanthropic funding for the [CCSS] reform through a conceptual lens of resource dependence theory” and concludes “by discussing benefits derived from this funding for different types of entities that grant and receive it,” the report states.

The study’s authors use an analogy to the Gold Rush to conclude, “The claim stakers are the federal government and philanthropies that have staked out the Common Core for public policy. To work that stake, they incentivize states and school districts to mine the Common Core and get higher measured achievement. To do so, the miners need equipment. The vendors who sell the equipment profit in the short term, even if their tools rarely enable the miners to get the sought-after results. In essence, those who set directions for the Common Core and those who provided resources for its implementation have benefitted, even as potential benefits to schools, educators, and students are elusive, and the entire claim may ultimately be empty.”

Analyzing Philanthropic Influence

Ze’ev Wurman, a senior fellow with the American Principles Project and former U.S. Department of Education official, says philanthropists using the power of government to force their agendas on the public undermine the political process.

“It is definitely not wonderful when private money assumes that the ideas it reflects are necessarily correct and is being used to leverage the channeling of public funds to promote philanthropists’ bright ideas across the board,” Wurman said. “Bill Gates and others single-handedly swamped every other foundation. He used his money to leverage public policy. The goal is to channel their ideas and make the [education] system follow them.”

‘Incredibly Expensive’

Michael McShane, director of education policy at the Show-Me Institute, says CCSS’s high price tag is an expected byproduct of such sweeping regulation.

“Seeing these price tag numbers that are starting to come in doesn’t really surprise me,” McShane said. “With these types of reforms, trying to change an entire state, or in this case an entire nation, all at once can be incredibly expensive. A lot of things having to do with education reform take refining, so I tend to think that it is a much more fruitful strategy to start small and build things up.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Trump Chooses DeVos to Head Education Department

Continued from page 1

against her prospective nomination to be the next U.S. secretary of education attests to how much she has rattled those with a vested interest in preserving a monopolistic status quo,” Holland said. “Meanwhile, DeVos’ reversal of her one-time support for Common Core suggests she now understands how curricular standards pushed from the top down by cultural elitists and Washington, DC insiders would undermine parental choice.”

During his presidential campaign, Trump pledged to decrease the power of the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), rid the nation of Common Core, use federal funds to strengthen voucher programs for low-income students, and cut college tuition costs.

New President, New Agenda

Trump’s education reform agenda was outlined in general terms during the campaign and since winning the November election, and it’s not yet clear how his administration will prioritize and carry out its education-related goals.

“I may cut [the] Department of Education,” Trump told Fox News in October 2015. “I believe Common Core is a very bad thing. I believe that we should be, you know, educating our children from Iowa, from New Hampshire, from South Carolina, from California, from New York. I think that it should be local education.”

Trump’s website says his administration will immediately add “an additional federal investment of $20 billion towards school choice.” The website also states Trump aims to provide “school choice to every one of the 11 million school aged children living in poverty,” and he says his administration will “[work with Congress on reforms to ensure universities are making a good faith effort to reduce the cost of college and student debt in exchange for the federal tax breaks and tax dollars.”

‘Starting from a Good Place’

Matt Frendewey, national communications director for the American Federation for Children, says the education policy proposals outlined by Trump so far should please school choice advocates.

“One of the very few policies Trump actually did dig into and provide context for was education. He held a press conference where he unveiled an education policy and he went into some detail on his thoughts on how the education policy nationally should look. One of those policies was school choice. He unveiled a much-talked-about $20 billion school choice program to provide low-income students with scholarships to schools of their parents’ choice. While we still have a lot more details to dig into, I really think we’re starting from a good place with this administration.”

‘Generally Positive’ Election Results

Martin West, associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and executive editor of education policy journal Education Next, says education reform still faces an uphill battle.

“The election results were generally positive for efforts to expand school choice, but not unambiguously so,” West said. “Most obviously, President-elect Trump championed the concept in the campaign and committed to using federal education funds to expand school choice. The fact that Republicans strengthened their control of state legislatures may facilitate the adoption of new school choice programs at the state level.

“The federal government’s ability to promote school choice is limited, even with a supportive president and unified Republican control of Congress,” West said. “We will certainly see the revival of the Washington, DC school voucher program and continued, possibly increased, funding for charter school expansion. I also expect the Trump administration to attempt a broader effort to permit states to let Title I funds for students from low-income families follow them to the school they attend.”

DOE, Common Core, Higher Ed

West says Trump’s administration will likely allow states to have greater authority to manage their own education programs.

“I certainly expect to see the Department of Education take a more hands-off approach to implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, permitting states greater flexibility with respect to the design of school accountability systems and in how they allocate their own spending than might have been expected under a Democratic administration,” West said.

“With respect to Common Core, the Every Student Succeeds Act places clear restrictions on the federal government’s ability to influence state decisions about academic standards,” said West. “While Trump’s election may encourage efforts in the states to withdraw from the Common Core, there is no legal authority for his administration to do more than serve as a cheerleader. "Trump offered few specifics with respect to higher education policy over the course of the campaign, and I expect Congress to set the agenda on this issue," said West.

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

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Matt Frendewey
National Communications Director, American Federation for Children
More Schools Reducing or Eliminating Homework

By Ashley Bateman

A growing number of schools and individual teachers are limiting or eliminating homework for elementary school students.

The Orchard School, an elementary school in South Burlington, Vermont, eliminated homework during the 2016–17 school year because “the principal there said he’s seen more anxiety among students in the last decade,” the Associated Press reported in September.

Illinois’ Hinsdale High School offers high school seniors a homework-free weekend once a year to give “harried seniors a little breathing room as they prepare for their futures,” the Chicago Tribune reported in October.

Boston Magazine reported in September Kelly Elementary School of Holyoke, Massachusetts instituted a no-homework policy for the 2016–17 school year in exchange for a longer school day. According to the report, “[E]ducators are telling parents … students should be spending more time with their families, chatting about the learning they did while at school, and getting to bed early.”

‘Trending Downward’ for Years

Cathy Vatterott, an education professor at University of Missouri–St. Louis and author of Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs, says reducing homework has become a more widespread practice.

“The focus [on homework] has been trending downward for several years,” Vatterott said. “Twenty years ago, nobody was even limiting the amount of homework. More and more schools started to develop policies about amounts or how it accounts for grades. Over the past few years, you’ve seen more and more elementary schools limiting or even eliminating homework for elementary.

‘I’m definitely not anti-homework, but I also see a trend growing in our culture that people are getting burned out on the hyper-competitive ‘let’s practice now in elementary school for college’ mindset,” Vatterott said. “People are ready to slow kids down a little bit and let kids be kids. I think we’re moving culturally in that direction.”

‘Most Parents’ Lack Choices

Tyler Koteskey, an education policy analyst at the Reason Foundation, says as the homework discussion gains traction, access to school choice and parents’ inclusion in education should be the real focus of the debate.

“Controversies over how much homework to assign are just another of several educational debates that we think are about the specific issue at hand but really tell the story of how many choices most parents lack,” Koteskey said. “It shouldn’t matter how much homework a school assigns or how it teaches if a parent can choose from a variety of options to pick the school that best meets their kids’ needs.”

‘Kids Learn Differently’

Koteskey says it’s unrealistic to think there is one right way to educate a diverse population of students.

“All kids think and learn differently, so why should we have the hubris to expect that we can find the one ‘correct’ amount of homework or teaching style that we should force every single student to learn by?” Koteskey said. “With more choices for parents and more autonomy for principals, more schools can better meet the individual needs of their students by experimenting with curriculum and being directly accountable to parents for their results.”

New York City Eases Student Transfer Rules

By Cheryl K. Chumley

A change in New York City regulations makes it easier for public school students to transfer out of schools that aren’t meeting their needs.

“A parent or student may request a transfer if a student is not progressing or achieving academically or socially and an alternative placement would address these concerns,” state the new rules approved by the New York City Department of Education in September.

Before the rule change, parents and students had to prove they were enduring a “hardship” to obtain a transfer approval. The hardship policy, in place since 2003, meant only students experiencing safety concerns, medical problems, or excessively long commutes were granted transfers.

“Now, parents can request a guidance transfer, and the city’s central enrollment office will make a final decision,” Chalkbeat.org reports. “Education department documents say that officials can request and review different evidence for each case, and the district superintendent must approve any transfer requested for academic reasons.”

‘Finding the Right Fit’

Charles Sahm, director of education policy at the Manhattan Institute, says families should be allowed to customize their children’s learning experiences.

“This is a good idea,” Sahm said. “Anything that promotes freedom of choice is a good thing. … It’s all about finding the right fit for the independent student.”

How Easy?

Pamela Wheaton, managing editor of Insideschools.org, a nonprofit organization that reviews New York City’s public schools, says the new transfer rules are good in theory but may be less impressive in practice.

“We get comments every day from students who want to transfer. … But what’s not clear to me yet is how easy the transfers will really be to get,” Wheaton said. Part of the problem is schools can accommodate only so many students.

“There are a lot of schools in New York City you really don’t want to go to. But in the ones where you do, [you have to consider] where there’s going to be space. So, this rule doesn’t necessarily mean that everyone who’s unhappy in their school on Friday will be getting a transfer on Monday.”

PAMELA WHEATON
MANAGING EDITOR, INSIDESCHOOLS.ORG

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

LEARN MORE


Cheryl K. Chumley (ckchumley@gmail.com) writes from Northern Virginia.
Alabama’s First Charter School to Open in 2017

By Elizabeth BeShears

The Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) won approval to open Alabama’s first charter school, which is scheduled to open in August 2017.

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately run schools that comply with stricter accountability rules in exchange for freedom from some government restrictions.

State Sen. Del Marsh (R-Anniston) introduced Senate Bill 45, the Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act, in 2015. SB 45 enabled the creation of some charter schools when it was passed in March 2016.

The Alabama Public Charter School Commission approved MAEF’s application in September to open the Accel Day and Evening Academy. It has been authorized to have an initial enrollment of 300 students.

‘Serious about School Choice’

Marsh says legislators had to overcome serious resistance to get the law passed.

“We’ve had problems with our own Department of Education,” Marsh said. “They were not on board with this early on, but in the legislation, to try to get them on board, we basically had them in charge of approving the charters. Yet, they were dragging their feet on that. I made it very clear with the former state superintendent, who is now gone, that we were not pleased with that. I’ve met with the new superintendent, Dr. [Michael] Sentance, and explained how we think this is very important. He seems to be very open to school choice, so I’m excited about that.”

Marsh says the school choice bill gained steam in 2013, when the state legislature passed the Accountability Act, thereby sending “a message to education officials that we were serious about school choice and that we wanted more accountability in the public system,” said Marsh.

“As we moved forward, we just continued to push the point that our goal was to make the existing public schools better, and competition creates that,” Marsh said. “And the same, typical host of characters opposed it: those who, quite honestly, don’t like competition, [such as] the teachers union. They still don’t support it and would like not to have [charter schools].”

‘Painstakingly’ Slow Process

“We are thrilled that Mobile will be the home of Alabama’s first charter school, the product of a law that was painstakingly passed by the Alabama Legislature,” said Taylor Dawson, communications director for the Alabama Policy Institute (API).

“Over the years, Alabama has been conspicuously slow to embrace school choice,” said Dawson. “Even today, Alabama politics is not always conducive to policies that put families rather than ZIP codes first. Many would prefer to bicker and battle for the preservation of the status quo. But Alabama families deserve the freedom to chart the best course for their child’s education, and that’s why API has been at the forefront of the fight for school choice in our state for over 20 years.”

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

“Together, with reinforcement from thousands of charter parents, alumni, teachers, and school leaders, we defeated a suite of bills that would have imposed major barriers to success on the charter sector and jeopardized the extraordinary gains our schools are realizing, particularly among students of color and students in poverty.”

JED WALLACE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CALIFORNIA CHARTER SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

California Governor Vetoes Bill Meant to Restrict Charter Schools

By Elizabeth BeShears

California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) vetoed a bill that would have increased restrictions on charter schools in the state.

Assembly Bill 709 would have made charter schools subject to state open meetings, public records, and conflict-of-interest laws.

Brown rejected the bill on September 30, writing in his veto message, “In 2014, I vetoed AB 913, a virtually identical bill. My reasons then were: ‘Starting a charter school requires the strong commitment of dedicated individuals willing to serve on a governing board. While I support transparency, this bill goes further than simply addressing issues of potential conflicts of interest and goes too far in prescribing how these boards must operate.’ That’s still my view.”

‘Major Barriers’

Jed Wallace, president and CEO of the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA), says Brown’s veto shows the governor has supporters in the California State Legislature who view charters favorably.

“Despite powerful political headwinds in the legislature, California’s charter sector demonstrated once again that support for charter schools in the legislature continues to grow,” Wallace said. “Together, with reinforcement from thousands of charter parents, alumni, teachers, and school leaders, we defeated a suite of bills that would have imposed major barriers to success on the charter sector and jeopardized the extraordinary gains our schools are realizing, particularly among students of color and students in poverty.”

Wallace says CCSA opposed AB 709 because the bill’s “rigid approach could have led to the effective dismantling of hundreds of nonprofit charter schools.”

“Nearly all charter schools in California already comply with the Brown Act, the Public Records Act, and the Political Reform Act,” Wallace said. “We have no objections to a sensible application of these three open-records laws. In fact, we sponsored legislation two years ago that would have subject- ed charter schools to these three laws, with some modifications, but the bill died following an aggressive opposition effort by California Teachers Association (CTA).”

‘There is a Certain Irony Here’

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says the teachers union is the only truly unaccountable organization in the education system.

“There is a certain irony here,” Sand said. “Charters must prove themselves to their customers, parents, and to a charter authorizing board, and [they] must renew their charter typically every five years. CTA, which cosponsored AB 709, never has to do this. The union, which was voted in and won the right to bargain collectively in 1975, has never had to recertify. A new teacher is forced to pay money to CTA or to a smaller state union, whether they want to or not. Hence the union whining about charter accountability is laughable. They don’t have to be accountable to their members; they have had a captive audience for over 40 years and counting.”

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erb@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
New York Makes Tweaks to Common Core State Standards

By Jenni White

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) released a draft of its proposed changes for the state’s Common Core State Standards and asked the public to review and comment on the plan.

Chalkbeat.org reports most of the changes seem “relatively small.”

“In some cases wording was tweaked; in others, an existing standard was made more specific,” Chalkbeat.org reported.

Two committees constituting a total of approximately 130 parents and educators prepared the draft recommendations over the course of a year. NYSED released the proposed changes in September and gave the public until November 4 to provide feedback. Newsday reported in September the changes “are largely a response to massive test boycotts statewide that have included more than half of all Long Island students in grades three through eight eligible to take the exams.

“Parent leaders of the testing opt-out movement—which set national records, with about 20 percent of students statewide in grades three through eight refusing to take state exams—voiced skepticism that the department’s proposed changes would have much effect in softening opposition to standardized testing,” Newsday reported.

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia told reporters during the release of the proposed changes the draft revisions would affect 60 percent of the state’s English language arts standards and 55 percent of the math standards. Elia also suggested the standards would be renamed.

NYSED reportedly will consider the changes to the standards in early 2017, implement them, if approved, during the 2017–18 school year, and test students with new assessments based on the changes beginning in the 2018–19 school year.

Tests ‘Distract’ from Standards

Yvonne Gasperino, cofounder of Stop Common Core in New York State, says NYSED is using the testing opt-out issue as a red herring.

“Focusing on the tests diverts the attention away from the standards themselves,” Gasperino said. “Long Island may be ground zero for test refusals, but parents statewide have been sounding the alarm about these standards since they were brought in during a stealth-like black-ops tactic several years ago by NYSED, [the Education Committee], and the [NYSED Board of Regents], along with the union heads backing up the efforts.”

‘Change the Toxic Name’

Kyle Olson, founder and CEO of Education Action Group, a nonprofit organization that promotes education reform, says NYSED is trying to trick people with its proposed changes.

“Let’s be clear: Changing the name and ‘tweaks’ in wording are just changing the lipstick color on the pig. The cynical bureaucrats know if they just change the toxic name, they can go out and say ‘Common Core’ doesn’t exist anymore. It’s a combination of cynical bureaucrats and a large majority of parents not being tuned in to these issues to understand what the bureaucracy is doing.”

KYLE OLSON CEO EDUCATION ACTION GROUP

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Glenn Dalagleish, another cofounder of Stop Common Core in New York State, says NYSED is trying to wear down the opposition.

“Renaming the standards is their first step in their plan to try and deceive New York State parents yet again,” Dalagleish said. “Refusing tests will very soon be dated, and parents will grow weary after years of refusing with not a lot to show for it.”

Business Groups ‘Motivated’

Gasperino and Olson say the influence of organized labor and business organizations in education, such as High Achievement New York, a group that has run ads in favor of Common Core and is composed primarily of business leaders based in Manhattan, goes a long way toward keeping the standards in place.

“The eyes of parents throughout New York State have been wide open for a long time about these untested standards, but we don’t have big business and union money to back us up while fighting this,” Gasperino said. “Big business has partnered with federal and state governments for selfish reasons, currying favors with them, and in return they get a tailor-made workforce.”

“Kids knowing Plato or Socrates doesn’t do much for businesses seeking computer techs,” said Olson. “Just as unions are motivated to minimize accountability for their members, business groups have their own motivations too. It’s important to understand that as policy is being made.”

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

In 2010, 45 states adopted Common Core State Standards for education—without public debate or appropriate scrutiny. Now many states are having second thoughts. This booklet by Joy Pullmann, research fellow for The Heartland Institute, explains why Common Core is a bad choice for America.

Buy Common Core A Bad Choice for America online at store.heartland.org or call 312/377-4000.
Common Core Is ‘Substandard,’ Incompatible with Catholic Education, Study Reports

By Teresa Mull

The Common Core State Standards are not compatible with a Catholic education because their workforce development emphasis “dramatically diminishes children’s intellectual and spiritual horizons,” a new study reports.

Common Core is a set of national standards dictating what students should know at each grade level. The report, “After the Fall: Catholic Education Beyond the Common Core,” published by the American Principles Project and the Pioneer Institute in October, states, “As 132 Catholic scholars wrote in a letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops, Common Core is ‘a recipe for standardized workforce preparation.’

‘Rather than triggering imaginations and nourishing souls through the wonder of sustained encounters with works that have inspired generations, Common Core’s ‘cold reading’ method for informational texts transforms literacy into little more than a content-empty ‘skill set,’” the paper says. “Also, its mathematics framework locks children into little more than a content-empty ‘skill set,’” the paper says. “Also, its mathematics framework locks children—except those whose parents are savvy enough to supplement their basic Common Core training—into a substandard education that will not prepare them for serious college course-work in science, technology, engineering, or math.”

The study reports the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) initially encouraged Catholic schools to adopt the standards, but NCEA warned “Catholic schools that textbooks, educational materials, state testing, college entrance exams, teacher training, and teacher resources would all now be Common Core-based, and therefore Catholic schools should plan and adapt accordingly."

The study also reports that after schools struggled to adopt Common Core while maintaining high standards, “the early attempts [by NCEA and others] to embrace the Common Core as a useful guide for Catholic schools seemed to devolve into downplaying the Common Core’s importance.”

‘Fundamentally Contrary’

Jane Robbins, an attorney, senior fellow at the American Principles Project, and coauthor of the study, says Common Core completely opposes Catholic education.

“(Common Core) is fundamentally contrary to a Catholic education, because the goal of Common Core is fundamentally opposed to the goal of Catholic education,” Robbins said. “The Common Core is a workforce development model. It’s not an education model. In the Common Core scheme, the purpose of education is to develop workers for the economy. Catholic education has very different goals: to develop children into the people that God intended them to be and to give them an appreciation of more fundamental things such as truth and beauty and goodness.”

‘Soul-Sapping Materials’

Dan Guernsey, an associate professor of education at Ave Maria University, director of K–12 programs at the Cardinal Newman Society, and coauthor of the study, says although Common Core is not specifically heretical, its designers have a poor understanding of real education.

“It’s not what they do; it’s what they don’t do,” Guernsey said. “Since the standards’ writers do not understand human nature, they do not understand education. They are misguided and missing an opportunity to elicit wonder and the pursuit of all that is true, good, and beautiful as they sell out to pragmatic and soul-sapping materials and high-stakes tests. They reduce the transcendent and engaging for the testable.

“A Catholic school’s goal is to produce a fully alive human being who can maximize all of his or her God-given potential in this world as they prepare to be with Him in Heaven in the next,” Guernsey said. “We do this from within a Catholic community and [do so] drawing on centuries of wisdom guided by reason and revelation.”

‘Seen a Lot of Pushback’

Robbins says parents across the nation are dissatisfied with Common Core.

“I think Common Core, I’m happy to say, has sparked a revival of interest among parents in what exactly is going on in their children’s schools,” Robbins said. “Maybe in years past they just assumed the schools were doing a good job and they didn’t get too worked up about it, but now Common Core has really focused their attention on what is happening, so we’ve seen a lot of pushback all over the country against Common Core.

“I know of people who have had their children in Catholic schools that adopted Common Core, and these parents had taken their children out and started their own school, which is of course something not everybody can do, but it’s an example of how strongly good Catholic parents feel about this and what they really want out of their schools,” Robbins said. “Homeschooling is really exploding. All of that is encouraging because it gets the attention of the people who are running the system that they can’t do whatever they want to do with no parental pushback.”

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

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JANE ROBBINS
SENIOR FELLOW
AMERICAN PRINCIPLES PROJECT

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
U.S. Education Secretary Faces Backlash for Criticizing Homeschooling

By Kenneth Artz

U.S. Education Secretary John King has been criticized for telling a group of reporters he’s concerned about homeschooled students not “getting the range of options that are good for all kids.”

“King said he worries that ‘students who are homeschooled are not getting kind of the rapid instructional experience they would get in school’—unless parents are ‘very intentional about it,’” Politico reported. “King said the school experience includes building relationships with peers, teachers and mentors—elements which are difficult to achieve in homeschooling, he said, unless parents focus on it.”

King made his remarks during a speech given at a breakfast event hosted by The Christian Science Monitor in September.

Writing for The Daily Signal, Heritage Foundation Fellow Lindsey Burke said King’s statement wrongly assumes homeschooled students are not in school. As Milton Friedman famously quipped in Free to Choose, ‘not all ‘schooling’ is education and not all ‘education’ is schooling.”

According to an October report in Breitbart, homeschooling parents have taken offense at King’s comments.

Wisconsin homeschooling parent Sara Lehman told Breitbart, “What’s also ironic is that his statement is in direct contradiction to why we choose to homeschool. We didn’t want ‘rapid (one size fits all) instruction’ meant to push kids along regardless if they were actually gaining knowledge.”

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show the number of U.S. families homeschooling grew by more than 60 percent between 2003 and 2012.

The National Home Education Research Institute reports, “The home-educated typically score 15 to 30 percentile points above public-school students on standardized academic achievement tests. A 2015 study found black homeschool students to be scoring 23 to 42 percentile points above black public school students.”

King acknowledged some homeschooling families are “doing it incredibly well,” and he said he knows of homeschooled students in college who have had “very tremendous academic success.”

‘Pretty Upset’

Will Estrada, director of federal government relations at the Home School Legal Defense Association, says King should have known better than to disparage homeschooling families.

“We were pretty upset about that,” Estrada said. “To have the head of the U.S. Department of Education criticize homeschooling and say he’s not sure that it can provide a good enough education for that many kids is a little ironic when we have more and more parents who are frustrated with the public schools and are choosing to homeschool their kids.”

“[King] did say he’s seen some good things with homeschooling, but then he said, ‘I have some concerns,’ and when a federal official says he’s concerned, that’s not a good thing for him or the 2.3 million homeschooled students who are using that option,” Estrada said.

“Then he went on to actually lay out some of the debunked myths about homeschooling: that homeschoolers are not able to get as good of an education or as well-rounded an education as children in public schools. [He said this] even though the studies and the research and now 30 years of homeschooling success show that is not the case at all.”

‘Plenty Are Misguided’

Frazier O’Leary, a former high school teacher and current homeschooling father, provides online classes and other enrichment activities to homeschoolers through the online O’Leary Academy. He says despite much progress, myths about homeschoolers still abound.

“I was disheartened but not surprised to read Secretary King’s statement about his concern about the ‘range of options’ for homeschool students,” O’Leary said. “While many in the education establishment feel threatened by independent, self-directed learners and parents, there are plenty who are just misguided and who are still blinded by negative, outdated prejudices. I’m hoping that Secretary King is in the latter camp: just misguided.”

O’Leary says contrary to King’s statement, homeschoolers actually have more options than their peers in traditional schools.

“Our kids and the kids in our larger homeschooling community mix traditional instruction with homeschooling co-ops, public speaking classes, art classes, project groups, independent-learner labs, independent projects, online classes, and courses at other schools and community colleges,” O’Leary said.

“A ‘Diversity of Options’

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“Our kids and the kids in our larger homeschooling community mix traditional instruction with homeschooling co-ops, public speaking classes, art classes, project groups, independent-learner labs, independent projects, online classes, and courses at other schools and community colleges,” O’Leary said.

“The pursuit of their own interests with rigorous and diverse instruction that takes advantage of the amazing resources available online and in our area, the most vibrant educational community in the country.”

‘No Authority to Regulate’

Estrada says he does not foresee the Department of Education acting to regulate homeschoolers.

“We do not anticipate [King] taking any action, and the reason why is even if he wanted to, he couldn’t, because now for about 22 years we’ve had U.S. law [in place that] very specifically says nothing in federal education law will ever apply to homeschools or private schools that do not receive federal funds. Congress had this put in so that the Department of Education has no authority to regulate homeschools, even if they wanted to,” Estrada said.

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

“We were pretty upset about that. To have the head of the U.S. Department of Education criticize homeschooling and say he’s not sure that it can provide a good enough education for that many kids is a little ironic when we have more and more parents who are frustrated with the public schools and are choosing to homeschool their kids.”

WILL ESTRADA
DIRECTOR OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, HOME SCHOOL LEGAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION
Western Governors University Praised for Reducing Student Debt

By Jane S. Shaw

Western Governors University (WGU), an online, nonprofit university, is receiving praise for its Responsible Borrowing Initiative (RBI), a program to reduce student loan debt.

Total outstanding student loan debt in the United States has now reached $1.26 trillion, more than the nation’s credit card debt. WGU’s program has reduced its students’ borrowing by 41 percent since it was first implemented in 2013. From 2013 to 2016, students who borrowed money to attend WGU decreased their average annual borrowing from $7,870 to $4,640 per year.

The American Association of University Administrators awarded WGU’s Responsible Borrowing Initiative its Exemplary Model Award in 2016 for reducing student borrowing at WGU by $400 million.

WGU’s vice president for financial aid, Bob Collins, developed the Responsible Borrowing Initiative. Collins supervised the creation of a simple, one-page statement customized for each student accepted to WGU. It states the cost of tuition at WGU, any grant aid the student will receive, and the minimum loan the student needs to borrow to cover “direct costs,” meaning tuition and fees.

A typical letter issued by most universities to a student about financial aid states the maximum amount the student can borrow from the federal government.

“Students entering WGU with more than $30,000 debt from prior student loans are assigned to participate in the program,” WGU’s website says. “Our goal is not to deter students from attending WGU, but to ensure that every student receives the financial resources needed to graduate without incurring unnecessary additional student debt.”

‘A User-Friendly Tool’

Mollie McGill, director of programs and membership for the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education’s Cooperative for Educational Technologies, says WGU’s program should be a model for other educational institutions.

“The initiative demonstrates WGU’s commitment to affordability and provides a model that any institution, regardless of size and mission, could replicate,” McGill said. “The student loan debt problem in the United States is huge. WGU has created a user-friendly tool for students in their financial aid decisions, and the initial results of the Responsible Borrowing Initiative clearly show that it is achieving its goals.”

DOE vs. WGU

Mark Kantrowitz, publisher and vice president of strategy at Cappex.com, a website that connects students with colleges and scholarships, says compared to WGU, the U.S. Department of Education takes the opposite position on student borrowing.

“Department of Education guidance precludes colleges from limiting borrowers to just direct charges,” Kantrowitz said. “But nothing stops colleges from making recommendations to their students.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.

College Lecturer Takes Leave of Absence after Comparing Black Lives Matter to KKK

By Jane S. Shaw

A University of Virginia (UVA) lecturer has taken a leave of absence after making a comment online that prompted a protest and statements from UVA officials denouncing his remarks.

Douglas Muir, an adjunct lecturer for the university’s School of Engineering and Applied Science, commented on a Facebook post advertising an event titled “Rooting Out Injustice: Poverty, Race and the Role of Legal Aid,” which featured Alicia Garza, cofounder of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

“Black lives matter is the biggest racist [sic] organization since the clan,” Muir wrote in October. “Are you kidding me. Disgusting!!!”

BLM was formed after Florida neighborhood watch participant George Zimmerman was acquitted of murder in the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, a black man. The movement’s website describes itself as “a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.”

The UVA School of Engineering and Applied Science and the Darden Graduate School of Business, the two colleges Muir works for, quickly distanced themselves from his comments by issuing statements.

“The UVA provost also issued a statement, saying, “[Muir’s] statement is inconsistent with the University of Virginia’s values and with its commitment to the principles of academic freedom.”

UVA announced in October Muir would be taking a leave of absence. Muir issued a statement of apology, saying in part, “Whatever my initial intention was from the post has been overshadowed by those who are rightly offended by it and others who want to use my words to further divide this community.”

Violating Academic Freedom?

Jay Schalin, director of policy analysis at the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, says generally a faculty member’s academic freedom protects “extra-mural” statements such as Muir’s, including statements made off-campus.

“Only when they are so irrational or venal that they demonstrate the unfitness of the teacher to teach or they clearly hurt the school’s reputation is punishment even considered,” Schalin said. “While some in the academic community may find Muir’s comments distasteful, his contention the Black Lives Matters is racist is a very common opinion—maybe a majority opinion—in the United States. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence to support his comments. They are not the sort of wild, unsupported conjecture that clearly indicates lack of fitness.”

UVA ‘Joined the Hecklers’

John Rosenberg, a historian who writes about discrimination and how it’s reported in the news at the Discriminations.us blog, says UVA’s unwillingness to support Muir is cowardly.

“I think the saddest thing of this affair is the incredibly pusillanimous statements from UVA’s provost and deans of two of its major schools giving lip service to academic freedom as they limit it to speech that’s ‘appropriate’ and ‘consistent with university values,’” Rosenberg said. “Rather than protect faculty speech from a heckler’s veto, they joined the hecklers. I think you’d have to look far and wide to find leaders of a major university spouting such craven nonsense.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
Study: Competency-Based Education Would Halve Higher-Ed Costs

By Jane S. Shaw

Colleges and universities could cut the cost of some of their degrees by as much as 50 percent by using competency-based education (CBE), a new study has found.

CBE is an emerging model for higher education that consists of online learning in which students move forward at their own pace, completing periodic assessments that show they know the material rather than building academic credits based on a certain number of “credit hours” of study.

CBE programs often “unbundle” faculty roles, with academic faculty members designing the courses and others—faculty with expert knowledge plus lower-paid “academic success coaches”—working directly with students.

The report, titled “A Study of Four New Models and Their Implications for Bending the Higher Education Cost Curve,” prepared by the rpkGROUP consulting firm and funded by the Lumina Foundation, studied CBE programs at four institutions: the University of Wisconsin-Extension School’s “Flexible Option,” which charges students $2,250 for three months, during which time they may demonstrate success in as many competencies as they can. Alternatively, students can pay $900 for each “competency set.”

At UW-Extension, bachelor’s degrees are offered as “completion degrees.” That is, most students come in with transferred credits, although they can get an associate’s degree from UW-Extension first. The school offers CBE bachelor’s degrees in nursing, information science and technology, and biomedical sciences diagnostic imaging. It also offers shorter-term certificates. Some CBE schools offer two-year associate’s degrees or master’s degrees.

Between 200 and 600 institutions of higher education are considering adopting CBE for some courses of study, the report says.

Different Types of CBE

One of the four programs researchers studied is the University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension School’s “Flexible Option,” which charges students $2,250 for three months, during which time they may demonstrate success in as many competencies as they can. Alternatively, students can pay $900 for each “competency set.”

Appeal to Employers

Alana Dunagan, a higher education researcher at the Christensen Institute, which focuses on disruptive educational technologies, says CBE has a bright future.

“If employers can choose between a student with a degree that has taught clear skills, they will always choose that over a ‘black box’ diploma where it’s unclear what a student has learned,” Dunagan said. “As employers build more awareness of CBE grads, we expect to see a preference develop for those types of degrees. For students, too, having assessment built into the learning process makes it a more gratifying experience than an end-of-semester pass-or-fail final exam. We all want to feel like we are building mastery.”

By: Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) writes from Raleigh, North Carolina.
College Board Chief Promises Changes to Common Core-Aligned SAT

By Kenneth Artz

The creators of SAT, America’s oldest college-entrance exam, say they will remove unnecessary words from the test’s math section and cut back on the recycling of exams.

The College Board, the company that makes SAT, has redesigned the exam to align it with the Common Core State Standards, a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. Students first took the new test in March 2016.

A Reuters investigation reported in September the College Board ignored research showing its wordy math problems “could harm students who do not speak English as a native language.”

David Coleman, chief executive of the College Board and an architect of Common Core, responded to the Reuters report by saying during a college conference in September, “We are going to do everything we can to further simplify the mathematics section. Using superfluous words is superfluous. Every extra word should go. Complex, distracting situations should go.”

The Reuters investigative series also revealed “how test-preparation companies in Asia are systematically harvesting old questions and having their students practice on them. When those questions are reused on exam day, the clients enjoy a big advantage over students.”

Pressure from Common Core

Ashley Thorne, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, says the pressure to align SAT with Common Core has created these problems.

“The increase in math word problems was meant to test ‘students’ ability to apply math to solve problems in rich and varied contexts,’ reflecting Coleman’s efforts to align the SAT to the Common Core, which emphasizes ‘real-world contexts,’” Thorne said. “Common Core math is now famous for unnecessarily convoluting ordinary math problems. Eliminating ‘superfluous words’ in the SAT math word problems would be a positive step, though it should be taken in the interest of clarity for all test-takers rather than a boon to international students.”

‘A History of Bad Revisions’

Thorne says SAT has been flawed for years.

“The SAT’s have a history of bad revisions, and the current changes should be seen in light of that history,” Thorne said. “Until 1995, the test was based on a single, unchanging standard. That year, the College Board re-normed the test to make average scores higher. This inflated scores and eliminated the ability to compare results to those of all the previous years.

“The newest version of the SAT drops the penalty for guessing, reduces the number of answer choices from five to four, and uses easier vocabulary. Again, these changes artificially inflate scores and make it harder to know which students have truly strong intelligence. It is good that Coleman is facing pressure on some of the test’s negative aspects, but all the others … remain to be addressed.”

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Let’s examine what [U.S. Education Secretary John] King refers to as the ‘rapid instructional experience’ students receive in the aggregate in K–12 education today.

“According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the U.S. Department of Education, just one-third of all eighth-graders in public schools can read proficiently. Roughly two out of 10 students don’t graduate high school at all. The United States ranks in the middle of the pack on international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment. In short: There is significant room for improvement in the traditional public education system.

“[Furthermore], homeschooling families have amazing networks to ensure children build relationships with peers and mentors—another concern of King’s.

“Homeschooling co-ops and sports leagues are just a few examples. And homeschool networking is becoming more sophisticated.”

— Lindsey Burke, “What Obama’s Education Secretary Got Wrong About Homeschoolers,” The Daily Signal, September 21, 2016
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!
Atlanta Superintendent Praises School Choice

By Kenneth Artz

Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen praised school choice in comments to reporters, saying it “is appropriate in a country focused on democracy.”

Carstarphen made the comments after her annual State of the District address in October.

“People like choice,” Carstarphen said. “They want to pick their president. They want to pick their Happy Meal.”

“The Atlanta school district has one of the highest rates of charter school enrollment in the state—and the highest in metro Atlanta, according to Georgia Department of Education data,” The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. “Over the past two years, Carstarphen has expanded the role of charter schools in Atlanta, hiring two local nonprofit charter school groups to turn around some of the city’s lowest performing schools.”

“What I hear here in Atlanta is that [families] do want a portfolio of options,” Carstarphen said.

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To donate, visit www.heartland.org/library or call 312/377-4000.

Atlanta ‘Ahead of the Game’

Kelly McCutchen, president and CEO of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, says charter schools are gaining support in Atlanta.

“Atlanta has been very open to chartering,” McCutchen said. “The success of many of the Atlanta charter schools has won over many skeptics and increased the demand for new charters.”

“I think Atlanta is ahead of the game, but the school choice movement has been evolving for some time,” said McCutchen. “Charters started out as very controversial. Today, those who are opposed to charters typically lead off with, ‘I support charters, but…’ In addition, when it comes time to testify on the effectiveness of charter schools at statehouses or before school boards, parents and students speak on behalf of charter schools, which is very difficult to refute.”

Only Public School Choice?

Jamie Lord, director of government affairs at the Georgia Center for Opportunity, says he doubts Carstarphen supports broad school choice.

“I couldn’t agree more with [Carstarphen’s] remarks, and I would say Atlanta Public Schools is better than most districts about approving public charter schools that provide alternative options for families,” Lord said. “But I would honestly be pleasantly shocked if she truly meant all forms of school choice, because school choice can mean a lot of different things to different people, and I would imagine she sort of means among the public schools, particularly in the Atlanta Public Schools. I’d be stunned if [Carstarphen] meant she was supportive of all private school options, with kids being able to go to private schools or home schools or virtual schools or whatever schools their parents choose for them.”

Challenges to Choice

McCutchen says although Georgia is better than most states at offering choice, it still has progress to make.

“Georgia is one of the leading states in the nation in school choice in terms of the number of different options provided to students: charter schools, career academies, a special-needs scholarship program, a tuition tax credit scholarship program, a vibrant homeschooling community, as well as a large selection of online classes and virtual schools,” McCutchen said.

“Our biggest challenge, surprisingly, is allowing one of the most successful programs to grow,” McCutchen said. “The tuition tax credit scholarship program is capped at $58 million—compared to a state Department of Education budget of over $11 billion. Despite huge demand, efforts to increase the cap have been stopped in the Georgia Senate. There has, however, been great interest in universal education savings accounts, with two bills introduced last year.”

Lord says the state’s tax credit scholarship is hugely popular.

“That program is currently capped at $58 million statewide, and it meets its cap within hours of the first day it’s available,” Lord said. “Every school scholarship organization that I’m aware of has waitlists because there are more families that desire to participate than they have funds to grant scholarships.”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Texas Lieutenant Gov. Pushes for School Choice

By Kenneth Artz

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R) vows he will continue to encourage lawmakers to pass school choice legislation in his state.

“Texas is lagging in school choice options,” Patrick told a group of education and business leaders during a speech in October. “I intend to fight for school choice session after session after session.”

Texas state Sen. Don Huffines (R-Dallas) introduced Senate Bill 1178 in March 2015. It would have directed the Texas Education Agency “to conduct a study on implementing an education savings account (ESA) program” in the state, but the bill did not make it out of the House Public Education Committee after passing the Senate.

“We Have Done Nothing”

An ESA program allows parents to remove their child from the local public school and use the money allocated to the child for public schooling on approved education services such as private school tuition, textbooks, and tutoring. The House Public Education Committee heard presentations on ESAs in October.

“Around the nation, they’re ahead of us,” Patrick said in his testimony. “We have done nothing. We passed a bill last session with bipartisan support on school choice. We didn’t even get a hearing in the House.”

Huffines says scholarly research shows ESAs would work in Texas.

“We’ve talked about the mechanics of education savings accounts and other methods of school choice,” Huffines said. “We had testimony from private school groups that told us how many seats were available in private schools across Texas. Right now, there are over 100,000 vacancies for private schools across the State of Texas. We heard testimonies from experts about the cost of private schools and if ESAs could handle that, and they could. ESAs would be more than adequate to satisfy the tuition requirements for those schools, and you can still have money left over to cover future costs.”

ESAs vs. Vouchers

Huffines says ESAs are the best choice for students and their families because they offer the most customization.

“ESAs are completely different from the voucher program,” Huffines said. “ESAs offer much more flexibility. It is an account that empowers the parent directly, because the money goes into an account for the students, and the parent controls [the funds] and can spend [them] on a variety of educational issues that the state legislature approves. It does not have to be spent on private education.”

Children ‘Shortchanged’

State Sen. Donna Campbell (R-New Braunfels) says ESAs increase educational opportunities.

“The future of Texas depends on a strong, well-educated workforce,” Campbell said. “The idea that some Texas children are getting shortchanged because we’ve put barriers in their paths and tied the hands of their parents is alarming to me. It’s concerning because a child who doesn’t graduate college-ready or with marketable skills won’t reach their income potential [and] is more likely to be trapped in poverty and is more likely to be incarcerated. Education is the great equalizer, but only when every child has access to a quality education.

“School choice multiplies success by adding more quality options for everyone,” Campbell said. “That’s a win for our families, a win for our schools, and a net positive for the Texas economy.”

‘Focused on the Student’

Huffines says the argument school choice programs will destroy public education is false.

“The argument that you’re taking money away from public schools with vouchers and ESAs is a lie, and people don’t understand the program because we can structure the ESA accounts so it’s a net positive financial benefit to the public schools, and it can be a net positive benefit to the State of Texas,” Huffines said. “[School districts] worried about losing students is a lie. They should never worry about losing students to this program. If they are doing a good job, there would be no reason for anyone to leave their school district.

“ESAs are about what’s best for the student, not what’s best for the school district or the campus or the bureaucrats,” Huffines said. “Our ESA program is focused on the student. A happy student is a good student. It doesn’t matter why the school district isn’t working for the student; what matters is that we give a choice to those students who want to leave the government-run schools and do something else for their education.”

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

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Milwaukee Zoning Board Denies Permit for School for At-Risk Boys

By Michael McGrady

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin Board of Zoning Appeals denied a permit request by a school whose students primarily use vouchers to attend. Right Step is “a choice military school that specializes in working with youth displaying ‘at-risk’ behaviors,” its website states. Citing potential traffic problems, the zoning board denied Right Step a special-use permit in October to open an all-boys campus in a vacant Milwaukee Public Schools building.

“Right Step Inc. enrolled about 154 students in fifth through 12th grade last year,” the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported. “All but a few attend the school with a taxpayer-funded voucher. Right Step wanted to open a boys-only campus for up to 140 students in the vacant Riverwest building, which had been built as a bank and zoned for business.”

City ‘Playing Games’

CJ Szafir, vice president for policy and deputy counsel at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, served as Right Step’s legal counsel. Szafir says city officials are deliberately blocking choice schools.

“Because of the growth of the Milwaukee parental rights program and declining populations in the city, the enrollment for Milwaukee Public Schools has plummeted,” Szafir said. “That has led to, over the course of five to 10 years, an abundance of vacant school buildings that are just sitting empty. Not surprisingly, as private schools in the choice program and charter schools have wanted to expand, what they look to is vacant, empty school buildings.

“The City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Public Schools have long played games, putting as many roadblocks as they possibly can, preventing these schools from expanding,” Szafir said. “Essentially, what the City of Milwaukee does is hoard empty school buildings instead of selling them to charter and private schools.”

City Breaking the Law?

Szafir says city officials are essentially breaking the law in denying the permit.

“The Wisconsin State Legislature and the governor, in the budget, put a provision that essentially forced the City of Milwaukee to sell these buildings to choice and charter schools,” Szafir said. “The law was implemented about a year ago, and Right Step was one of the schools that wanted to take advantage of this new law.”

For Teachers or Kids?

Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, says Milwaukee officials are doing the bidding of the public school lobby in opposition to students and taxpayers.

 “[Milwaukee Public Schools] is doing everything they can to maintain as many students in the district as they can,” Bender said. “If they actually followed the law and released the building to a school in the voucher program, they would potentially lose their market share of students, so they are not going to do that.

“Milwaukee has the largest racial gap on graduation rates in the country,” Bender said. “And you have people who are only concerned about the adults in the system, trying to block a school that is literally designed to help those who are the worst off in the district to achieve a high school diploma or GED. They are more concerned about the teachers than the kids.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
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