The federal government spends 7 or 8 percent of its money on education, and its method is typical of the federal intrusion into local matters: It gives money from the federal treasury to states and localities on condition. The conditions are myriad, confusing, and usually ugly when they can be understood. Title IV of the Higher Education Act governs federal student aid, and it numbers around 500 pages. A lawyer for Hillsdale College told me once I would be unable to read it, because he himself cannot read it, for which reason his firm keeps a specialist who is the only person he knows who understands what it says.

For this reason alone, it would be a grand thing to get rid of the Department of Education.

By Larry P. Arnn

**GRAND IDEA, p. 18**

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**Voucher Bill Proposed in Tennessee**

**By Elizabeth BeShears**

Tennessee Rep. Bill Dunn (R-Knoxville) says he plans to reintroduce a bill to bring school vouchers to the state in 2017.

Currently, only Tennessee students in special-needs programs have access to a state-sponsored school choice program.

School vouchers give parents access to the funds allocated for their child’s public school education to use at another public school or at a private school, if they choose to enroll their kids elsewhere.

The Tennessee Senate has passed voucher legislation three times since 2011, but the bills never made it through the state’s House of Representatives. Eight new Republican lawmakers...
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Dallas Public School District Working to Win Back School Choice Students

By Kenneth Artz

The demand is there. Matthews says families are forcing DISD to change its approach in order to keep their children. "We're a brand-new charter. We started in 2013 with 2,500 kids, and three years later we have just over 10,000 students. The DISD is a district of about 160,000 students. It's kind of like David versus Goliath."

Charters Are More Innovative

Stephanie Matthews, a senior policy advisor at the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s Center for Education Freedom, says charter schools have more flexibility to innovate, allowing them to meet families' needs.

"Every family deserves the ability of choosing the school for their kid, so district schools evolve. When you do see robust school choice options, you see districts innovate and offer more to parents, and they become more creative."

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

Lawmakers in Pennsylvania are likely to introduce education savings account (ESA) legislation during the 2017 session now that the state has larger Republican majorities in both the House and Senate after the November 2016 election.

ESAs grant parents access to a portion of the money allocated for their child’s public school education to spend on learning alternatives such as private school tuition, textbooks, or tutoring. Pennsylvania currently has two tax-credit scholarship programs that offer corporations tax credits for donations they make to organizations that provide private school scholarships.

“Under Republican leadership, the House Education Committee held a hearing on ESAs in September [2016],” Watchdog.org reported in December 2016. “Republicans will hold larger majorities in both the state House and Senate [in 2017], going from 119 to 122 in the 203-member House and from 31 to 34 in the 50-member Senate.”

Focusing on Special-Needs Students

James Paul, a senior policy analyst focusing on education policy at the Commonwealth Foundation in Pennsylvania, said initial ESA legislation in the state will likely be limited to special-needs students.

“Education savings accounts are the best way for parents to customize their child’s learning experience,” Paul said. “Essentially, parents are given a set amount and can pay for private school tuition, curriculum, online expenses, educational therapy, and behavioral therapy for students with special needs. The bill will likely be introduced as an ESA for students with Individual Education Plans [developed for children with special needs]. It has the potential to transform the entire educational system.”

Parents ‘Control and Customize’

Paul says ESAs make schools accountable to parents.

“ESAs allow parents to completely control and customize the educational experience of their kids,” Paul said. “ESAs are a model for where government is still involved in education yet no longer the sole service provider.

“Generally, the best accountability rests with parents who are invested in their child’s education,” Paul said. “If their child isn’t satisfied, they are free to seek an alternative. As for service providers, there are going to be accountability measures related to teacher certification and testing requirements. Those details are still going to be worked out in the legislation. However, I would prefer to see less restrictions and less oversight to begin with and iron out kinks as they arise.”

‘Step Up and Innovate’

Michael Chartier, director of state engagement at EdChoice, says ESAs can improve the education system throughout the nation.

“[ESAs] can seamlessly integrate in any state’s educational framework,” Chartier said. “Parents and kids are accustomed to and excited about customization in virtually every aspect of their lives: cellphones, cars, wardrobe, etc. ESAs allow parents to have the same flexibility in education. They can customize around a child’s learning needs and allow education providers to step up and innovate.”

‘So Many Benefits to ESAs’

Chartier, who has worked with numerous states on ESA legislation, says Pennsylvania should learn from other states and listen to parents.

“I’m not going to tell the people of Pennsylvania what to do, but I think that there are so many benefits to ESAs that parents will enjoy,” Chartier said. “A more inclusive ESA program would create larger groups of people who could support the program. [Pennsylvania lawmakers should] remember to look at this from the parents’ point of view.

“It’s important to ensure that whatever legislation they enact is easy for the parents to utilize and therefore for students to benefit from,” Chartier said. “Consider the trade-offs of accountability and user-friendliness. Learn from what other states have done. Where have they succeeded? What would they do differently?”

Alexandra Hudson (alexandraohudson@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.

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**Chicago Teachers Union Refuses to Let Volunteers Run Library**

By Kenneth Artz

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has said it would rather see a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) elementary school library shut down than allow parent volunteers to run it.

In the fall, Pritzker Elementary, located in Chicago’s Wicker Park neighborhood, experienced funding cuts and low enrollment, so the school released its librarian. Rather than see the school library closed, some parents volunteered to do the work normally completed by a librarian so students could continue to check out books. School officials agreed to the arrangement, and in response, CTU filed a grievance against Pritzker Principal Joenile Albert-Reese arguing Pritzker should have hired a CPS-certified librarian or chosen not to have anyone work in the library.

“[U]nless further funding for CPS is secured, having already cut all non-essential staff and programs, schools like Pritzker will now have to start identifying which essential services they can eliminate or reduce in the future,” said the grievance filed by CTU, according to a December 2016 report by Chicago’s WGNtv.com.

Defying the Union

Albert-Reese says she plans to defy the union.

“The problem has been because of the Chicago Teachers Union’s contract with the CPS. They have tried to inhibit us from using these vast resources, which are available to us in our own building,” Albert-Reese said. “And consequently, as principal, I have decided I am going to allow them to use the library anyway, because it’s a travesty to have the library there with materials for the children [but without a way to use them.]”

“We want them to read,” Albert-Reese said. “We want to make reading available to them. Reading is the premise of all education, and how could I tell them they can’t go there to read and they can’t have access to the literature in their own library at their fingertips? I am not going to deny my students access to the rich resources we have in our building.”

The union represents teachers, not students, Albert-Reese says.

“This is the union’s job, to represent the employees. It’s what they do,” Albert-Reese said. “But it’s my job to ensure our students are well-educated and ensure they have access to the resources I can provide, so that’s why I’m going into the library. They can’t tell me I can’t go into the library, I’m the principal!”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
U.S. Students Make Unimpressive Showing on International Tests

By Elizabeth BeShears

The U.S. students scored below the international average in math and showed no improvement in reading and science on the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test.

Every three years, 15-year-old students in countries across the world take the two-hour PISA test administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In 2015, approximately 540,000 students in 72 countries took the test.

OECD released the 2015 PISA results in December 2016. U.S. students scored an average of 477 in math, below the international average of 490. U.S. math scores are lower than they were in 2009 and 2012. The United States scored 497 in reading, slightly above the international average of 493, and 496 in science, slightly above the international average of 493. Singapore performed the best on the PISA test.

“Among the 35 industrialized nations that are members of OECD, the U.S. now ranks 31st,” reported The Hechinger Report in December.

Common Core’s Fault?

Shane Vander Hart, online communications director for the American Principles Project, says the PISA scores show Common Core-aligned curricula now required in most public classrooms are not adequately preparing students.

“The Common Core math standards leave our students at a disadvantage,” Vander Hart said. “By the time students are in the 5th grade under Common Core, they are one year behind their international peers, and they are two years behind when they reach 7th grade.

“Common Core’s [English language arts] standards, with their emphasis on informational text, do not adequately prepare students for college,” Vander Hart said. “Studies have shown that a focus on classical literature prepares students far more. Students who read good literature typically have better writing skills as well. It’s hard to write well if you don’t read good writing.”

PISA ‘Not Highly Regarded’

Sandra Stotsky, professor emerita in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, says PISA isn’t a good indicator of our education system’s problems.

“PISA is not highly regarded by most mathematicians,” Stotsky said. “It is a test of 15-year-olds of skills that the average adult supposedly would have. It’s not a test of curriculum content, which is what the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study is. That’s why mathematicians prefer TIMSS, which is an international test that gives kids test items that reflect curriculum content at grade levels 4 and 8. We didn’t have impressive results with TIMSS, which came out about a week before the PISA results came out. We did mediocre on both of them.”

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

Colo. Producing Fewer Teachers, State Reports

By Michael McGrady

The number of people in Colorado becoming teachers and education administrators has decreased for the sixth consecutive year, the state reports.

The 2016 Legislative Educator Preparation Report, released by the Colorado Departments of Education and Higher Education in December 2016, reported, “The total number of individuals completing an educator preparation program at Colorado colleges and universities during the 2015–16 academic year declined by 2.2 percent from the previous year, to 2,472. This is the sixth consecutive year the number of completers has declined.

“There has been a 24.4 percent decline in the number of educators completing an educator preparation program at Colorado colleges and universities between the years 2010–2016,” the study found.

‘Overproducing Teachers’?

Ross Izard, a senior education policy analyst at the Denver-based Independence Institute, says the teacher shortage could be a myth resulting from there being too many teachers in years past.

“The notion of a teacher shortage is not a new one,” Izard said. “In fact, the U.S. Department of Education has consistently identified shortages in at least some instructional areas in Colorado and other states since 1990–91, but there’s some compelling new research finding that the United States may have actually been overproducing teachers over the past several decades. We should be careful about accepting the wholesale argument we’re experiencing a massive teacher shortage. The conversation is far more nuanced than that.”

Make Teaching ‘More Attractive’

Izard says states should make it easier for people to become teachers.

“First and foremost, we need to be very careful about erecting further barriers to entry into the teaching profession,” Izard said. “Expanding licensure requirements or otherwise making it harder to get good people into classrooms will only exacerbate the situation. We could take steps to make the teaching profession more attractive for new teachers. One of the best ways to do this would be to realign our teacher pay systems to compensate teachers for performance rather than longevity.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Homeschooling Booming in South Dakota

By Jenni White

The number of families homeschooling in South Dakota increased by 40 percent between 2010 and 2015, according to data provided by the South Dakota Department of Education (DOE).

The South Dakota DOE reports there were 3,858 homeschoolers in the state in 2015. “Statewide, home-school enrollment has risen 40 percent since 2010, according to a count from the South Dakota Department of Education (DOE),” the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported in November 2016. The National Home Education Research Institute estimates there were approximately 2.3 million homeschoolers in the United States in 2016.

‘Fiercely Independent Folks’

Natalie Micheel, a support representative for Classical Conversations for Eastern South Dakota, a community of homeschoolers, says homeschooling comes naturally to many South Dakotans.

“South Dakotans are fiercely independent folks,” Micheel said. “That can work for and against homeschooling, because it’s hard to convince people to break away from their school system, but once they see the freedom in it, it speaks to our independent streak. We’re fairly conservative, and when we see opportunities to do things a more conservative way than traditional public schools, we’ll be happy to take advantage of that.”

Customizing Education

Micheel says a desire to customize her children’s learning experience prompted her to homeschool.

“I know so many people for whom math was the deciding factor for homeschooling, because they want to go back to traditional math facts and the more traditional approach of phonics and more classical and interesting literature than what’s being used in schools,” said Micheel. “I want to read things to my kids they’re interested in.”

Chad Theisen, a former higher-education administrator who is now a full-time homeschooling dad, says his own child gave him the idea to homeschool.

“When our daughter was four years old, she asked us if we would do school at home,” Theisen said. “Prior to that, it was not really on our radar.”

Building a Community

Theisen says he and his wife thought their daughter was simply going through a “phase,” because they had very few friends who homeschooled at the time. When their daughter persisted, the Theisens found the right resources to help get started from Sioux Empire Christian Home Educators (SECHE).

The group also enables the Theisens' three children to interact with other homeschooled kids and their families through activities such as field trips and social events.

The Theisen family began voluntarily helping SECHE “to give back to the organization that helped us out so much.”

Chad Theisen says South Dakotans homeschool for a variety of reasons.

“Some parents made their decision [to homeschool] after very negative situations—such as bullying, assaults, and peer pressure—while others chose to homeschool based on the flexibility, small class size, and the freedom to educate their children,” Theisen said.

Theisen says his family takes advantage of the flexibility homeschooling provides.

“We have the flexibility in our schedule that we can travel and still homeschool on the road,” Theisen said. “If one of our children is excelling in an area, we can advance in the topic without waiting for others to master it. Also, our children are able to get rich experiences from world-class museums, successful small business owners, and engaging hands-on experiments we would not be able to get just through the public school system.”

Overcoming Unique Barriers

Micheel says South Dakota laws support homeschooling, but the state’s demographics can impose limits on the practice.

“If you’re in a small town and have a reason to homeschool or feel called to homeschool, you can feel kind of bad because you want to support your school, and if it falls below a certain headcount and they were to lose the school, it’s a huge loss for that community,” Micheel said.

Micheel says another impediment to homeschooling is for many South Dakota families, both parents must work.

“Often the business is a farm,” Micheel said. “Dad farms, and mom goes into town to work at the bank to get insurance. It really is a two-income state, and that cuts into homeschooling a bit, but anecdotally, I’m starting to see a lot of parents looking at how to make it work, to homeschool and work.”

Theisen says his family homeschools because “no one is more passionate or dedicated about the education of my children than I am.”

Natalie Micheel CLASSICAL CONVERSATIONS FOR EASTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
New Orleans Considers Making All Public Schools Charters

The more that schools can specialize in the needs of unique subsets of children and families and the more they are able and required to compete with one another, the better it is for families. They can more easily get the education best for their unique children, and they don’t have to rely on a glacial political process to make changes to schools that aren’t working.”

By Ashley Bateman

New Orleans may become the first large U.S. city to replace its traditional public school system entirely with charter schools, pending the Orleans Parish School Board’s consideration of local interest in chartering the district’s remaining schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately managed schools held to higher accountability standards than traditional public schools in exchange for increased flexibility in other areas.

Henderson Lewis Jr., superintendent of Orleans Parish Schools, published a statement in December 2016 saying he had “received expressions of interest from the current principals of our remaining five network elementary and high schools to convert to Type 3 charter schools,” beginning in the 2017–18 school year.

Lewis announced the school board would inform families and school staff of the possible conversion to charters, but he provided no other details.

“If the decision proceeds, it will have been a long time coming,” Nola.com reported after Lewis’ statement. “In 2014, the Louisiana Recovery School District finished converting to charters all the New Orleans public schools it took over after Hurricane Katrina.”

End of ZIP-Code Learning

Ann Duplessis, president of the Louisiana Federation for Children, says an all-charter city would break long-established barriers to education choice.

“The conversion to all-charter schools means that all parents and students in New Orleans can choose quality educational options,” Duplessis said. “For the first time in a major American city, a parent won’t have to send their child to a school just because it’s in their ZIP code.”

‘Bottom-Up Evolution’

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says New Orleans’ charter schools have been given a unique opportunity to prove their value.

“I think it is a bottom-up evolution,” McCluskey said. “To a much greater extent than in other places, charters [in New Orleans] were not seen as a threat to existing public schools, because those schools had already been wiped out, and schools arose to meet demand as the city recovered.

“The more that schools can specialize in the needs of unique subsets of children and families and the more they are able and required to compete with one another, the better it is for families,” McCluskey said. “They can more easily get the education best for their unique children, and they don’t have to rely on a glacial political process to make changes to schools that aren’t working.”

Charters ‘Accountable to Parents’

Duplessis says charter schools are held to a higher standard than traditional public schools.

“Louisiana’s charter schools are accountable to parents and taxpayers,” Duplessis said. “Charter schools are held to high academic, financial, and organizational standards. The state’s letter-grade system is transparent and allows parents to know how each school is performing. If a charter school’s performance is consistently low, it is shut down.”

Charters operate in a manner similar to private-sector businesses, Duplessis says.

“Goverment and administration is under the jurisdiction of the Orleans Parish School Board,” Duplessis said. “At the same time, each school has an autonomous board in place that has a say in each school’s curriculum, personnel, and budgeting. Charter schools’ hiring decisions are made at the school level. Teachers and principals choose to work in their school rather than being assigned by a school district. Charter school workers consider the same employment factors as those in the private sector, including salary, curriculum, school leadership, and location.”

‘Parents Were Demanding Change’

Duplessis says charters are making parents’ educational wishes come true.

“Unfortunately, this community had to go through the experience of a failed public school system,” Duplessis said. “When I was elected to the state Senate in 2004, parents were demanding changes to a system that was corrupt, disorganized, and dysfunctional. We were beginning to enact meaningful education reform when New Orleans and Louisiana were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. While Hurricane Katrina accelerated the reform movement, I believe this transformation would have occurred, although not as quickly. Parents were demanding change, as was the business community. There was a realization that the state’s economy would not grow without meaningful education reform.”

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

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—Sandra L. Stotzky, Professor Emerita of Education Reform, University of Arkansas; former Senior Advisor, Massachusetts Department of Education
Voucher Bill Proposed in Tennessee

Dunn sponsored House Bill 1049 in 2016, which would have granted private school scholarships to students in the state’s lowest-performing schools. The legislation ultimately stalled in the House.

Regarding the proposed voucher bill for 2017, Dunn told The Tennessean in November 2016, “We won’t know until we start moving the bill, but it is encouraging that people are starting to put the kids before the bureaucracy.”

Califonia Gives School Districts More Power to Teach Bilingual Education

By Kenneth Artz

California public school districts will have more power to offer bilingual education when the California Non-English Languages Allowed in Public Education Act takes effect in July 2017.

The act, known as Proposition 58, gained approval from 73 percent of voters in the November 2016 election. Proposition 58 repeals a portion of Proposition 227, an initiative approved by 61 percent of voters in 1998 mandating students take English-only classes unless parents sign a waiver requesting their children be placed in non-English classes.

Proposition 58 will go into effect in July 2017 and will allow public schools to offer students bilingual classes without explicit permission from their parents.

‘Proposition 227 Worked’

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says Proposition 58 will not improve newcomers’ English skills.

‘Proposition 227 worked,’ Sand said. ‘Parents were happy their kids were learning the language of the country they lived in quicker than before. Dual-language programs, in which most of the instruction is in Spanish, were never outlawed by Proposition 227. That initiative asked parents who wanted to place their children in non-English classes to sign an annual waiver. Turns out the overwhelming majority of parents wanted their children taught in English.’

Jonathan Butcher, The Goldwater Institute’s education director, says families deserve choice.

“This [proposition] doesn’t answer the question of what is the best method to help [English Language Learner] students, but lawmakers must keep the importance of giving parents and children more than one learning option front and center,” Butcher said.

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

Explaining School Choice

Dunn says when encouraging people to support school choice, he points out how the concept applies in other areas of life.

“When I go and talk to a group like a Rotary Club, I’ll get them going along with me by starting out asking, ‘What if there was a bill that said for higher education, we’re going to get bureaucrats to draw circles on a map?’” Dunn said. “If you’re from Knoxville, you have to go to the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. If you’re from Chattanooga, you have to go to the University of Chattanooga. In Rome County, you have to go to Rome County Community College. Everyone says that’s just the dumbest idea, and they go down the list of why it doesn’t work that well.”

Unleashing Academic Potential

Hannah Cox, outreach coordinator at Tennessee’s Beacon Center, says education choice would benefit all children in the state.

“In Tennessee, school choice is only an option for families with students receiving a special-needs education,” Cox said. “While this is an important first step, thousands of students across our state are still waiting for the opportunity to unleash their academic potential. We believe that parents should have the power to determine the best educational path for their child, and we will continue to support school choice policies in our state.”

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erb@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
Virginia School District Removes Classic Literature from Classrooms

By Ashley Bateman

A group of community members gathered to protest a Virginia school district’s decision to remove two classic novels from a public school’s classrooms.

Accomack County Public Schools Superintendent Chris Holland banned *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in November 2016, following a parent’s complaint the books contain “racial slurs” and “offensive wording.”

Dozens of Accomack County community members, including parents and students, protested the books’ suspension outside the Accomack courthouse in December 2016. The district appointed a committee to decide whether the books should be permanently banned. The Accomack School Board voted in December to reverse the temporary ban of the books and allow their immediate return to school classrooms and libraries.

Educators ‘Narrowly Acculturated’

Martin Cothran, author of Memoria Press’ *Traditional Logic, Material Logic,* and *Classical Rhetoric* books for students, says today’s educators don’t understand students’ need for a diverse education.

“Between video games and text messaging, today’s young people, literally and figuratively, don’t get out much,” Cothran said. “In this cultural context, it is easy to see why a modern student would be in greater need of books that take them outside the narrow, culturally illiterate world he inhabits. Unfortunately, the people who now run most schools were products of the first culturally illiterate generation—roughly the Generation Xers. They, too, are narrowly acculturated and hence cannot even understand the benefits of broad cultural literacy.

“The fact that [this censorship] happened in the first place is just one more sign that the people who tout ‘diversity’ in our culture not only don’t really believe in what they say, but, because of the narrow cultural blinders they have placed on themselves, they can’t even understand what the word really means,” Cothran said.

Importance of Guided Discussions

Christian Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, served on the government school board in Fairfax County, another Virginia school system, for eight years. Braunlich says it makes sense to accompany controversial books with guided discussion.

“We had a ton of book challenges from people who felt like books in the school libraries were inappropriately placed, mostly due to sexual references,” Braunlich said. “I think there’s a qualitative difference between a book that is in a library and a book that is in a classroom, where discussion is guided. One [of the banned texts] was *Huckleberry Finn.* It’s one thing to use that in a classroom where the conversation is guided, another in a high school library where anyone can run assumptions about the appropriateness of the language. It ought to be used in appropriate English literature classes in guided discussions.”

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

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DOE Spends $103 Million More on ‘Investing in Innovation’ Competition

By Michael McGrady

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) will grant $103 million to 15 organizations as part of its Investing in Innovation (i3) competition.

Organizations must obtain matching private-sector funds in order to receive the government grants.

“A signature program of the Obama Administration, i3 has galvanized educators across the country to develop, build out, and apply research on practices that address the most persistent challenges in education,” DOE’s website states. “The Department launched the first i3 competition in 2010 as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Through the seven i3 grant competitions, the Department has received more than 5,000 i3 applications and, if this year’s potential grantees successfully secure their matching private sector funds, it will have funded 172 of them at more than $1.4 billion, in addition to more than $260 million in private sector funding.”

DOE announced in November 2016 the 15 projects in the final i3 cohort. In December 2016, DOE announced the launch of the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant competition for 2017. EIR is meant to “continue i3’s tiered-evidence approach to generating and building upon innovative, locally-driven practices that improve outcomes for students,” said DOE on its website.

Calls for Elimination

Terry Stoops, director of research and education studies at the John Locke Foundation, says programs such as i3 have proven to be ineffective.

“Ironically, throwing taxpayer dollars at public schools in the name of innovation will simply reinforce the status quo,” Stoops said. “There’s little evidence that federal spending on programs does much to increase student achievement or really move the needle on improving public education. Keeping in mind that we have a $4 trillion federal budget, $103 million is a relatively trivial amount. And the fact that it is part of a larger problem of out-of-control spending and massive budget deficit, it seems to me that if we’re looking to reduce the federal budget, eliminating these types of programs is a good way to do so.”

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

States Prepare Plans for Incorporating Final School Accountability Regulations

By Michael McGrady

In the waning days of the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) released final regulations on school accountability, state plans, and data-reporting.

States are developing plans to incorporate the regulations ahead of two 2017 submission dates, one in April and the other in September.

President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2015, reauthorizing the federal government’s oversight of public education. DOE released draft accountability rules in May 2016 and received more than 20,000 public comments.

The final regulations, posted by DOE to the Federal Register on November 29, 2016, “incorporate the valuable feedback that the Department received through the public comment process, while maintaining the focus on providing states with new flexibility to ensure that every child gets a high-quality and well-rounded education, and enhancing equity and preserving critical civil rights protections for all students,” the agency’s website reports.

DOE announced some major provisions in November, including giving states “flexibility to develop innovative approaches tailored to their individual needs” and recognizing “the critical role of stakeholders, including parents, students, educators, principals, and other school leaders, in supporting the development and implementation of school improvement activities.”

States must “engage in timely and meaningful consultation with an array of stakeholders” and submit draft plans by two submission dates—April 3, 2017 or September 18, 2017. They have until the end of the 2018–19 school year “to identify schools for comprehensive and additional targeted support and improvement.”

‘A More Federalist Approach’

Lisa Snell, director of education and child welfare studies at the Reason Foundation, says the new rules give more power to the states.

“It really takes a more federalist approach,” Snell said. “This allows each to state the accountability benchmarks and lets them determine who the low-performing schools are. It is a huge improvement to [the draft rules]. It has a lot more flexibility, and, again, it is a return to federalism.”

‘More Flexibility’

Sarah McKenzie, executive director of the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas, says the final rules take into account how students want to be tested.

“This really gave states and districts more flexibility in how they measure their achievement,” McKenzie said. “One of the important changes in these final regulations was, for example, that high schools can use locally selected national high school tests instead of state-developed tests. They can use the ACT or the SAT as a part of meeting the requirements of the federal law. It’s giving states an opportunity to customize their assessment programs to meet the needs of the students they are serving.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Far fewer teenagers in the United States are using drugs and alcohol than a year ago, a new national survey has found.

“Teenagers’ use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco declined significantly in 2016 [to] rates that are at their lowest since the 1990s,” the University of Michigan (UM) stated in a press release in December 2016 announcing the results of the 42nd annual “Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of the Life-Styles and Values of Youth” survey.

“Overall, the proportion of secondary school students in the country who used any illicit drug in the prior year fell significantly between 2015 and 2016,” the release stated. “The decline in narcotic use is particularly significant between 2015 and 2016,” the release said. “Students in grades 8, 10, and 12 are surveyed.”

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‘Definitely Not Surprised’

Renee Johnson, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, says media reports and anecdotal observations tend to exaggerate teen drug use.

“I was definitely not surprised,” Johnson said. “Adults tend to overstate youth drug use and imagine that young people are using ‘more than ever.’ The scientific data has been telling us this for years, and it’s important to examine trends closely, rather than make assumptions. In a paper I published in 2015, I noted that use of nearly all substances was down since 1999.”

Sheryl Ryan, who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Substance Use and Prevention, says the trend may not last.

“One of the things we have seen that is a little concerning is on some of the surveys, we’ve seen that teenagers’ perception that drug use—whether you talk about alcohol, marijuana, or other illicit substances—their perception of the harm of those substances has decreased,” Ryan said. “We may be seeing a slowing of this declining trend, and when perceptions change, sometimes it takes a little while for us to see changes in behavior.”

‘Major Change in Social Norms’

Johnson says teens may be changing their behaviors to keep up with societal trends.

“For cigarette smoking, we’ve had a major change in social norms,” Johnson said. “Even young people recognize the harms involved with cigarette smoking. This has resulted in the lowest cigarette smoking rates in decades.”

Young Adults ‘at Incredible Risk’

Johnson says it’s important to note that many of them have had finding jobs, the financial pressures to pay off student loans, so young people find themselves burdened more by debt,” Johnson said. “Those are economic trends I think could potentially have an impact on the availability of funds to go out and purchase substances. If that’s the case, we should see declining rates in our young adults, but we’re not seeing that, so I’m not sure: Is it because they don’t have to pay for rent they can use their money to pay for substances?

“It’s possible that with young people who are living at home, unable to get a job, don’t have a sense of their future, are not financially secure, there could be some underlying negative effect or emotional distress that has them turning to substances for the euphoric numbing effect,” Johnson said.

Family Influence

Johnson says a strong family dynamic is key to continuing the decline in the use of illicit substances.

“A strong family relationship helps young people be more emotionally strong,” Johnson said. “Often, with substance use, the problem is not the mere use of a substance, but rather the use of substances in concert with emotional or psychological distress. Substance use among adolescents in families characterized by violence and emotional problems is more likely to lead to problematic use.”

Ryan says parents should learn about substance use and set a good example for their children.

“Familial factors are very, very important,” Ryan said. “Kids learn from the people around them.”

Ryan says parents should also be on the lookout for other addictive behaviors.

“There are a number of different types of addictive behaviors,” Ryan said. “Substance use is one of them, but we also have addictive behaviors that relate to eating, overeating, and now there’s some new data coming up to look at the addictive behavior related to social media use and video gaming use. So, sometimes I worry, are we seeing a change in our rate of substance abuse in our young people but what’s happening is that’s being replaced with other addictive behaviors?”

By Tori Hart

“I was definitely not surprised. Adults tend to overstate youth drug use and imagine that young people are using ‘more than ever.’ The scientific data has been telling us this for years, and it’s important to examine trends closely, rather than make assumptions.”

RENEE JOHNSON
BLOOMBERG SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

LEARN MORE

At College of the Ozarks, Students Work Off Tuition Debt

By Jane S. Shaw

One Midwestern college is fighting off the specter of lifelong debt for its students by providing them the opportunity to work in return for tuition.

College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Missouri is nicknamed “Hard Work U.” All students receive tuition aid, and no student has to pay for tuition if he or she cannot afford it.

Earning Their Way

Those attending College of the Ozarks can receive federal and state support such as Pell grants, but they are not allowed to take out federal loans. They are expected to work at the college 15 hours a week, plus two 40-hour weeks per year when school is not in session. What they earn is applied to the $18,700 in tuition (for the academic session). What they earn is applied to the $18,700 in tuition (for the academic session). The school covers any remaining tuition charges.

The students are not directly paying for their tuition under the college's plan. Instead, they commit themselves to work on campus in return for scholarship support. Donors around the country finance the scholarships.

Students are responsible for room and board, $7,100 in 2017–18. Approximately 800 students who can't cover room and board spend the summer working at the school to raise the funds. Other students who want to earn money for their meals and lodging can rent rooms at the college during the summer and work in nearby towns, such as Branson, Missouri.

Addressing a Need

Originally founded as a high school in 1906, the college has always had a mission of providing education for low-income students from the Ozarks, a hilly region in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. More than 80 percent of the 1,440-person student body comes from the Ozarks.

Marci Linson, vice president of patriotic activities and dean of admissions, says the college grew because education opportunities in the region were limited.

“We are a Christian school started by a Presbyterian missionary who saw that there was a need for education beyond what was available in public schools then,” Linson said. “At that time, high school was ‘advanced’ education, but as time progressed, the school became a junior college, and then the first four-year class graduated in 1967.”

Promoting Self-Responsibility

The college promotes Christian values and patriotism and tries to create habits that will serve graduates well throughout their lives, Linson says.

“If you grabbed a random group of students out of a class, you would find their clothes neat and clean and in good repair, no facial piercings or tattoos, and none would look as if they had just crawled out of bed,” Linson said.

“You can’t say that about all campuses today.”

Linson says the school conducts all its operations on principles of self-responsibility. For example, it builds new buildings only when it has cash in hand.

The college’s distinctive philosophy enables it to obtain financial support from sympathetic donors around the country who want to support schools that provide opportunities for low-income students. Its endowment was $442.3 million in 2015, putting it in a league with schools such as St. Olaf College in Minnesota ($455.5 million in 2015) and Creighton University in Nebraska ($449.4 million in 2015).

Pros and Cons

Mark Kantrowitz, president of MK Consulting and author of more than 100 student financial aid policy analysis papers, says Ozark’s approach is not “scalable” for most private colleges.

“Two months of full-time work yields $2,000 to $4,000, hardly enough to replace loans,” Kantrowitz said. “So, realistically, these ‘work colleges’ have generous alumni who contribute enough money that the current students do not have to borrow. That’s similar to the six-dozen colleges with generous ‘no loans’ financial aid policies.”

Joseph Bast, president and CEO of The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says he is impressed by the college’s work requirement.

“I am certainly partial to a school that requires students to work for their tuition, based on my own college experience,” Bast said. “Having to work for tuition, I put a high value on every single course I took at the University of Chicago. I did all the required readings, and more, and because I took only two courses a quarter, I had time to do so and the mental ‘bandwidth’ to do deep dives into the subject matter.

“It’s an experience I believe nearly all college students would benefit from, though of course I wouldn’t impose my preference on anyone,” Bast said.
Students and Faculty Push for ‘Sanctuary’ Campuses

Faculty and students at nearly 200 colleges and universities have petitioned their administrations to make their schools “sanctuaries” to prevent the deportation of students who are illegal immigrants.

Some college presidents have agreed. John Kroger, president of Reed College, announced his school will be a sanctuary college.

“As a sanctuary college, Reed will not assist Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the investigation of the immigration status of our students, staff, or faculty absent a direct court order,” Kroger said in a statement.

Refusing to Cooperate

Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Portland State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and a handful of other schools have likewise declared themselves to be sanctuary campuses.

While not officially declaring the University of California (UC) system a sanctuary, Chancellor Janet Napolitano stated, “UC will act upon its deeply held conviction that all members of our community have the right to work, study, and live safely and without fear at all UC locations.”

The university has laid out on its website policies to protect undocumented students, such as refusing to release confidential student records “without a judicial warrant,” forbidding campus police to “undertake joint efforts with local, state, or federal law enforcement agencies to investigate, detain or arrest individuals for violation of federal immigration law.”

More than 580 college presidents have asked the federal government to continue a policy allowing illegals who were brought to the United States at a young age to attend college.

About 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school in the United States each year, the College Board estimates. The Pew Research Center estimates the total number of illegal immigrants in the United States as 11.1 million.

Political History

The sanctuary campus activity, which included student protests in November, followed the election of President Donald Trump, who campaigned on a promise to deport illegal immigrants.

The sanctuary campus issue dates back at least to 2012, when President Barack Obama issued an executive order called the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, permitting young illegals to attend college. He did so after Congress declined to enact a law that would have done the same and more, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, commonly called the “DREAM Act.” That law would have provided illegals with a path to citizenship through education.

The campus movement is also an echo of the “sanctuary cities” movement, which aims at preventing federal officials from deporting illegal immigrants from certain cities.

Predicts Little Effect

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, says he doubts the push for sanctuary campuses will have “real consequences,” in contrast to sanctuary cities, which affect intergovernmental relations.

“Sanctuary cities limit the extent to which their police departments can cooperate with federal immigration authorities, usually restricting such cooperation to handing over alleged violent or property offenders to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency,” Nowrasteh said. “I’ve never heard of campus police cooperating with ICE before, so there’s not an ability for the campus to create a sanctuary.”

‘Kneejerk Ideological Posturing’

Thomas Cushman, a professor of sociology and director of The Freedom Project at Wellesley College, says there is little value even in faculty petitions in favor of sanctuary campus policies.

“If universities declare themselves sanctuaries, they risk calling attention to a problem they are trying to help students who might be in danger of deportation. I often say this virtue signaling is good for the virtue signalers but not necessarily for the people they are trying to help.

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“I call this ‘virtue signaling,’” Cushman said. “Mostly irrelevant academe shows that they have the correct attitude and that they are ‘good people.’ They think little about the legal ramifications or the consequences for students who might be in danger of deportation. I often say this virtue signaling is good for the virtue signalers but not necessarily for the people they are trying to help.

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“I’m not against trying to help them, but the sanctuary campus movement is useless in helping them.”

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Representative Duncan Hunter (R-CA) introduced the No Funding for Sanctuary Campuses Act in late December to define ‘sanctuary campus’ and create financial penalties for any ‘institutions of higher education that violate immigration laws.’ The bill, H.R. 6530, was co-sponsored by Representatives Tom McClintock (R-CA) and Lou Barletta (R-PA).

“It’s by no means unreasonable to expect the nation’s higher learning institutions to follow the law the same way we expect states and localities to abide by the law,” Hunter told the Washington Examiner in an interview published on Tuesday. ‘If a school wants federal money, an open declaration that it’s a sanctuary should disqualify it for federal support.

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Federal Student Loan Programs Will Cost Taxpayers at Least $108 Billion

By Jane S. Shaw

Federal programs to help individuals cope with their college loans will cost the nation’s taxpayers at least $108 billion during the next few years, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports.

The $108 billion figure doesn’t include $39 billion in losses through loan discharges due to death or disability, and it applies only to loans made by the end of fiscal year 2017.

Taxpayers on Hook

Total student loan debt is now more than $1.2 trillion and exceeds credit card debt. The GAO reports the federal government holds $912 million of that debt. The rest is held by private companies, including those that issued loans before the federal government replaced its loan-guarantee program with direct loans.

The GAO report—provided to Congress in November at the request of U.S. Sen. Michael Enzi (R-WY), chairman of the Senate Budget Committee—examines the costs of income-driven repayment (IDR) plans and loan forgiveness programs. The report, titled “Education Needs to Improve Its Income-Driven Repayment Plan Budget Estimates,” criticizes the U.S. Department of Education for underestimating those costs.

“Education’s approach to estimating IDR plan costs has numerous weaknesses that may result in unreliable budget estimates,” writes the GAO. The report also states the estimates are at odds with the latest findings by the National Center for Education Statistics, which projects the number of IDR plan participants will grow by 140 percent in the next three years.

Varying Plans

Depending on the plan, graduates can reduce their payments to between 10 and 20 percent of their discretionary income. (Discretionary income is the amount of a graduate’s income above 150 percent of the poverty level.) After 20 or 25 years, the loan is forgiven if it is not paid. By that time, however, some graduates will have paid more than if they had not taken a repayment plan, because interest will still accrue.

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Loan (PSLF) plan allows students who work in government or nonprofit organizations to obtain forgiveness of their loans after 10 years. An example the GAO gives is a graduate owing $60,000 who, under the standard repayment plan, would pay $82,000 over 10 years ($22,000 in interest). An income-repayment plan plus the forgiveness program could reduce that figure to $46,684.

Participation in these programs has been growing rapidly. As recently as June 2013, just 10 percent of graduates with federal loans were using IDRs. In June 2016, the proportion had more than doubled to 24 percent, or 5.3 million borrowers.

‘Not at All Surprising’

Victor Brown, a former professor and administrator at Ursinus College and now an independent analyst of higher education, says the current trends are to be expected given the significant benefits the programs provide.

“It is not at all surprising that we have seen a huge migration of student loans into the income-driven student loan program offered by the federal government, with the number of participants growing 140 percent in just three years,” Brown said. “Basic economics suggests that people will always act in their economic self-interest, and the ability to soften repayment terms at the government’s expense while waiting for the loan forgiveness that will come in 10 years with the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, with qualifying public service loosely defined, is just too good a deal for student borrowers to pass up.

“Did the Department of Education really fail to see this coming?” Brown said. “I don’t think so. These twin programs are basically designed to give students as close as possible the free college education that the left has always wanted.”

Colleges ‘Gaming the System’

Thomas Lindsay, director of the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, says the schools may be complicit, too. He says, for example, Georgetown Law School has been shown to be gaming the student-loan system to allow it to raise tuitions at the taxpayers’ expense. Georgetown counsels its law students who go on to work for the government or a nonprofit entity on how to avoid tens of thousands of dollars of student-loan debt.

Lindsay says federal government involvement in higher education funding has been bad for students and taxpayers alike.

“I think a better way would be to get the feds out of the student-loan business,” Lindsay said. “Barring that, we should follow Bill Bennett’s [education secretary under President Ronald Reagan] advice and give schools some ‘skin in the game’—that is, make schools pay a percentage of the losses for each student of theirs who defaults on a loan. We also should simplify the burdensome, labyrinthine financial aid system.”

THOMAS LINDSAY
DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

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

LEARN MORE

Homeschool Association Sues New York City Over Mistreatment

By Alexandra Hudson

The Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) has filed a civil rights lawsuit against New York City public schools “over their systematic mistreatment of homeschooling families.”

The lawsuit follows HSLDA’s involvement in a case in which the city sent Child Protective Services (CPS) to a homeschooling mother’s home after she legally withdrew her son from public school.

In 2016, Tanya Acevedo removed her son from a New York City public school to homeschool him. HSLDA reports on its website Acevedo “had done everything right—filing paperwork, carefully following all the rules of New York City.” Shortly thereafter, a CPS agent visited her in her home and told her she had been reported for “educational neglect” resulting from her son’s absence from school. Acevedo enlisted the help of an HSLDA attorney, who persuaded the case worker to close the investigation.

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

‘The Last Straw’

Jim Mason, HSLDA vice president of litigation, says Acevedo’s case is far from the first instance of New York City public schools harassing homeschoolers.

“What happened to Tanya was the last straw,” Mason said. “Before this, there had been a string of what seemed to be bureaucratic oversights. People would fail to receive responses to their requests or letters. But this invasion of Tanya’s privacy was beyond the pale.”

‘Entirely Contrary to the Law’

In New York State, which has some of the oldest homeschooling laws in the country, a parent who withdraws a child from school has 14 days to inform the district of the decision.

Mason says in the case of the Acevedo family, the New York public school system ignored the law.

“We discovered that New York public schools believe that you need to have their permission to withdraw your student from their system and begin homeschooling,” Mason said. “That’s entirely contrary to the law. Tanya both withdrew her child and gave the district notice on the same day. Everyone was on the same page. They have no cause to investigate you or even mark your child absent. The district’s actions show that they are completely misreading the law.”

‘It’s Private Schooling’

Brian D. Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, says governments should give homeschooling as much respect as other educational alternatives.

“It’s private schooling,” Ray said. “They don’t take public money, and the academic research shows that students schooled at home do the same, if not better, academically, socially, and emotionally than their counterparts at public schools.”

Historically, homeschooling is the norm and government schools the exception, Ray says.

“People forget that being schooled at home was the norm for most of human history,” Ray said. “It’s important to remember that institutionalized schooling with educational professionals didn’t become the norm until about 1900. Along comes back home education, revived in the 1980s, and people don’t know what to make of it. It can and does work.”

Alexandra Hudson (alexandraohudson@gmail.com) writes from Washington, DC.
Kentucky Board of Education Issues Charter School Guidelines

By Jenni White

Kentucky is one of seven states that do not allow charter schools, but the state’s board of education recently approved a set of charter school guidelines, signaling its anti-choice policy may change soon.

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately run schools. In November 2016, the Kentucky Board of Education met for a study session to learn about charters. In December, the 12-member board approved a list of recommendations for policymakers considering charter legislation in the future.

The board said it should have final authority in approving and overseeing charter schools, which it said should be run by nonsectarian nonprofit organizations. Other recommendations include certifying teachers by Kentucky’s Education Professional Standards Board and granting charters access to state funding for facilities.

A Political Issue

Kentucky’s electorate voted largely in favor of Donald Trump in November, which helped Republicans earn significant victories for GOP legislative candidates across the state. Previously controlled by Democrats, Kentucky’s House emerged from the 2016 general election cycle firmly under Republican control, 64 seats to 36 for Democrats.

Dick Innes, an education analyst at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy, says with a Republican governor, a significant victory for GOP legislative favor of Donald Trump in November, Kentucky’s electorate voted largely in favor of charter school legislation, and for the first time ever, it will get a full and open discussion in the Kentucky Legislature,” Innes said.

Innes says he’s happy with the guidelines he and other board members approved for legislators.

“I had personal disagreements with a few items on the list, but I was pleased the board was able to mostly agree to advance a set of principles that could guide strong legislation when the General Assembly takes up the issue in January,” Houchens said.

“My experiences have taught me that no school, no matter how good, can meet the needs of every single child, and so parents should have options,” Houchens said. “Choice won’t solve every problem in the education system, but it’s one tool that can bring positive consequences for many children, one that I heartily support.”

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

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Preserving the Literature of Liberty

The Michael Parry Mazur Memorial Library is one of the country’s best libraries devoted to freedom and limited government, with hard-to-find books on free-market environmentalism, economics, health care, and much more. Censors can’t hide or delete physical books on physical shelves in a building open to the public, free of charge, and conveniently located.

The library is located at The Heartland Institute, 3939 North Wilke Road, Arlington Heights, Illinois. Call 312/377-4000 to schedule an appointment or to donate books. Visit heartland.org/library for more information and an online book catalog.
The Basis of American Exceptionalism Is True Freedom and Individual Liberty

By Jay Lehr, Ph.D.

When I was finishing my Ph.D. studies, I heard about an amazing history teacher who welcomed grad students in other departments to audit his course for pure enjoyment. I took advantage of his offer and audited his Revolutionary War course. He sat on the edge of his desk and hypnotized the class into joining him centuries before on the ground and in the woods and houses where the tale was unfolding.

He had to bring us out of our trance and back to the classroom at the end of the period so we students could begrudgingly move on to another class. Passing tests was a cinch, as no real memorization was required: We had been there! The Rush Revere series of history books by Rush Limbaugh, written with help from his wife and friends, recreates that very same learning experience I enjoyed so many years ago.

Discovering Exceptionalism

Main character Rush Revere is a substitute history teacher for a middle school who chooses students to accompany him and his talking horse, aptly named Liberty, as they time-travel through history.

In Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims, the first of the five books in the series, Rush and students Tommy and Freedom join a shipload of brave families on the Mayflower in 1620. The reader experiences exactly what they did on that rough and dangerous ocean crossing. The students ask the pilgrims why they left and what they expect in the New World. The time travelers then join the pilgrims at the very first Thanksgiving, once their small community had been established after several long and arduous months. The seeds of a new nation have been planted.

In the second book, Rush Revere and the First Patriots, the reader experiences firsthand interviews with the likes of Benjamin Franklin, King George III, and Patrick Henry, who discuss the important issues of the period, including the Stamp Act, Townsend Acts, and Quartering Act of 1765. Among the “interviews” conducted in England and the American colonies, Limbaugh manages to insert marvelous humor and teenage tomfoolery that make the history a truly enjoyable, exciting, and fun read for those of any age.

Adventure and Intrigue

On the adventure with Patrick Henry, Rush Revere takes along a young African-American student named Cam. He is a new friend of Tommy, who learned to duel with a sword from Myles Standish in the first book. Cam is taken for a slave by three Redcoats and arrested. Between Tommy dueling with one Redcoat, Liberty the talking horse kicking another, and a crowd of colonists outnumbering the enemy to rescue Cam, an amazing adventure plays out.

The reader also witnesses the important events at the Boston Tea Party, joining Revere and his students aboard the Dartmouth to empty 342 crates of tea into Boston Harbor.

First Patriots includes color portraits of most of the historical characters and facsimiles of the official documents that were the subject of debate leading up to the Revolutionary War.

When I met George Washington on the pages of the book, I literally got goosebumps. It felt as though I was there.

For History Lovers of All Ages

Although the target audience is schoolchildren of all reading levels, I challenge any history-loving adult not to find these books exciting.

Unfortunately, some school systems have shunned these books, evidently fearing their students will be exposed to Limbaugh’s political ideas.

The books do not preach politics at all. Instead, they explain that American exceptionalism and greatness do not mean there is something uniquely different about Americans as human beings, but rather that America is different from other nations because it was founded on a fundamental respect for true freedom and individual liberty.

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


“Although the target audience is schoolchildren of all reading levels, I challenge any history-loving adult not to find these books exciting.”

JAY LEHR, PH.D.
Commentary

Ending the Department of Education: A Grand Idea

Continued from page 1

Starting with Intermediate Steps

There are also some excellent intermediate steps Congress and the Trump administration could take. If one changed the conditions of the federal education money that goes to states, localities, and schools, there could be an immediate influence.

The first thing to understand is human beings are made to learn, and they desire to do it naturally. This means the job of teachers, like the job of parents, is to help children learn, not to make them or cause them to learn. Good schools are built around this fact. It also means authority over the schools can best be exercised by those who are closest to the students. What if the federal government required states to pass charter laws that delegated wide latitude and real authority to schools, not to the Department of Education or to state departments of education or to school districts? What if it relied, not upon high-stakes centralized testing as in Common Core, but in the simple fact parents and teachers are much more likely to care for students than strangers, even if those strangers are highly trained federal bureaucrats? The chairman of our education program at Hillsdale College has written a series of standards that states might adopt for K–12 education. For each grade, they take up about half a page. If a child can do the things on that half a page, the child has learned a lot. Here is a way for higher levels of government to be sure that any money they give to lower levels is well-spent in education. It involves hardly any management of details. That is the constitutional model, the model that comes from our nation’s founding.

Liberalizing the System

To follow this practice would liberalize the system. It would mean there would be plenty of bad charter schools, just as there are plenty of bad schools now. But it would also mean there would be a proliferation of good ones. Hillsdale College has helped to found 16 charter schools, with more coming, and they are all doing well. Everybody wears a uniform and signs an honor code. Everybody—indeed everybody in kindergarten—learns to read. Everybody studies mathematics at least through pre-calculus. Everybody learns Latin, history, literature, philosophy, physics, biology, and chemistry. Everybody is admitted by a lottery system. For the inner-city schools, care is taken to advertise only in the immediate area, to make the opportunity available to the children who live in poor areas. The students in these schools make on the average excellent scores on the ubiquitous state standardized tests, and they do this without class time or curriculum set aside to prepare for those tests. They do very well even in relation to the legions of public schools that now take months to cram only for those tests, which means the students know little more than what is on those tests, and all the adults get raises and promotions if the students do well. That’s why there have been spectacular instances of cheating (by teachers and school administrators!) on those tests.

The kind of education going on in Hillsdale’s charter schools is not something that could be advanced nationally by a federal mandate. Key to the success of these schools is that the school leaders, the parents, and the teachers are all glad to be there and all help willingly to make it work. In other words, they are all volunteers. It is a partnership. Partnerships are cooperative, not imperative. If you force people who are unwilling to do something, they will not do it very well, which is the encapsulation of human freedom.

Hopeful for Many Reasons

The polls tell us the American people today live in fear of the government. Now they have elected someone new, and we will soon know if he is good. It is a simple fact that he has never done anything like this before, and very great people have found such things difficult. But I would be hopeful for many reasons.

One of the main ones is Trump wrote this on January 16, 2016: “The United States of America is a land of laws, and Americans value the rule of law above all. Why, then, has our Congress allowed the president and the executive branch to take on near-dictatorial power? … What is needed in Washington is a president who will rein in the executive branch and work with Congress to make sure the legislative branch does its job.”

President Donald Trump has said that these are his purposes. Pray that he achieves them.

Larry P. Arnn (think@heartland.org) is the 12th president of Hillsdale College. Article reprinted with permission from Imprimis, a publication of Hillsdale College.

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