Congressional Republicans Introduce School Choice Bills

Several bills to increase school choice are now under consideration in Congress.

During his campaign, President Donald Trump proposed a $20 billion voucher program for low-income students. During his address to Congress in February, Trump said, “Education is the civil rights issue of our time. I am calling upon members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious, or home school that is right for them.”

In line with Trump’s pledge to support school choice, congressional Republicans introduced and reintroduced several school choice bills during School Choice Week at the end of January.

By Ashley Bateman

NH Senate Approves Universal ESA Bill

By Teresa Mull

The New Hampshire Senate voted to approve a bill that would establish a universal education savings account (ESA) program in the state. ESAs grant parents access to all or a portion of the money allocated for their child’s public school education, to spend on approved educational alternatives such as private school tuition, learning therapies, homeschooling textbooks, and tutoring.

New Hampshire currently has one school choice program, a tax-credit scholarship program for low-income families to use for private and homeschooling expenses. New Hampshire also has a law in place allowing school boards in small towns that do not offer public education for every grade level...
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Calif. Teachers Sue to End Mandatory Union Fees

By Kenneth Arzt

A group of public school teachers in California is suing the districts that employ them and one of the state’s teachers unions for forcing nonmembers to pay union fees.

The Center for Individual Rights (CIR) filed Yohn v. California Teachers Association (CTU) on behalf of eight teachers in federal court in February. The plaintiffs allege the mandatory union fees imposed on them on the union’s behalf violate their First Amendment rights.

“The State of California and its public school districts, in cooperation with the California Teachers Association and the other named Defendants, maintain an agency-shop regime that injures public-school teachers (including Plaintiffs) by forcing them to make financial contributions to teachers’ unions as a condition of public employment,” the plaintiffs stated in the lawsuit complaint.

“California’s agency-shop arrangement violates Plaintiffs’ First Amendment rights in two distinct ways,” the plaintiffs said. “First, it violates Plaintiffs’ rights of free speech and association by forcing them to contribute to so-called chargeable union expenditures that are germane to collective bargaining, even though those contributions provide economic support to nonchargeable union activities and even though many of the chargeable expenditures and collective-bargaining activities are contrary to Plaintiffs’ political beliefs and personal interests.

“Second, the agency shop arrangement violates Plaintiffs’ rights of free speech and association by forcing them to undergo an opt-out process each year to avoid contributing to political and ideological expenditures that Defendant Unions concede are not germane to collective bargaining,” said the plaintiffs.

Lawsuit Déjà Vu

CIR filed Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association, a nearly identical suit, in 2016 on behalf of California teacher Rebecca Friedrichs. In March 2016, after the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a 4-4 ruling. The lower court’s ruling remained in effect, and public employees have been compelled to pay union agency shop dues even if they do not belong to the union.

‘Not All Teachers Benefit’

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says the work of unions is not always in the best interest of every teacher.

“Maybe a teacher would rather not have the union negotiate their contract. Why should they be forced to do so? Not all teachers benefit from collective bargaining, which leads to wage compression, where mediocre teachers are overpaid and great teachers are underpaid.”

LARRY SAND

PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA TEACHERS EMPOWERMENT NETWORK

‘Bullied, Shunned, and Silenced’

Friedrichs says teachers’ well-being is on the line with this case.

“The union I’ve been forced to fund for almost three decades was voted in when I was a small child, and I was bullied, shunned, and silenced for daring to speak in opposition to any union policies or campaigns,” Friedrichs said. “If the unions prevail, workers will go on being silenced, harassed, and mistreated, and they’ll be forced to pay their oppressors for the abuse.”

Friedrichs says the teachers in this case want to regain their autonomy.

“They just want teachers to be able to decide for themselves, without fear or coercion, whether or not to join or fund a union,” Friedrichs said. “When teachers have that freedom, their voices and efforts on behalf of children will finally have the hope of restoration.”

Kenneth Arzt (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas.
New Hampshire Senate Approves Universal ESA Bill

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to negotiate for parents to send their children to nonreligious schools in neighboring towns, a practice called “town tuitioning.”

Senate Bill 193, introduced by state Sen. John Reagan (R-Deerfield), would establish Education Freedom Savings Accounts granting parents of public school and homeschool students access to 90 percent of their child’s state public education funding and up to 50 percent for kindergarten students.

SB 193 passed the Senate by a 13–10 vote in late February and is currently pending in the House.

Union Opposition

Reagan says the state’s teachers union poses an obstacle to his bill becoming law.

“We’ve been struggling with Democrat governors for 14 years, and we now have a Republican governor,” Reagan said. “We’re kind of hopeful that this will change things. What happens in the House is anybody’s guess. We have a House where we have a Republican majority, but we’re a volunteer legislature, and too many of the House members are also public employees, and they’re all union members or retired union members, so they tend to dominate.

Oregon Considers Universal ESA Bill

By Michael McGrady

The Oregon legislature is considering a bill that would establish education savings accounts (ESAs) for every child in the state.

ESAs grant parents access to all or a portion of the money allocated to their child’s public school education for use on education alternatives such as homeschooling textbooks, educational therapies, and private school tuition.

Senate Bill 437 would establish the Education Savings Program Fund, an ESA program in which parents of low-income or disabled children would have access to 100 percent of their child’s public school money. Parents who do not fall into either category would have access to 90 percent of those funds.

SB 437 was introduced in January and remains in committee.

ESAs grant parents access to all or a portion of the money allocated to their child’s public school education for use on education alternatives such as homeschooling textbooks, educational therapies, and private school tuition.

Jason Bedrick, director of policy at EdChoice, says ESAs incentivize education providers to improve.

“Education savings accounts empower families to tailor their child’s education to his or her learning needs,” Bedrick said. “ESAs have the potential to foster innovation. There is no one best way to provide an education. With greater flexibility in funding, education providers will have the freedom to try new ways of educating children beyond the traditional school model, and as parents select providers that are effective, those providers have an incentive to grow and others have an incentive to imitate them. Over time, successful innovations will spread and the entire system will evolve.”

Budget Impact Concerns

Steve Buckstein, a senior policy analyst and founder of the Oregon-based Cascade Policy Institute, which provided model language that legislative attorneys used to craft SB 437, says the bill needs some adjusting if it is to have any chance of being passed by the legislature.

“Politically, the bill is a nonstarter this year because it will have a $200 million fiscal impact on the state,” Buckstein said. “So, we are adjusting by filing an amendment that would dictate that special-needs and low-income students are to receive $6,000 instead of $8,781, and if all of the other kids were to receive $4,500 instead of 90 percent of the full amount, that would virtually break even for the state. In other words, there would be roughly no fiscal impact with this amendment.

“Higher ESA dollar amounts can result in a fiscal impact because the bill allows all students to access ESA accounts, including those currently outside the public education system,” Buckstein said. “We estimate that some 90 percent of current private school and homeschool students will apply for ESAs, while less than 10 percent of current public school students will apply for ESAs. Since the state currently only funds public school students, the impact on state funding can be large if the dollar amounts of ESA accounts are too high. We ran models at different dollar amounts and estimated the ‘break-even’ for the state and local districts combined occurs about the $6,000 level for disabled and low-income students and $4,500 for other students.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Strain-Japan School District, composed of a single K–8 school of 75 students in rural Franklin County, Missouri, is doing more with less, thanks to lots of collaboration among teachers, students, and parents.

Despite being in a small community and spending less per student than most Missouri schools, Strain-Japan’s test scores often rival those in some of the state’s richest districts.

“About 91 percent of Strain-Japan’s students who took state tests this year scored at least proficient in English, better than any other district around St. Louis,” the St. Louis Post Dispatch reported in January. “About 71 percent scored at least proficient in math.” The Post-Dispatch reported Strain-Japan spends half as much per student as neighboring schools, “while receiving a fraction of local tax revenue.” Strain-Japan also contends with the financial disadvantage of spending about a quarter of its operating budget on tuition for its graduates to attend nearby high schools.

**Value of Teacher Collaboration**

Anita Studdard, superintendent of the Strain-Japan School District, says emphases on teacher collaboration and teaching to the individual student have contributed greatly to the school’s success.

“The staff meets weekly for 30 to 45 minutes, and each teacher shares what they did with their assessments and how many of those students were successful, then asks for input and shares their new instructional strategy,” Studdard said. “Being a K–8 district, every teacher knows every student here, so they’re able to offer input on instructional strategies that worked for individual students. Because every student learns differently, once they incorporate that individual strategy into their lessons, we see that students start mastering more.”

**Community Is Very Supportive**

Studdard says the local community is very involved in the school.

“The community is very supportive of the district,” Studdard said. “It’s a very tight-knit community. When you have kindergarteners who start and go all the way through 8th grade together, they become so close with their classmates; it’s almost like siblings. There are so many volunteers who help with supplies and services in the classroom. If they have expertise in an area, they’re just very willing to volunteer their time.

‘[The Parent Teacher Organization] is a huge supporter,’ Studdard said. “They have one big fundraiser a year, and with that they have donated the money to get new tile put down in the hallways, [have redone] the computer lab, and they’re working now on some bathroom renovations. They have also been the ones who have purchased a lot of the Chromebooks for the students. They are willing to go above and beyond.”

**Tremendous Loyalty, Commitment**

Gary Funk, director of the Rural Schools Initiative, says community investment is important.

“What struck me about the Strain-Japan district isn’t that they were doing things for less money, as any rural community in the Missouri Ozarks would have to do, but that as a community, they had a long tradition of supporting public education to the best of their ability and had tremendous loyalty and commitment to the school,” Funk said.

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erob@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
Congressional Republicans Introduce School Choice Bills

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Array of Legislation
Rep. Luke Messer (R-IN) reintroduced in January House Resolution 716, the Enhancing Educational Opportunities for All Students Act. The legislation would allot $14.5 billion in Title I federal funds for low-income students to attend their choice of a public or private school. At press time, HR 716 remains under consideration by the House Ways and Means Committee.

Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) reintroduced in January Senate Bill 265, the Creating Hope and Opportunity for Individuals and Communities through Education Act (CHOICE Act). The CHOICE Act would create grants for special education school choice programs and award scholarships to children of military families, among other things. At press time, Scott’s bill remains pending before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Rep. Steve King (R-IA) introduced House Resolution 610, the Choices in Education Act of 2017, in January. “This bill repeals the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and limits the authority of the Department of Education (ED) such that ED is authorized only to award block grants to qualified states,” according to a description posted on Congress.gov.

Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY) introduced a one-sentence bill, House Resolution 899, in February that states, “The Department of Education shall terminate on December 31, 2018.” The bill has not, so far, moved out of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Homeschool Opposition
The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) opposes HR 610.

“HSLDA has repeatedly told our friends on Capitol Hill that if our members and many other homeschooling families know that government dollars will eventually result in government regulation,” HSLDA Federal Relations Director Will Estrada wrote on the organization’s website in February. “Although we are grateful for our friends on Capitol Hill, and although we know that [the bill sponsors] are well-intentioned, they need to hear loud and clear from the homeschool community. Even though the vouchers created by H.R. 610 would be voluntary, we believe that this would be a slippery slope toward more federal involvement and control in homeschooling.”

Limited Federal Role
Jason Bedrick, policy director for EdChoice, says the federal government has a very small, constitutionally defined role in education.

“The U.S. Constitution clearly gives Congress jurisdiction in Washington, DC and with military families and the Bureau of Indian Affairs on Native American reservations; there is a role where the federal government could enact choice programs,” Bedrick said.

The federal government can and should promote school choice in a way that respects states’ authority, says Patrick Wolf, a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions.

“If they do develop a federal program to incentivize private school choice, they need to be careful not to attach a lot of strings to that program and basically end up telling states what to do and what not to do and violating federalism concerns,” Wolf said.

“We wouldn’t support any legislation that would create a nationwide regulatory structure for school choice programs. Different states have different policy based on the particular needs of the people in those states. It’s a beautiful thing that we have federalism, where states can move in different directions. What we don’t want is one national set of rules.”

JASON BEDRICK
POLICY DIRECTOR
EDCHOICE

“Very Serious Concerns”
Bedrick says he’s concerned about the federal government overstepping its authority.

“We wouldn’t support any legislation that would create a nationwide regulatory structure for school choice programs,” Bedrick said. “Different states have different policy based on the particular needs of the people in those states. It’s a beautiful thing that we have federalism, where states can move in different directions. What we don’t want is one national set of rules. Certainly, a national voucher program would be something we would be against. That would raise very serious concerns.”

“We Want to Empower Parents”
Bedrick says local legislation is best at making parents the decision-makers regarding their children’s education.

“The purpose of the school choice programs is to empower parents to give kids the best education that’s tailored to them,” Bedrick said. “We don’t want to create a program at the federal level that tries to do that but has the unintended effect of disempowering parents with a distant regulatory framework versus one that is closer to parents’ voices. We want to empower parents. That is our number one goal, what mechanisms are the best for doing that.”

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

Students at a School Choice Week rally in Phoenix, Arizona

“The purpose of the school choice programs is to empower parents to give kids the best education that’s tailored to them,” Bedrick said. “We don’t want to create a program at the federal level that tries to do that but has the unintended effect of disempowering parents with a distant regulatory framework versus one that is closer to parents’ voices. We want to empower parents. That is our number one goal, what mechanisms are the best for doing that.”

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“Education is the civil rights issue of our time. I am calling upon members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious, or home school that is right for them.”

- DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT, UNITED STATES
OK Charter School Achieves 100% College Acceptance Rate

By Jenni White

Every student graduating this year from an Oklahoma City, Oklahoma public charter school has been accepted to at least one college.

Harding Charter Preparatory High School (HCP) takes students of all economic and academic backgrounds and requires all its students to take at least five advanced placement (AP) courses during students’ four years at the school.

HCP is a tuition-free, publicly funded, privately run school enrolling roughly 480 students, of which about 30 percent are white, 30 percent African-American, and 24 percent Hispanic. Approximately 10 percent of the students have Individualized Educational Plans (a program of learning developed for special-needs students), and 51 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

HCP students are granted admission to the school by lottery.

“The Washington Post” ranked HCP the “most challenging high school in Oklahoma” in 2016. HCP ranked number 148 nationally out of 2,391 public and private schools on the Post’s annual list, which takes into account the number of AP, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced International Certificate of Education tests given at a school each year in relation to the number of graduates.

“We Don’t Select Our Students”

HCP Principal Mylo Miller says his school’s greatest accomplishment is its ability to serve students of all backgrounds.

“I’m a big fan of the ranking,” Miller said. “The Washington Post is very reputable. And the thing we’re most proud of here is that we’re an open-access AP school. We don’t select our students.”

Miller says the goal of gaining 100 percent college matriculation is challenging because the students have varied learning abilities.

“It’s a lot of hard work,” Miller said. “Some students come into ninth grade at a third grade reading level. We get kids from just about every middle school in the city, so for one reason or another, some students will be behind in grade level. Every public school faces that challenge, either through family or educational malpractice.”

“We Do Not Lower Standards”

Michael Lewchuk, an HCP pre-AP Algebra II instructor, says all students are expected to take rigorous courses.

“We do not lower expectations for any student on campus,” Lewchuk said. “If you are in this school, you will be challenged, and the expectation is that every student will rise to that challenge.”

Lewchuk says HCP faculty members are not encouraged to take on additional, extracurricular school activities, which ultimately benefits the kids.

“This philosophy has left me free most mornings and evenings to work one-on-one with students who want or need extra help,” Lewchuk said. “As a result, far fewer students fall behind at Harding.”

Miller says working directly with students is a big aspect of the HCP environment.

“I spend more time sitting down with kids,” Miller said. “Our challenge is keeping kids, not getting rid of kids. We extend the hours for after-school programs and stay open two Saturdays a month. We have to create the opportunity [for students to succeed], so we have to have the doors open to create that opportunity.”

Readying Seniors for Graduation

HCP requires students to take a “capstone course” during the seventh hour of the school day. During this time, teachers help students fill out college applications and scholarship forms, and students listen to college recruiting presentations. Each student must apply to at least four colleges, including Oklahoma Community College. Students also must complete a six-week job-shadowing project.

Miller says the capstone courses pay off.

“Our senior class will earn $3 million or more a year through a variety of scholarships,” Miller said. “We’ve had a couple of students enter the military, but usually 100 percent of the student population matriculates into college. One-hundred percent for sure are accepted to colleges. We’ve had some students go on to pretty prestigious colleges like MIT, Yale, and USC.”

Lewchuk says HCP’s model is focused on rewarding students’ determination.

“There is no model that guarantees success for every student, but at least at Harding, if you’re willing to work and you seek out the help that is always available, then you will succeed at this school,” Lewchuk said.

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

Did you know

7 million men ages 24 to 55 are neither working nor looking for work?

To request a complimentary copy of Men Without Work by AEI’s Nicholas Eberstadt, please visit www.aei.org/heartland-offer/ To learn more about Mr. Eberstadt and his work visit www.aei.org.
Trump Admin. Reverses Obama Transgender Bathroom Edict

By Teresa Mull

The Trump administration announced it will reverse a set of guidelines the Obama administration issued to schools regarding transgender students’ use of bathrooms and locker rooms.

The U.S. Supreme Court then withdrew from ruling on a case regarding implementation of the guidelines.

‘Dear Colleague’
The Obama administration’s Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Education (DOE) sent a “Dear Colleague” letter to public schools in May 2016 reinterpreting the word “sex” in the Title IX law, which prohibits discrimination “on the basis of sex” in an education program or activity, to mean “gender identity.”

The letter declared, in part, “When a school provides sex-segregated activities and facilities, transgender students must be allowed to participate in such activities and access such facilities consistent with their gender identity.

Schools that did not comply faced the threat of lawsuits and the loss of federal funding.

After the Obama directive, Texas led a 13-state coalition in suing DOJ and DOE to overturn the guidelines, alleging illegal federal overreach. In August 2016, Judge Reed O’Connor of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas granted a temporary injunction, ruling the federal government did not grant states enough notice or give them a chance to comment on the guidelines before they were issued.

In February 2017, the Trump administration’s DOJ and DOE sent another Dear Colleague letter to the nation’s public schools, this time stating the Obama administration’s directives do not “contain extensive legal analysis or explain how the position is consistent with the express language of Title IX, nor did they undergo any formal public process.

“In addition, the Departments believe that, in this context, there must be due regard for the primary role of the States and local school districts in establishing educational policy,” the letter said. “The Department of Education and the Department of Justice have decided to withdraw and rescind the above-referenced guidance documents in order to further and more completely consider the legal issues involved.”

Virginia Ruling Vacated
Gavin Grimm, a Virginia transgender boy, sued the Gloucester County School Board in 2015, alleging the board sexually discriminated against Grimm by forbidding the use of the boys’ bathroom.

The U.S. Supreme Court was scheduled to hear Gloucester County School Board v. G.G. on March 28, but on March 6, the Supreme Court ordered Virginia’s Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals to reconsider its ruling in favor of Grimm.

“The judgment is vacated, and the case is remanded to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit for further consideration in light of the guidance document issued by the Department of Education and Department of Justice on February 22, 2017,” the Supreme Court wrote in its order.

‘Erasure of Women and Girls’
Kara Dansky, board chair of the Women’s Liberation Front, which filed a joint amicus brief in the Supreme Court with the Family Policy Alliance, says the Obama administration letter undermined protection of women’s rights.

“Interpreting ‘sex’ to mean ‘gender identity’ for Title IX purposes results in the erasure of women and girls as a category worthy of legal protection,” Dansky said. “For thousands of years, women and girls were excluded from the educational arena because of our biology, and Title IX was enacted specifically in order to remedy that problem. Reinterpreting sex to mean gender identity renders sex meaningless as a legal category because it means anyone, including a man, can ‘identify as a woman.’”

Denying Reality
Dansky says courts should acknowledge and respect what it means to be female.

“The court should rule that sex is a meaningful category and that women and girls are entitled to legal protection in the educational arena as women and girls,” Dansky said.

“Women and girls have been oppressed for thousands of years because of our sex, not because of our identity,” said Dansky. “Girls are aborted and killed all over the world because of their sex, not because of their identity. To pretend otherwise is to deny the reality of what it means to be female.”

Calls for Local Control
Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says the federal government should not be involved in this issue.

“It should be an issue left to the states to decide,” Sand said. “Even better, let individual schools or districts determine how to handle the situation. Transgenderism is estimated to afflict about 0.3 percent to 0.6 percent of the population. So, an elementary school with 500 kids will have between one and three students who consider themselves to be born in the wrong skin. Given that likelihood, why does Washington, DC see the need to get involved?”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
NH Bill Prohibiting Forced Use of Common Core Passes Senate

By Jenni White

A bill to prevent the state government from requiring schools to use the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) passed the New Hampshire Senate.

CCSS is a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. Senate Bill 44, introduced in January 2017, would “[prohibit] the department of education and the state board of education from requiring the implementation of the common core standards in any school or school district in this state,” the bill’s text states.

SB 44 passed along party lines with a 14–9 vote in February and moved to the House for consideration. Republicans in the Senate supported the bill; Democrats uniformly opposed it.

SB 44 Is Pushback

Ann Marie Banfield, education liaison at Cornerstone Policy Research, says getting rid of CCSS has been a constant battle in New Hampshire.

“Since [2010], parents from across the state have been leading an effort to get rid of the standards,” Banfield said. “SB 44 is pushback, but we’ve been trying that for a few years. Unfortunately, our former governor, [Maggie Hassan (D)], was fully invested in Common Core. In November, our new governor, [Chris Sununu (R)], ran his campaign saying he’d scrap Common Core.”

State Rep. Victoria Sullivan (R-Hillsborough), a member of the House Education Committee, says a similar House bill, House Bill 207, which awaits a hearing by the House Education Committee, goes even further toward stopping the implementation and use of the standards.

“[HB 207] states that changes to the academic standards adopted by the state must [first] be approved by [the state’s legislature],” Sullivan said. “The hope is that standards like Common Core do not sneak into the state in the future.”

Sullivan says both the House and Senate bills would keep the state from “falling into a trap like Common Core again.”

Smarter Balanced Snag

New Hampshire is a member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a group of states that develops Common Core-aligned assessments. Sullivan says as long as the state belongs to the consortium, its school curricula do as well.

“Districts haven’t had much of a choice, since our state assessment is the method by which we currently, in law, measure an adequate education,” Sullivan said. “I am hopeful our new commissioner of education, [homeschooling father Frank Edelblut], will find a way to do away with the Smarter Balanced Assessment. Until then, districts do not truly have the freedom to develop their own standards.”

New Leaders, New Chance

Banfield says she’s optimistic the new government leadership will eliminate CCSS.

“SB 44 finally has a chance of passing with new leadership,” Banfield said. “Not only do I believe [Sununu] will sign the bill if the House passes this bill, New Hampshire will have to adopt new academic standards.”

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

N. Dakota House Rejects Bill to Require Homegrown Standards

By Michael McGrady

The North Dakota House of Representatives has voted against a bill that would have prohibited the state from joining multistate school curriculum standards systems.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium creates tests aligned with CCSS for states to use. In 2015, the North Dakota legislature rejected a bill to exit the consortium.

House Bill 1432, introduced by state Rep. Ben Koppelman (R-West Fargo) in January 2017, would have prohibited North Dakota from participating “at any level, in any national or multistate consortium course content standards from any source” and using “any assessments aligned with any national or multistate consortium course content standards from any source that cedes to the national or multistate consortium control of North Dakota educational course content standards in any manner.”

HB 1432 would have also prohibited the state superintendent of public instruction from implementing new state standards “without statutory authority by the legislative assembly” and mandated the state adopt the standards used by Massachusetts during the 2008–09 school year until North Dakota’s legislature approves a new set of standards.

HB 1432 failed to get enough House votes in February.

‘There Is Hope’

Koppelman says he’s optimistic the legislature and governor can gradually make small changes.

“I believe that there is hope,” Koppelman said. “One of the things that I’m hopeful for is that we’ll have some opportunity to work with the governor’s office to try to initiate some change. I don’t believe that that change is going to be in the way of wholesale changes. But each step we can make that gets us away from federal control or involvement from a third-party initiative, I think, is going to be positive to our state.”

Threatened Funding Cuts

Leah Peterson, a member of Stop Common Core North Dakota, says there are several reasons HB 1432 failed.

“The Department of Public Instruction put a hefty fiscal note on the bill, assuming that North Dakota would lose all federal funding if we cut ties and started paving a new education path that is best for the state,” Peterson said. “Second, although there was no time given for amendments, the bill may have tried to do too much at once. And lastly, most legislators did not want to be informed. They did not respond to their constituents on the matter.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Mich. Considers Repeal,
Replace Common Core

By Jenni White

The Michigan House and Senate are considering companion bills that would repeal the state’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and replace them with the highly regarded standards Massachusetts used during the 2008–09 school year.

Common Core is a set of national standards dictating what students should know at the end of each grade level. In February 2016, lawmakers introduced Common Core repeal bills in the Michigan House and Senate. The House Education Committee did not undertake hearings on the House bill last year, and though the Senate bill passed the Senate Education Committee without amendment and with bipartisan support, the Senate failed to vote on the measure before the summer recess.

Second Time’s a Charm?

State Rep. Gary Glenn (R-Midland) introduced House Bill 4192 in February 2017. HB 4192 and its companion bill, Senate Bill 81, would repeal CCSS, replace Michigan’s standards with Massachusetts’ 2008–09 standards, grant local districts more power to implement curriculum “based upon the school district’s educational mission,” and “respect and support the ultimate right of a parent to opt his or her child out of public school, and out of any public school activity, practice, or testing that the parent finds unacceptable with no negative repercussions.”

As of late February, HB 4192 had 28 cosponsors: two Democrats and 26 Republicans. SB 81 had 16 cosponsors. Both bills have been referred to committee.

‘No Actual Test Results’

Glenn says CCSS had no evidence proving its worth.

“The so-called Common Core standards were adopted in Michigan with no actual test results to measure their effectiveness,” Glenn said. “The test results we’ve seen since show no improvement in student performance and, in fact, indicate that Michigan’s improvement in test scores is the worst in the nation.”

Glenn says Massachusetts’ 2008–09 standards have already demonstrated their effectiveness.

“This legislation would replace those unproven standards with the Massachusetts standards that were proven by actual test results to be the best in the nation in all measured categories,” Glenn said.

Fear of Education Establishment

Melanie Kurdys, cofounder of Stop Common Core in Michigan, says although there is little public support for CCSS, politicians are afraid to run afoul of the education establishment.

“I have no idea if the bill can pass,” Kurdys said. “Even though voters in Michigan and across the country have been very clear that Common Core is bad, few politicians seem to have the backbone to stand up to big business and big education, and we have no indication that Gov. [Rick] Snyder (R) has changed his mind about supporting Common Core.”

Kurdys says Glenn is very enthusiastic about repealing Common Core.

“He believes in this passionately,” said Kurdys.

Higher Aspirations

Glenn says his goal is to make Michigan an educational leader among the states.

“Michigan shouldn’t be known for being a ‘common’ state. We should aspire to have the same reputation Massachusetts has now, of having the best standards and best-performing students in the nation.”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Congress Overturns Obama’s ESSA Accountability Rules

By Michael McGrady

The U.S. Congress voted to end extensive Obama administration rules governing how states hold schools accountable.

President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, reauthorizing the federal government’s oversight of public education. In late November 2016, the administration released final ESSA regulations on how states should hold schools accountable, develop state plans, and report data.

The U.S. House of Representatives voted 234–190 in early February 2017 to reverse the accountability provisions, and the U.S. Senate followed suit in March with a 50–49 vote.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), who led the effort to overturn the accountability rules, said before the vote, “People had grown fed up with Washington telling teachers and schools, and superintendents, and states so much about what to do about our children in 100,000 public schools. This resolution restores flexibility. This resolution preserves local decision-making. This resolution scuttles new and burdensome reporting requirements. This resolution ensures strong accountability for our schools, but it is state accountability.”

Congress also voted to reverse an Obama administration mandate regulating teacher-preparation programs. Both resolutions were accomplished through the Congressional Review Act, which enables Congress to repeal federal regulations within 60 days of their being issued, by a simple majority vote. President Donald Trump must sign the resolution for it to take effect. Trump has said he would do so.

Updated State Plan Template

On March 13, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos released an updated state plan template.

“The updated state template will ensure states are able to better serve students with the freedom and flexibility they deserve, and which Congress requires,” DeVos said in a letter to chief state school officers. “My philosophy is simple: I trust parents, I trust teachers, and I trust local school leaders to do what’s right for the children they serve. ESSA was passed with broad bipartisan support to move power away from Washington, D.C., and into the hands of those who are closest to serving our nation’s students.

“States, along with local educators and parents, are on the frontlines of ensuring every child has access to a quality education,” DeVos wrote. “The plans each state develops under the streamlined ESSA template will promote innovation, flexibility and accountability to ensure every child has a chance to learn and succeed.”

‘Restores Constitutional Protections’

Mary Byrne, a former college professor and member of the Missouri Coalition Against Common Core, says the reversal of the ESSA rules puts more power in the hands of parents.

“Congress’ rollback of ESSA regulations restores the constitutional protections of a representative government to parents who are not professionals in the education lobby but experts in their own children,” Byrne said. “Local school boards of school districts within a state are comprised of members elected from their community to make decisions tailored to the needs of that community. The U.S. Department of Education touts that ‘the proposed regulations themselves were informed by extensive input from a diverse group of stakeholders.’ However, the composition of the regulations committee was not as extensive as a plain reading of that statement might imply.”

Byrne says ESSA is flawed.

“Rollback of regulations is not enough to fully restore constitutional government,” Byrne said. “The rollback does not eliminate badly conceived sections of ESSA. Several sections of the statute are inconsistent with each other and with the claim that ESSA restores state and parent authority over education.”

Michael McGrady (mmcraddy@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
study: colleges replacing civics ed with progressive activism

by jane s.shaw

education that actively supports progressive causes is replacing traditional civics education on college campuses, a new report says.

“making citizens: how american universities teach civics,” published by the national association of scholars (nas) in january, is a 523-page volume written by nas director of communications david randall detailing the history and current state of “new civics,” which appears under labels such as “civic learning,” “democratic engagement,” and others that imply political action.

emphasis on ‘service learning’

the heart of what nas calls “new civics” is “service learning.” although the term suggests voluntary involvement of students in community activities to help others, it is much more than that, randall writes. not only does service learning merge education and activism, but from its start in the 1960s, its goal has been to permeate the academy with the radical political goals of the left.

randall quotes early leaders of the movement such as nadine cruz at stanford university, who said, “i see the academy as an organizing base from which to do social change work.”

with its innocuous name and emphasis on volunteerism, service learning has quietly expanded throughout academia. at the university of northern colorado, nas counted at least 100 service-learning courses—about 10 percent of all courses offered.

a typical service-learning course at metropolitan state university in denver is called “social justice: self and citizenship.” it requires 30 hours of “volunteer work in a setting for the underserved” and directs students to: a) reflect on social oppressions; b) analyze the political systems that surround their communities and institutions; and c) apply their reflections to their career goals and personal development.

alinsky, marxist tactics

although service learning is the broad vehicle for new civics, the effort has been shaped by other forces as well, writes randall. one of these is a movement called “public achievement,” which teaches k–12 students and college undergraduates the political action techniques outlined by left-wing community organizer saul alinsky. another is the “new civic pedagogy,” patterned after the “critical pedagogy” of the brazilian marxist and liberation theologian paulo freire. it teaches students to attack power structures they consider oppressive.

faculty members teach service-learning courses, but the impetus for the new civics takeover comes from a combination of administrators, activist organizations, and government agencies, randall reports. the pivotal moment was the publication of a report by the association of american colleges and universities (aacu) in 2012. the aacu, composed of 1,400 postsecondary institutions, calls itself a “force for liberal education,” but the organization embodies much of the current emphasis on civic engagement. its literature is sprinkled with phrases like “life, work, civic engagement, and global challenges,” “civic learning, ethical reasoning, and engagement with us and global diversity,” and “reinventing undergraduate education for today’s world.”

federal government financed

the aacu’s 2012 report, “a crucible moment,” was authorized and heavily financed by the u.s. department of education. it minimized traditional civics and proposed new approaches.

“americans need to understand how their political system works and how to influence it, certainly, but they also need to understand the cultural and global contexts in which democracy is both deeply valued and deeply contested,” the report said. “moreover, full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities also are honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement.”

soon after “a crucible moment” appeared, the obama administration issued a regulation based on a recommendation from the report, requiring colleges to use 7 percent of their federal work-study funds to provide “community service jobs” for students.

“the machinery of the federal government now works to forward the new civics, regulation by regulation and grant application by grant application,” wrote randall.

‘intellectual chicanery’

jay schalin, director of policy analysis at the martin center for academic renewal, says the left has sneakily infiltrated academia with its agenda.

“one of the worst deceptions the left has gotten away with in recent years is to surreptitiously redefine our american democracy,” schalin said. “often, i am amazed to find myself agreeing with articles written by academics whose ideas i have previously found abhorrent, and then i remember that they are discussing a radical form of democracy conceived by leftists such as john dewey, paulo freire, and the frankfurt school rather than the form conceived by james madison, thomas jefferson, and john adams.

“this deception is taking over the academy, and the nas report is a good start on calling out those responsible for this intellectual chicanery,” schalin said.

student life factor

george ehrhardt, an associate professor in the department of government and justice studies at appalachian state university, says the nas report may be putting blame in the wrong quarters.

“most of the indoctrination stories that hit the news are from student life, not faculty, and i think the case with service-learning is similar. to me, it seems like the student-life folks—even more than academics—are marinated in the closed bubble of social thought in academia.”

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associate professor
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janeshaw5966@gmail.com is school reform news’ higher education editor.

learn more

‘Great Books’ College to Open Additional Campus

By Jane S. Shaw

Thomas Aquinas College (TAC), a Catholic college in California with fewer than 400 students, is planning to open a new branch in Massachusetts.

Great Books Difference

TAC’s expansion is unusual in a time when many small schools have been closing under great financial pressure. TAC is also unique in being a “Great Books” school.

“At the heart of the Thomas Aquinas College curriculum are the great books, the original works of the greatest minds in our tradition, both ancient and modern,” TAC’s website states. “The College’s syllabus is composed exclusively of the seminal texts that have, for good or for ill, animated Western civilization.”

TAC’s curriculum centers on seminar discussions of classic works. In the freshman year alone, students read writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Herodotus, and they study scientists who laid the foundation for modern science, such as Euclid, Linnaeus, Harvey, and Mendel.

Massachusetts is home to more than 100 colleges. TAC’s new campus will be located on property donated by the family of David and Barbara Green, the evangelical Christian family that owns the craft chain Hobby Lobby, Inc.

The new site in Massachusetts—where the branch is expected to open in the fall of 2018—was the location of two boarding schools originally founded by the Protestant evangelist Dwight L. Moody in the nineteenth century. Part of the property will be used for a museum honoring Moody.

The campus became available 12 years ago, after the two high schools were consolidated at another location. The Green family purchased it because they wanted to give it to a Christian university.

‘Pioneers in a Movement’

A group of Catholic lay people founded TAC in 1971 in response to a move by major Catholic universities to become more secular. The 1967 “Land O’ Lakes Statement,” issued by prominent Catholic educators, declared Catholic universities would modernize and break away from the control of the Church hierarchy.

Anne Forsyth, Thomas Aquinas director of college relations, says TAC was founded in response to a desire to combine strong faith learning and academics.

“The founders of Thomas Aquinas felt that the universities had given up on the idea of combining academic excellence and fidelity to the Church,” Forsyth said. “We were pioneers in a movement that includes quite a few Catholic colleges that found they can be both academically excellent and faithful to their Catholic identity.”

‘A Bold and Confident Move’

Wilfred McClay, an intellectual historian at the University of Oklahoma, says TAC’s growth is evidence of its solid curriculum.

“It’s a bold and confident move by a young college known for its profound Catholic religious commitments as well as its commitment to a traditional understanding of the liberal arts,” McClay said. “That includes the Great Books, or ‘core texts,’ approach to higher education. But it also includes a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum with virtually no electives and with extensive requirements in the study of foreign languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and music.

“Such an education will always be a minority taste,” McClay said. “But I believe that its appeal will continue to advance, not because it is perfect, but because so many parents and students will continue to see it as much better and more substantive than the real-world alternatives now on offer.”

Thomas Lindsay, head of the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s higher education program, served on the accreditation panel for the school in 2002. He says those who attend TAC recognize its value in a climate in which higher education has been diluted.

“The school is first-rate academically,” Lindsay said. “I can’t say whether its expansion to Massachusetts represents a trend or not, but I certainly hope so. Prospective students and their parents are beginning to glean the inadequacies of much of what passes for higher education today.”

Influence of the Great Books

Jesse Saffron, managing editor for the Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says TAC’s curriculum goes beyond academic achievement.

“The Great Books may not make college students better people or upstanding,” Saffron said. “But they can provide a sense of intellectual humility and a broader spiritual, artistic, and philosophical frame of reference. Those traits help people to think for themselves and increase cultural sophistication, which is perhaps needed now more than ever.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) is School Reform News’ higher education editor.
Non-Catholic students are beginning to represent a growing share of the enrollment at Catholic schools.

The changing student cohort in St. Louis reflects a national trend, says Heather Gossart, senior consultant and director of executive mentoring and coaching at the National Catholic Education Association.

"In 1970, only 2.7 percent of our students in Catholic schools were non-Catholic," Gossart said. "Today, we know that between 18 and 19 percent are non-Catholic. In the inner-cities and very urban schools, there may be 70 to 80 percent non-Catholic students."

Says Parents Want Values
Gossart says the Catholic school environment appeals to people of varying faiths.

"Regardless of what faith parents profess, they want their children to be in an environment where there is a moral compass," Gossart said. "They want to feel that their children are taught values. They want their children in environments where social justice and morality and faith-based decision-making are a part of their lives."
Virginia Considering ESA Program for Special-Needs Students

By Ashley Bateman

The Virginia state legislature is close to approving a bill that would establish a new education savings accounts (ESAs) program in the state. ESAs grant parents access to all or a portion of the funding allocated to their child’s public school education for use on educational alternatives, such as private school tuition, homeschooling, textbooks, tutoring, and learning therapies. Virginia currently has one school choice program, the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits Program, which serves low-income students.

State Del. Dave LaRock (R-Hamilton) introduced House Bill 1605 in January 2017. HB 1605 would create Parental Choice Educational Savings Accounts (PCESAs) for students who attended a Virginia public school for at least two semesters immediately prior to establishing an ESA.

As passed by the House, the bill would grant to families with incomes above 300 percent of the federal poverty level access to 90 percent of the state’s “Standard of Quality” (SOQ) funding. Parents of special-needs students or families with incomes below 300 percent of the federal poverty level would receive 100 percent of state SOQ funding.

The House approved HB 1605 on February 7 in a 49–47 vote.

The Senate amended HB 1605 to make ESAs available only to a student “whose family income is less than or equal to 300 percent of the poverty guidelines, who receives special education pursuant to an Individualized Education Program,” and who attended a public school for at least two semesters immediately prior to establishing an ESA. The Senate passed HB 1605 on February 21 with a 21–19 vote.

If the House approves the Senate’s amendments, HB 1605 will go to Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) for final approval. McAuliffe vetoed a similar bill to establish ESAs for special-needs students in April 2016.

‘Virginia Is Facing a Crisis’

LaRock says HB 1605 would help to alleviate Virginia’s special-needs-education “crisis.”

“Right now, Virginia is facing a crisis of rising special-education demands, as the number of students most expensive to serve, [those with] autism and other health impairments, has skyrocketed by 23 percent to 46,865 students in just the last five years,” LaRock said. “In the next 30 years, Virginia is poised to expect an additional 300,000 students. PCESAs would help alleviate the inevitable overcrowding [and] help take the pressure off of Virginia’s schools.”

LaRock says school choice is valuable to Virginia’s economy as well as its educational system.

“I believe school choice is essential to unlocking the full potential of Virginia’s education system, requiring a diversified approach to achieve success in education and economic development, and to improve Virginia’s competitiveness and quality of life,” LaRock said.

Benefitting Public Schools

Education choice also benefits public schools, LaRock says.

“Twenty-three empirical studies have examined school choice’s impact on academic outcomes in public schools,” LaRock said. “Of these, 22 find that choice improves public schools and one finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found that choice harms public schools. While Florida’s A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program was in place, giving school choice to kids in low-performing schools, the low-performing schools facing competition from vouchers improved dramatically.”

Saving Taxpayers Money

A Goldwater Institute analysis estimated for every 5,000 children using Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, the state saves $12.3 million. Virginia’s PCESAs were crafted using a design similar to the Arizona program.

Lindsey Burke, director of The Heritage Foundation’s Center for Education Policy, says ESAs promote competition and drive down prices.

“Even if you’re in an area where there’s a good private school market, [when] you expand education choice options, you catalyze the supply of new providers,” Burke said. “As soon as parents are walking around with that purchasing power, the market diversity increases.”

ESAs ‘Really the Way Forward’

Burke says many states are now considering ESA programs.

“Virginia has a fairly barren school choice landscape, so the more options that can be added in the Commonwealth, the better,” Burke said. “If Virginia is moving on an ESA option, they are in good company. Most states looking to move on school choice legislation this session are looking at an ESA option.

“ESAs, in my opinion, are really the way forward in education choice. ... It’s something that’s really attractive, especially in Virginia, a state that has so much geographic diversity,” Burke said. “In rural areas, without many private schools, parents would have the ability to harness the power of an ESA for tutors or online options. In Northern Virginia or Virginia Beach, they should be able to access private schools.”

School Choice Opponents

Attempting to block the bill this session are “those who see education in terms of dollars and cents, instead of improving education for schoolchildren,” LaRock said. “Teachers unions, superintendent associations, the NAACP at the national level, and the politicians they support financially have all sold the kids out.”

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

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Dave LaRock
State Delegate, Hamilton, Virginia
Arizona Bill to Expand ESAs to All Public School Students Advances to Full Senate

By Ashley Bateman

A bill to expand Arizona’s existing education savings account (ESA) program to all public school children in the state has passed out of committee and awaits a vote by the entire Senate.

ESAs give parents access to some or all the money allocated for their children’s public education to use on educational alternatives such as private school tuition, homeschool textbooks, tutoring services, and learning therapies.

Arizona implemented the nation’s first ESA program in 2011, the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts program, which grants ESAs to adopted and special-needs students, students in failing schools, and students living on Native American reservations. The program served 3,357 of the approximately 1 million students currently enrolled in Arizona public schools.

Gradual Expansion

Senate Bill 1431, sponsored by state Sen. Debbie Lesko (R-Peoria), would expand ESAs to all Arizona children currently attending public schools. The program would gradually roll out according to grade level, until all grade levels are eligible in the 2020–21 school year.

The Senate Education Committee passed SB 1431 in early February. The bill needs 16 votes to pass the Senate and move to the Republican-controlled House. One Senate Republican, out of 17 total, declared she will vote against SB 1431.

Keeping Public Schools in Mind

Jonathan Butcher, education director for the Goldwater Institute, says SB 1431 was designed to allow public schools to have a sufficient transition period.

“This bill will make all public school students in the State of Arizona eligible over the course of four years,” Butcher said. “We wanted the program to phase in such a way that all of the school districts that have students using ESAs have time to adjust, in such a way that wouldn’t disrupt district schools.”

Lesko says her bill would benefit public schools and their students.

“The more competition there is—whether that be private schools, charter schools, or online schools—the more traditional district schools have to improve their game, like any other free-market product.”

Debbie Lesko
State Senator
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I’m Very Hopeful This Year’

Lesko says her legislation has a good chance of passing during the current session.

“I need 16 votes to pass the bill in the Senate, and right now, I have a guaranteed 15,” Lesko said. “No Democrats are voting for it. There are 17 Republicans in the Senate, and one has said no. I’m very hopeful this year.”

Butcher says Arizonans are used to choice and want more.

“I think in a state like Arizona, where you have charter schools, open enrollment, private school scholarships, and tax-credit scholarships, parents are accustomed to choosing how and where their children learn,” Butcher said. “I feel confident we have a quality piece of legislation, and it’s a natural next step. We’ve had strong supporters in the legislatures for several years.”

Lesko says public school advocates are forcefully expressing their opposition to SB 1431.

“I think the winds have changed, from nationwide down, and people are promoting school choice,” Lesko said. “It’s making the public school establishment go absolutely crazy, and they are coming out with everything and anything to oppose this bill, including protesting outside my house.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Florida Bill Would Count Computer Coding as a Foreign Language

By Michael McGrady

A bill to allow public school students to use computer coding classes to satisfy their public college foreign language requirement is making its way through the Florida Senate.

Senate Bill 104 states it would, among other things, authorize public high schools “to offer students opportunities to take specified computer coding courses beginning with a specified school year,” mandate high schools “will not be required to offer such courses,” and require “Florida College System institutions and state universities to recognize the credits as foreign language credits.”

By Jenni White

Florida high school students aren’t required to take a foreign language to graduate. SB 104 would mandate public colleges and universities in Florida that require foreign language credits for admission to accept coding as a foreign language.

Only five of 40 Florida senators voted against a similar bill proposed last year, which ultimately failed to gain a vote on the House floor. The Florida Senate Education Committee voted unanimously to approve SB 104 in February. If approved by the Rules Committee, SB 104 would advance to the Senate floor for a full vote.

“The best way to prepare Floridians for economic life in the twenty-first century is to recognize that students aren’t all cut from the same cloth and that we should ‘vive la difference!’”

WILLIAM MATTOX
DIRECTOR OF THE MARSHALL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS
JAMES MADISON INSTITUTE

Oklahoma Fails to Move ESA Bills Forward During Legislative Session

By Jenni White

Bills that would establish education savings accounts (ESAs) in Oklahoma failed to advance during this year’s legislative session.

ESAs grant families access to some of the money allocated for their child’s public education, to spend on education-alternatives such as private school tuition, tutoring, and homeschool textbooks. Oklahoma currently has two education choice programs: a tax-credit scholarship program for low-income students or students in low-performing schools and the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship, a private school voucher program for special-needs students.

State Sens. Kyle Loveless (R-Oklahoma City) and Rob Standridge (R-Norman) both proposed ESA bills during the spring 2017 legislative session. Loveless presented three nearly identical bills—Senate Bills 395, 396, and 399—collectively called the “Oklahoma Parental Empowerment Act of 2017,” to create ESAs in the state. Each bill offered different student eligibility requirements.

None of Loveless’ bills advanced this session.

Standridge’s Senate Bill 560 would have established an ESA for any student enrolled in an Oklahoma public school the first 100 days of the prior school year, except children of legislators. Establishment of ESAs under the bill would have been subject to the Oklahoma Legislature approving pay raises for public school teachers.

The Senate Education Committee voted 9 to 7 to approve SB 560 in late February. In March, Standridge pulled his bill from consideration.

“I don’t want to pass it by a thin margin,” Standridge said to senators in an appropriations committee meeting, according to a report by OklahomaWatch.org. “I want us to feel good about this.”

“Oklahoma’s Promise [Scholarship] helps working-class families afford expensive [higher] education,” Loveless said. “No one seems to have an issue with these public funds being used to pay for private or religious-based schools, but when it comes to common education, the education establishment has a problem. I think this highlights the hypocrisy.”

Money ‘a Large Motivator’

Both senators’ bills would have allocated to the public school district a percentage of the money tied to each child who leaves a public school. Loveless says such provisions are meant to appease current public school employees.

“In a perfect world, this money would be included in the empowerment account,” said Loveless. “However, leaving a percentage of the money with the local school district is a compromise that’s been tried in the past to make reform more acceptable to the entrenched education establishment. Unfortunately, money is a large motivator to maintain the status quo.”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Catholic, ‘Hybrid’ Homeschooling Centers Expand Nationwide

By Ashley Bateman

Keri Beckman, a Catholic mother in Atlanta, Georgia, decided the home education she had designed for her children was not meeting her family’s needs.

Beckman wanted more accountability and diverse educators to guide her children in their lessons, while maintaining a strictly Catholic, classical home education. What she wanted wasn’t available, so Beckman crafted something entirely new, and Regina Caeli Academy (RCA)—the first hybrid academy (meaning students learn part-time at home and in a formal classroom) for homeschoolers in the Catholic, classical tradition—was born.

Since 2003, RCA has grown to 10 centers in 10 cities and serves more than 1,000 students in grades pre-K through 12th grade. Expansion of the centers is ongoing nationwide.

Hybrid, Classical Education

At Regina Caeli, intellectual growth is just one of many overarching goals. Students are meant to grow spiritually, discern vocations, and learn to articulate their faith fluently. Strict adherence to Catholic doctrine, taught in a formal group setting, provides a cornerstone for homeschoolers who long for Catholic community and an established system of accountability for their children’s education.

Regina Caeli is a tutoring center that meets two days per week and is fully accredited as a private school. Transcripts, standardized test scores, and college-level entrance-exam preparation provide an extra layer of documentation and accountability for students. Tuition for the program is just over $3,000 per student per year.

RCA students wear uniforms. On Mondays and Thursdays, they attend traditionally scheduled classes, with breaks for lunch and extracurricular activities woven into the day.

“We’re very structured while we’re here,” Beckman said. “We come together, we pray, then first period starts, then second, then third, so there’s a definite schedule to the day that looks very much like what you would consider to be a private school.”

Beckman based her curriculum on Laura Berquist’s book Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum. Berquist’s Mother of Divine Grace curriculum is the foundation for learning at all RCA academies, providing a structured week for students when they are not at the center. Center teachers, called “tutors,” are available throughout the week to help students with the schoolwork they do at home.

Motivated by Dissatisfaction

Beckman says she wanted an authentic Catholic education experience for her children, which her local Catholic school was not providing.

“The staff wasn’t Catholic,” Beckman said. “The school wasn’t Catholic. We didn’t want to put [my son] into a school that wasn’t following the traditions of the Church, from a philosophical standpoint. At the time, my spiritual director was very in favor of homeschooling. It was great. First grade was easy. Second grade was easy. Third grade [was] harder, and by fourth grade, I wanted to just have a couple of days when I wasn’t that primary interface. I loved that time we had together, and I didn’t want to send him back to school.”

Parents Leading by Example

Fr. Augustine Tran, RCA’s cofounder, chaplain, and I.T. administrator, says parent involvement is central to children’s faith development.

“According to the Church, parents are the primary educators of their children,” Tran said. “When the parents also educate them about reading, writing, and arithmetic, then they are able to incorporate their faith into those subjects. I think the example the parents give is extremely important for helping the child to integrate his faith into every aspect of his life. Working at a Catholic high school, I have seen that parents can do that with their own children much better than teachers can do with a classroom full of students.”

Tran says RCA parents collaborate to ensure students have all the necessary resources.

“RCA gives parents the support that they need when it comes to subjects that they may find difficult to teach,” Tran said. “No one knows everything about every subject, especially when it comes to the high school subjects. RCA can help to fill in the gaps for the parents. RCA is also accredited, so parents do not have to go through that process themselves when it comes time for their children to go to college.”

RCA Program ‘Very Powerful’

Over the past 12 years, Melanie Levergood has added several children to her family and to the Atlanta RCA community, which Levergood says provides a good balance between home and campus.

“It’s helped with the homeschooling, providing the structure and accountability with their tutors, but still allows for the parent to be the primary teacher,” Levergood said. “As I’ve had more children, we’ve been able to incorporate more kids into the family and schooling. Catholic education as a homeschool parent has been very powerful. The curriculum is a thorough education but is planned to allow for more time if there are other subjects I’d like to add in, and if there’s something [my child] is really interested in, we can explore that.”

Demand for Expansion

The Atlanta RCA center is currently the largest, with approximately 200 students. Four other centers are currently in development. Beckman says families are calling for additional RCA locations.

“Homeschoolers, by their nature, are very independent, so getting everyone to agree and move in the same direction can be very difficult, and we were able to do it here successfully,” Beckman said. “People want to have us come and do that for them. We have never sought [to open another] location.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Tenure, the system of guaranteeing lifetime employment to professors who spend little time in the classroom, is antiquated.

As far as I am aware, the only two groups that receive lifetime tenured employment are federal judges and college professors, the theory being these people need protection from undue political pressure. But today, there is as much blatant politicking involved in a Supreme Court appointment as there is in a presidential election, yet a president can serve only eight years, whereas a person could be a judge for 40 or 50.

It makes even less sense that professors are guaranteed such an expensive perk. The professorial lobby pretends tenure is essential to allow it to voice unpopular and unpatriotic opinions. There might have been a time when professors could have been fired for such, but currently, they are more commonly hired for having radical opinions.

Politics Don’t Belong in Classroom
The question of a professor of any political stripe being shown the exit because the academic administration disapproves of his or her leanings should be moot. Even if the field of study is history, philosophy, or the Republican Party in the twenty-first century, no professor has any business dragging partisan politics into the classroom. But suggest that to a liberal academic and he or she will claim censorship, as if the job description of a professor includes political proselytizing.

In the Socratic method, to which all academics give lip service, the function of the professor isn’t to tell young people what to think; it is meant to pave the way so they can think for themselves, encouraging them to ask hard questions and even question their own beliefs.

Tenure Tide Beginning to Turn
The American Association of University Professors reports the average salary of a tenured, full-time professor in the United States is now an astounding $142,000, but the good news is it looks as though the tide is finally beginning to turn, as public and private colleges alike are questioning the prudence of tenure.

Attacks on tenure have become commonplace since the 2008 recession cut public support for colleges and forced the latter to impose large tuition increases to make up for shortfalls. In Iowa, Missouri, and North Dakota, where budget cuts are imminent, legislators have introduced bills to eliminate tenure, cut back its protections, or dramatically increase the requirements for tenured faculty to keep their jobs.

The Wisconsin Legislature cut $250 million from the state universities’ budget and weakened the schools’ tenure law by requiring reviews every five years of tenured professors, to prove their continued effectiveness. Failure to provide such proof automatically places professors on a brief probationary period. Additionally, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) has introduced an accountability program to monitor the time professors spend in the classroom.

The State College of Florida eliminated new tenure-track positions as of July 2016. Pending Missouri legislation would end tenure awards after January 1, 2018. North Dakota has cut 500 full-time public college positions and can lay off tenured faculty with 12 months’ notice. Some smaller colleges are offering buyouts of their tenured professors to cull their ranks of older faculty.

Iowa state Sen. Brad Zaun (R-Urban-dale) has introduced new legislation that would eliminate tenure positions for new hires and could strip it from current tenured professors at the state’s three largest universities. Zaun told The Wall Street Journal in February, “I just don’t think if you’re being paid with tax dollars you should be guaranteed a job for life.”

Professors Should Compete, Too
Defenders of tenure argue schools without it will lose the most talented academics and the funding grants they typically acquire for the colleges that employ them. But if the dangers that threatened the livelihood of professors disappeared long ago, why didn’t tenure, put in place to protect them, also go away long ago?

States Finally Challenging Antiquated Higher-Ed Tenure Laws

“I just don’t think if you’re being paid with tax dollars you should be guaranteed a job for life.”

BRAD ZAUN
STATE SENATOR, URBANDALE, IOWA

By Jay Lehr

Defenders of tenure argue schools without it will lose the most talented academics and the funding grants they typically acquire for the colleges that employ them. But if the dangers that threatened the livelihood of professors disappeared long ago, why didn’t tenure, put in place to protect them, also go away long ago?
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