Illinois Approves Tax-Credit Scholarship Program

By Lindsey Schulenburg

School choice proponents celebrated a victory in Illinois as the governor signed a budget that includes a tax-credit scholarship program. Tax-credit scholarship programs give individuals and companies a full or partial tax credit for donations to fund private school scholarship organizations. Illinois had no school choice programs before this law passed.

In late August, Gov. Bruce Rauner signed into law an education funding bill giving individuals and corporations a 75 percent tax credit for donations to the program. Students whose family income is below 300 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible to receive the scholarships. The program is capped at $75 million in tax credits.

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Do You Underestimate How Much Public School Teachers Make? — 7

High-Stakes Teacher Evaluations Improve Student Outcomes — 11

School or Jail
Florida parents could be arrested and sent to jail for not sending their kids to school.

Free Speech on Campus
Ohio lawmakers plan to introduce legislation to protect freedom of speech on public college campuses.

Record Charter Growth
Enrollment in charter schools has reached record numbers.

Maine Homeschooling
Homeschooling is growing steadily in Maine. From 2005 to 2015, the number of registered homeschool students increased by 35 percent, according to the state’s Department of Education.

School Start Times
Delaying the start of the school day would add billions of dollars to the economy, a study finds.

By Teresa Mull

U.S. Senate committees voted to reject proposed cuts to the Department of Education (DOE) the Trump administration made earlier in 2017, while the House voted to accept some but not all of the proposed cuts.

President Donald Trump proposed a budget in May 2017 that would have cut $9.2 billion from DOE’s 2018 fiscal year budget by reducing the number of after-school programs and teacher training grants and ending federal subsidization of college student loans, among other actions. The budget also called for expanding education choice programs by increasing charter school funding and creating a federal voucher program.

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House, Senate Split on Trump’s Proposed Education Reforms

By Teresa Mull

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The Heartland Institute’s Emerging Issues Forum (EIF) will look to the future and explore state public policies in the areas of economics, education, health care, and more.

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For more information, visit eif.heartland.org today!
Arizona Group Gathers Signatures to Put ESA Expansion on Hold Pending Citizen Vote

By Tori Hart

A ctivists opposing the expansion of Arizona’s education savings account (ESA) program say they’ve collected enough signatures to put the issue on the November 2018 ballot.

Arizona established the nation’s first ESA program, the Empowerment Scholarship Account, in 2011, giving families with special-needs children access to the money allocated for their public school education to use on educational alternatives. In April 2017, Gov. Doug Ducey signed into law a bill to expand the ESA program to make every Arizona student eligible by 2021.

Save Our Schools, a group of anti-choice advocates, announced in August 2017 it had collected enough signatures to put the issue of expanding the ESA program on the November 2018 ballot. The signatures were in the process of being validated as of early September. ESA supporters filed a lawsuit challenging the petition’s wording and signature-collection methods.

“The expansion of the Empowerment Scholarship Account program was supposed to go into effect in August but was put on hold pending the outcome of the referendum effort,” AZCentral.com reported in September. “Barring a loss in court, it will remain on hold until November 2018.”

‘Same Worn-Out Arguments’

Michael Schaus, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, says the Save Our Schools group’s narratives are false and long-refuted.

“Of course, as is expected, when parents are given the freedom of choice, the public school monopolists begin to panic,” Schaus said. “We’re hearing the same worn-out arguments from Arizona’s ESA opponents that we’ve heard in other states. They cry that ‘public schools will be defunded,’ ‘only rich families will take advantage of the program,’ and that public school budgets—not increased options for all families see their child needs,” Butcher said.

Scholars vs. Children

Schaus says the focus of education should be children, not money or power.

“Anti-choice activists like to cry about budgets, funding, and politics, but they ignore the most important part of the entire discussion: the children. At the end of the day, children are not the decision establishment as many families as possible.”

Influence of Teachers Unions

Jonathan Butcher, a senior policy analyst with The Heritage Foundation, says government school employees are behind the effort to thwart the ESA program.

“The Arizona teachers union and school boards association have long-standing goals to block ESAs entirely and send students back to district schools,” Butcher said. “This year, Gov. Doug Ducey signed an expansion to the accounts that will, over the course of four years, give every Arizona public school child the option of applying for an account. This was a huge victory for families. But the union and other special-interest groups are designed to organize opposition to parental options in education.”

Erroneous Claims

Butcher says the facts don’t support the Save Our Schools group’s arguments.

“They claim private schools are too expensive and ESAs won’t cover the cost, when in fact research shows that the median private school tuition in Arizona is $5,000, which is approximately the amount of an ESA award for a mainstream student,” Butcher said. “Children with special needs receive larger awards. They say ESAs will drain money from public schools, when state fiscal analysts report that children with special needs save the state $1,400 [per child per year] when they use an ESA.

“Every child should have the chance to succeed, and ESAs allow families to challenge their student, if that’s what families see their child needs,” Butcher said. “For children [for whom] the district school isn’t a good fit, families can find something else immediately with an ESA, without having to wait for a school turnaround plan or a new principal.”

Bureaucracies vs. Children

Schaus says the focus of education should be children, not money or power.

“Anti-choice activists like to cry about budgets, funding, and politics, but they ignore the most important part of the entire discussion: the children. At the end of the day, children are not funding mechanisms for public school bureaucracies. They are individuals, and thus deserve individual approaches to education.”

Michael Schaus
communications director
nevada policy research institute

Tori Hart (tori.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Wilmette, Illinois.
“The House spending bill, which provides $66.1 billion to the Education Department as part of a broader $1.2 trillion spending package for various government agencies, must be reconciled with the Senate legislation,” EdWeek.org reported in September. “Unlike House lawmakers, Senators in charge of the appropriations process have so far, in the subcommittee and committee that oversee K–12 spending respectively, voted to increase spending slightly at the Education Department.”

‘Eliminate Them’

Vicki Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute and author of Failure: The Federal Misedukation of America’s Children, says governments have an obligation to stop funding worthless programs.

“When programs have proven to be ineffective, elected officials should eliminate them, not prop them up with continued funding. That’s exactly what President Trump did by reducing the U.S. Department of Education’s discretionary budget by $9.2 billion. Close to two-thirds of that reduction—63 percent—comes from eliminating programs that are duplicative or just don’t work.

“The Clinton-era 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, for example, promised to provide disadvantaged children with after-school enrichment to improve their academic performance,” Alger said. “This program has cost nearly $18 billion so far, with scant evidence of success, according to numerous official evaluations.”

‘More Bang for Fewer Bucks’

DeAngelis says scientific evidence shows schools of choice use funding more effectively than traditional government schools.

“Obviously, schools that must cater to the needs of individual families have a stronger incentive to allocate their scarce educational resources efficiently. DeAngelis said. “Indeed, a 2014 study by the School Choice Demonstration Project finds that relative to traditional public schools, charter schools overwhelmingly produce more ‘bang’ for fewer ‘bucks.’ A 2017 version of this study, produced by my colleagues and me, will also be available soon.”

‘More Money, No Improvements’

Corey A. DeAngelis, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says throwing money at the education system doesn’t work.

“In theory, additional resources ought to translate to improved student outcomes; however, the empirical evidence largely suggests otherwise,” DeAngelis said. “Stanford economist Eric Hanushek’s 1997 review of nearly 400 studies on the topic fails to find a ‘strong or consistent relationship between student performance and school resources.’ This is likely at least partially due to the fact that public school spending increases are more often allocated towards administrators and staff than children, as found by [EdChoice Senior Fellow] Dr. Ben Scafidi.”

Subsidizing Self-Interests

DeAngelis says the additional funding doesn’t make it to the classrooms because it is not in the interest of the adults who are running the schools.

“They do not currently have to. If I owned a restaurant that was funded through property taxes, and my customers were assigned to me by ZIP code, I would probably not spend very much additional resources on the food taste levels. Instead, I would rationalize that my leadership is so valuable that I deserve a higher salary.”

Alger says taxpayer dollars should stay at the local level and be controlled by families.

“Rather than subsidizing failed programs, funds should be returned to taxpayers in the states, where they could be used for localized programs that actually work for students and families,” Alger said. “Establishing parent-directed education savings accounts would be an excellent way to ensure children get the additional academic enrichment they need, without the costly bureaucracy.”

Saving States Money

DeAngelis says not only do school choice programs use money more efficiently, they also use less of it.

“Over 20 studies of private school choice programs have found that private school choice programs save states and local school districts money,” DeAngelis said. “This is because private school tuition levels are about half of the per-pupil amount spent in traditional public schools, on average.”

Teresa Mull (tmull@heartland.org) is a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Texas District Institutes No-Homework ‘Family Nights’

By Elizabeth BeShears

A Texas school district has marked six “family nights” on its 2017–18 school calendar, at parents’ request.

The family nights, now official policy for the Katy Independent School District (ISD) in suburban Houston, Texas, designate “days during which teachers will be dissuaded from assigning homework,” the Houston Chronicle reported in July.

“The goal of that night is to encourage family gatherings, family dinners, or going to a football game—anything geared around family,” Katy ISD spokeswoman Maria DiPetta told the Chronicle.

The district designated the days in response to parents and students lobbying the superintendent after the no-homework policy of a teacher in a different Texas district went viral on social media.

‘A Breath of Fresh Air’

Vicki Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute and author of Failure: The Federal Miseducation of America’s Children, says the Katy ISD policy restores some power to parents, where it belongs.

“Katy ISD’s family night initiative acknowledging the primacy of families is a breath of fresh air,” Alger said. “It helps counter the decades-long trend of relegating parents to the periphery of their children’s education as distant ‘experts’ dictate curricula and testing. Parents are rightfully frustrated that increasingly the homework assigned to their children, particularly younger children, is time-consuming, not age-appropriate, and often incomprehensible.”

‘A Beginning, Not an End’

Alger says family night is merely a good start toward important reforms. “Family nights are a step toward making education truly local again, and let’s face it, there’s nothing more local than parents directing their children’s education and upbringing.”

‘More and More Bureaucratic’

Schilling says federal overreach forces local districts to comply with decrees from Washington, DC and distances them from local input.

“What we’ve discovered at APP through fighting the Common Core is that the [U.S.] Department of Education has been leapfrogging legislatures and parents and working hand-in-hand with state boards of education,” Schilling said. “So you’ve got big-time bureaucracy working with little-time bureaucracy, and they’re both getting more and more bureaucratic and putting more and more expectations and demands onto schools and teachers and students.

“Each individual parent contributes through their property tax dollars, but what’s happening is that these parents can’t compete with the millions and millions of dollars that the federal government is putting into the system,” Schilling said. “These schools end up answering more to the federal government and the state government than they do to the parents and teachers.”

‘Too Much Pressure’

Schilling says mandates from huge, out-of-touch government entities do not help children learn.

“The more demands and the more stringent standards you have on these kids at the earlier ages, you’re actually discouraging them from learning more,” Schilling said. “At that age, they’re very active and have tons of energy. So when you try to teach them math at four years old, all they want to do is play with blocks and throw a ball. But we’re trying to force them into these boxes and trying to create these prodigies, but we’re putting too much pressure on them and they’re not learning as much.”

Schilling says the more other districts imitate Katy ISD’s family night program, the better off kids will be.

“The big thing for us is that we need more of this type of program, where school districts are working hand-in-hand to make sure parents are more involved with their kids’ education,” Schilling said. “This is a good example of it. Is it going to be effective? We don’t know, but this is why we should have two thousand school districts across the country helping to try out new things and being laboratories of democracy, so to speak, in education policy.”

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

“Schools and districts across the country are taking a second look at the amount of homework they assign as parents complain that students are over-worked and stressed out by increasingly demanding course loads.

“A second-grade teacher in Godley, Texas, made national headlines last year after she told parents she would not assign homework, asking instead that parents eat, read, play and bond with their children during after-school time.

“Heidi Maier, the new superintendent of that 42,000-student school district, pointed The Washington Post to research showing that homework assigned in elementary schools made no noticeable difference on student achievement and brought only a modest difference in middle and high school student performance.”

Illinois Approves Tax-Credit Scholarship Program

Continued from page 1

its and is set to begin in the 2018 fiscal year. It will sunset after five years unless the government renews it.

Prioritizing Low-Income Kids

Mindy Ruckman, a government affairs legislative analyst at the Illinois Policy Institute, says the tax-credit scholarship program will benefit low-income students at the worst public schools.

“For the first time in Illinois’ history, low-income students will have a chance to escape failing public schools,” Ruckman said. “Families earning $73,800 or less are eligible to apply for the scholarship program. Scholarships will be prioritized for kids living in districts with underperforming schools.”

‘An Important Step’

Ruckman says other forms of school choice, such as vouchers and education savings accounts, would be better than the scholarship program, but Illinois families are fortunate to have any alternative to government schools at this point.

“Vouchers give money to students,” Ruckman said. “Under Illinois’ tax-credit scholarship program, money goes to schools. Vouchers are preferable, but the tax-credit scholarship program is an important step toward greater school choice in Illinois.”

Shortchanging Change

Jason Bedrick, director of policy for EdChoice, says the program has much room for improvement.

“First, it will only provide scholarships for about 0.5 percent to 1 percent or so of the total K–12 student population in Illinois,” Bedrick said. “That will help fill some empty private school seats, but it won’t spur system-wide innovation. The cap on the tax credits should be significantly increased to aid more families.

“Second, the law has a sunset clause that ends the program after five years,” Bedrick said. “The clause should be removed so that the program can continue indefinitely. Third, the program mandates that schools accepting tax-credit scholarship students administer the state test to those students. Since tests drive curriculum, this is a round-

about way to impose the state curriculum. Families who want the state curriculum already have thousands of schools to choose from, but many families are looking for something different.”

Testing Freedom

Bedrick says to make this program a true alternative to government schools, the state should allow private schools to use tests of their choosing.

“It doesn’t make sense to impose the same test on all schools,” Bedrick said. “Instead, the best way to provide parents with information about school performance while giving those schools the autonomy that parents value is through nationally norm-referenced (NNR) tests, like the Stanford 10 or Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Allowing private schools to select from a menu of NNRs—as most already do—appropriately balances accountability and autonomy.”

Lindsey Schulenburg (lindseys.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Chicago, Illinois.
Qatari Foundation Funds Arabic Courses in U.S. Public Schools

By Michael McGrady

A foundation from Qatar has spent millions of dollars funding Arabic courses in U.S. public schools in recent years, The Wall Street Journal reports. “The Qatar Foundation gave $30.6 million over the past eight years to several dozen schools from New York to Oregon and supporting initiatives to create or encourage the growth of Arabic programs, including paying for teacher training, materials, and salaries,” the newspaper reported in August. “The funding came through Qatar Foundation International, the foundation’s U.S. arm.”

Children electing to take the classes learn the Arabic language and study Arab culture.

The story reported parents have expressed concern over the foundation’s ties to Qatar, a country embroiled in Middle Eastern disputes and diplomatic uncertainties with the United States.

‘Risk of Operational Intrusion’

April Few, communications director for U.S. Parents Involved in Education, says accepting money from faraway sources puts schools in danger of undue influence.

“When with the gold set the rules,” Few said. “Accepting money from China, Qatar, or the federal government all run risk of operational intrusion from that source. Local control excludes national mandates, and certainly international, and in this case a nation with ties to terrorism and/or communism.”

Mixed Bag

Shane Vander Hart, editor of CaffeinatedThoughts.com, says the funding from Qatar could be beneficial, though schools should be careful to ensure students aren’t receiving propaganda.

“On one hand, money to teach students Arabic in public schools could be beneficial to the intelligence community, law enforcement, and organizations who work with Muslims down the road who probably do not have enough Arabic speakers and translators,” Vander Hart said. “Without grants such as these, it is unlikely that schools will offer it as a foreign language. On the other hand, I’m skeptical of Arabic Immersion Schools—are there any examples of immersion schools for other languages?—as a potential gateway for Muslim indoctrination.”

‘Strings Attached?’

Vander Hart says districts should get all the answers before accepting such funding.

“Does this money come with strings attached beyond teaching Arabic?” Vander Hart said. “Do schools have control over who is hired and what curriculum is used? How realistic is it for Arabic to be taught without use of the Quran? What is Qatar’s motivation? These are questions that I have, looking at this money. With the increasing risk of homegrown terrorism by ISIS, it is vital that recipient school districts do their due diligence to answer these questions for concerned parents.”

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

Poll: Public Vastly Underestimates Average Public School Teacher Salary

By Harry Painter

The American public thinks government school teachers are underpaid, until they learn how much they actually make, a new poll has found.

Respondents to the 2017 EdNext Poll on School Reform estimated the 2015–16 national average salary of U.S. K–12 public school teachers to be $40,587, more than 30 percent below the real National Center for Education Statistics figure of $58,964. Even teachers underestimated the average teacher salary by about 20 percent.

“When asked whether teacher salaries should be raised, no fewer than 61 percent of Americans are in favor,” the authors report. “But when told what teachers currently earn, the level of support drops to 36 percent. Both those readings show a modest cooling of public enthusiasm for higher salaries since 2016—a drop of 4 percentage points for the uninformed and 5 percentage points for the informed.”

“Democrats express strong support for increasing teacher salaries, at 70 percent among the uninformed and 45 percent among the informed, as compared to 50 percent and 27 percent, respectively, among Republicans,” the report states. “The drop in support among the uninformed is higher among Democrats than among Republicans—8 percentage points as compared to just 2.”

In the Unions’ Interests

Martin West, an associate professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, editor-in-chief of EdNext, and coauthor of the poll, says interest groups perpetrate the idea teachers aren’t paid much.

“We can’t know for sure why the public is misinformed, but teachers unions obviously have an interest in portraying teachers as earning very little,” West said.

Jason Richwine, an independent public policy analyst in Washington, DC, says the education establishment has successfully pushed a false narrative, constantly claiming government schools are underfunded.

“The education establishment—teachers unions and the politicians they support—has been successful in perpetuating the narrative that schools are constantly on the brink of bankruptcy,” Richwine said. “It pushes endlessly for more public money, and no amount is ever enough.”

Don’t Forget the Benefits

Richwine says misconceptions about teacher pay result partly from people forgetting about benefits packages.

“Another reason [for the underestimating] is that fringe benefits are a larger part of the compensation package for government school teachers compared to private-sector workers,” Richwine said. “So people tend to compare the salaries but forget that teachers are receiving much more generous health and retirement benefits than the typical private sector worker.”

Rewarding Successful Teachers

West says he favors switching to a merit-based system of teacher compensation, where standout educators receive raises in accordance with their performance.

“The key is to use the resources we invest in teacher compensation to make the profession as attractive as possible to those who are effective in the classroom,” West said. “Especially given how hard it is to predict who will be effective at the time they are hired, this requires that we find ways to reward those who demonstrate success.”

Harry Painter (jarrypainter@gmail.com) writes from Brooklyn, New York.

“Accepting money from China, Qatar, or the federal government all run risk of operational intrusion from that source. Local control excludes national mandates, and certainly international, and in this case a nation with ties to terrorism and/or communism.”

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LEARN MORE

Maine Homeschooling Grew by 35 Percent in Ten Years

By Ashley Bateman

In keeping with national trends, increasing numbers of Maine families are moving their children out of traditional schools and into the home.

From 2005 to 2015, the number of registered homeschool students in Maine increased by 35 percent, according to the Maine Department of Education. Approximately 5,500 children, or 3 percent of Maine’s K–12 students, were homeschooled in 2015, the Portland Press Herald reported in 2016.

“Over the last 10 years, the state has seen a steady increase from year to year on the number of children who are homeschooled,” the Bangor Daily News reported in August 2017.

Regarding overall U.S. numbers, the National Center for Education Statistics reports, “Approximately 3 percent of the school-age population [about 1.8 million U.S. children] was homeschooled,” the Horizons Education reported in 2016.

“The homeschool laws of Maine are decent, and they are administered in a fairly friendly way, so that tends to keep things harmonious,” Woodruff said. “There are no major issues we are fighting right now.”

Unique Benefits

Ed and Kathy Green founded Homeschoolers of Maine, or HOME, in 1990 to support fellow homeschooling families. A lack of early-education options had led them to homeschool their four daughters in the early 1980s.

Kathy Green says homeschooling provided her family unique benefits not found in traditional schools.

“It didn’t take long for us to realize that there was something very special about learning together as a family,” Kathy Green said. “We noticed a bond developing as they learned and grew together that we had not experienced in our own growing-up years.”

Ed Green says other families are also realizing the advantages of homeschooling.

“The results of numerous nationwide studies continue to show that homeschooled students are doing at least as well academically, if not better, than their public school counterparts. More importantly, though, parents themselves see better results in their children.”

ED GREEN
CO-FOUNDER
HOMESCHOOLERS OF MAINE

“A Wider Swath of People”

Brian Ray, founder and president of the National Home Education Research Institute, says homeschooling is more mainstream than it used to be, now attracting all types of people.

“Because the homeschool movement has matured in terms of numbers and experience, that means people who choose it do not have to be as zealous or ideologically strong as they did 10, 15, 25 years ago,” Ray said. “There’s a wider swath of people, philosophically and politically, who are trying to home-educate.”

Competing Traditions

The Greens say caring parents have historically gravitated toward directing their children’s education.

“[Good parents] have an inherent desire to provide for the health, well-being, and education of their children in every way possible,” Kathy Green said. “That desire is what drives parents to seek an alternative when something isn’t working out in a traditional school setting. Today, most families know that home education is an option.”

“Home education has existed since the beginning of time,” Ed Green said. “It is a model that cannot easily be duplicated elsewhere, since any alternative would take the home, the family, and the special uniqueness of each child out of the equation. A private home education is tailored by the parent to fit the needs of an individual child as she grows and changes. Parents can be creative and flexible and adapt at a moment’s notice. This is a very difficult task to achieve in a school setting.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Fewer Than One-Third of DC Students Are ‘College and Career Ready’

By Cassidy Syftestad

Scores from a national, standardized test show fewer than one-third of Washington, DC students are “college and career ready.”

DC Public Schools (DCPS) officials celebrated as results from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test, released in August 2017, showed improved English Language Arts (ELA) and math scores. Fewer than one-third of DCPS students, however, achieved a 4 or 5 on the PARCC assessment, which is the benchmark for “college and career readiness.”

In the district’s traditional government schools, only 32 percent of students tested adequately for readiness in ELA, and only 27 percent in math. “The charter schools also made gains, now boasting 10 straight years of rising scores,” The Washington Post reported in August. Still, only 29 percent of charter school students passed the ELA readiness test, and 29 percent scored high enough to be considered college-ready in math.

‘Still Struggling Academically’

Lindsey Burke, director of the Center for Education Policy and Will Skillman Fellow in Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation, says although the gains are laudable, taxpayers aren’t getting their money’s worth. “Although DCPS has made some small gains in pockets of the district over the past few years, students in the most expensive school system in the country, while headed in the right direction, are still struggling academically, as evidenced by low rates of math and reading proficiency,” Burke said. “The fact that fewer than one-third of DC Public Schools students meet math and reading benchmarks punctuates the inefficiencies in the system, in which revenue per pupil exceeds $30,000 per student, per year.”

‘Missing Ingredient’: Parents

Gerard Robinson, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, says graduating from high school does not guarantee readiness for college. Robinson says parents play a pivotal role in preparing children for adulthood. “There is a disconnect between what it takes to leave high school and what it takes to be successful in college,” Robinson said. “Look at the millions of students who finish American public high schools, both public and charter, who go to college and take remedial courses that their high school diploma says they shouldn’t need. Schools can only do so much; businesses can do so much. The missing ingredient is involving parents in this process. Using literature and language, the school system can better empower and educate parents on how to be involved.”

Burke says the one-third proficiency rates provide “evidence that families in DC need school choice more than ever.” “It is not more spending that will lead to improvements in DC public schools, but parental influence over how existing dollars are spent, and the option to choose learning environments that work best for their children,” Burke said.

Faster, Better Decisions

Robinson says school-level decision-making produces faster, more innovative solutions to educational problems. “Charter schools have a unique ability to introduce new aspects to a curriculum quicker than traditional public schools,” Robinson said. “Decisions are made at the school level instead of waiting for a district-wide bureaucratic approval process to take place.”

Cassidy Syftestad (cassidysyftestad@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

Increasing Education Choice

• Giving all children the best education through school choice and returning local control to every community.

• Supporting education savings accounts for parents to personalize their children’s learning experience and save for college.

• Allowing schools to choose the tests, pay structures, and rules that work best for their teachers and principals.
Study: Later School Start Times Would Bring Billions in Economic Benefits

By Tori Hart

 Starting school later in the morning would improve the U.S. economy by billions of dollars per year, a new analysis has found.

"Using a novel macroeconomic modelling approach, the study estimates changes in the economic performance of 47 U.S. states following a delayed school start time, which includes the benefits of higher academic performance of students and reduced car crash rates," the RAND Corporation reports in "Later school start times in the U.S.: An economic analysis."

"The benefit-cost projections of this study suggest that delaying school start times is a cost-effective, population-level strategy which could have a significant impact on public health and the U.S. economy," the study states.

"From a policy perspective, the study’s findings demonstrate the significant economic gains resulting from the delay in school start times over a relatively short period of time following the adoption of the policy change."

Billions of Dollars Every Year

"The study suggested that the benefits of later start times far outweigh the immediate costs," the report, published in August by the RAND Corporation, further states. "Even after just two years, the study projects an economic gain of $8.6 billion to the U.S. economy, which would already outweigh the costs per student from delaying school start times to 8:30 a.m. After a decade, the study showed that delaying schools start times would contribute $83 billion to the U.S. economy, with this increasing to $140 billion after 15 years. During the 15-year period examined by the study, the average annual gain to the U.S. economy would be about $9.3 billion each year."

Importance of Sleep

Wendy Troxel, a senior behavioral and social scientist at RAND and a co-author of the report, says the study found later start times would avert many accidental deaths.

"The study’s novel macroeconomic [approach] focused specifically on the impact of extra sleep among teenagers from later school start times across two key areas," Troxel said. "[This included] the academic and professional performance of students and reduced car crash rates among adolescents. The impact of car crashes and young adults dying prematurely has a negative impact on the future labor supply of an economy."

Nationwide Policy Interest

Troxel says many states are considering mandating later school start times.

"Numerous states are currently considering or have considered legislation for later start times, including California, Maine, Rhode Island, Nevada, and Utah." - WENDY TROXEL

SENIOR BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENTIST, RAND CORPORATION

Questions the Estimates

Stoops says the full benefits claimed in the report are unlikely to materialize.

"The economic benefits cited in the RAND report are somewhat overstated," Stoops said. "After all, the immediate and uniform implementation of a school start time change in 47 states is improbable. Instead, start time changes—like most reforms in the district system—will be unevenly distributed across schools, districts, and states. This will dilute much of the economic impact that such a change may produce."

"Because of their potential to be broadly disruptive, schedule changes are among the least popular types of school reform," Stoops said. "Any change, regardless of the academic, economic, and public safety benefits, will require buy-in from those affected most, namely school staff, students, and families."

Prefers Choice, Flexibility

Stoops says schools of choice, those that are not traditional government schools and therefore subject to fewer bureaucratic mandates, are freer to adapt to families’ needs.

"While many conventional school districts enjoy schedule flexibility, schools of choice rarely need approval from legislative committees, distant bureaucracies, or oversight boards to make a change," Stoops said. "Instead, school leaders can establish the start time that meets the needs of children and their parents."

"In other words, change is easier in the school choice environment," Stoops said.

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“A year after this Memphis suburb decided to start middle- and high-school classes a bit later in the morning in hopes of improving student achievement, none of the seven other districts in the county have found the motivation to change.

“Shelby County school leaders cite the cost, logistics and an overall lack of interest as factors why they’re not changing. Some schools in each district start as early as 7 a.m. CT in spite of mountains of recent studies and lobbying from medical groups on the benefits of starting school no earlier than 8:30 a.m.”

— “If later school start times are better, why aren’t they more popular?” Jennifer Pignolet and Linda A. Moore, USA Today, August 17, 2017
Study: High-Stakes Teacher Evaluations Benefit DC Students

By Ashley Bateman

High-stakes teacher evaluations are benefiting students in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), a new study reports.

“A closer look at one high-stakes evaluation system ... shows the positive consequences such systems can have for students,” authors Thomas S. Dee and James Wyckoff write in the Fall 2017 issue of EducationNext.

“Since 2012, we have been studying IMPACT, a seminal effort by DCPS to link teacher retention and pay to their performance,” Dee and Wyckoff write. “Under IMPACT, the district sets detailed standards for high-quality instruction, conducts multiple observations, assesses individual performance based on evidence of student progress, and retains and rewards teachers based on annual ratings. Looking across our analyses, we see that under IMPACT, DCPS has dramatically improved the quality of teaching in its schools—likely contributing to its status as the fastest-improving large urban school system in the United States as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.”

Political Fallout, Student Success

Michelle Rhee, DCPS’ chancellor at the time the evaluation policy was implemented, and the mayor who appointed her lost their positions as a result of controversy over the change. “But IMPACT outlasted them both, to the benefit of students,” the authors write.

“DCPS dismissed the majority of very low-performing teachers and replaced them with teachers whose students did better, especially in math,” the report states. “Other low-performing teachers were 50 percent more likely to leave their jobs voluntarily, and those who opted to stay improved significantly, on average, the following year. High-performing teachers improved their performance as well, especially those within reach of the significant financial incentive created by the system.”

The authors conclude, “The DCPS story shows that it may be politically challenging to adopt high-stakes evaluation systems, but it is not impossible. And it shows that well-designed and carefully implemented teacher evaluations can serve as an important district improvement strategy—so long as states and districts are also willing to make tough, performance-based decisions about teacher retention, development, and pay.”

Setting Expectations

Wyckoff, the Curry Memorial Professor of Education and Policy and director of the EdPolicyWorks program at the University of Virginia, says the DCPS system gives teachers clear expectations.

“I believe the DCPS teacher evaluation reforms have succeeded because they were well designed, very well implemented, and DCPS policymakers were willing to modify policies as they received feedback from teachers,” Wyckoff said. “Teacher evaluations in DCPS differentiate among teachers in ways that few other districts do, so teachers better understand the skills they need to improve.”

‘Meaningful Gains for Students’

Arnold Shober, an associate professor of government at Lawrence University, says the high-stakes system makes room for quality educators.

“I think it’s pretty clear that DCPS’ ‘fast fire’ policy has boosted the quality of applicants to the system,” Shober said. “In a profession that features substantial turnover anyway, this translates into meaningful gains for students. States’ teacher evaluation laws assume that evaluation can turn weak teachers into good ones. This is a mistake. Robust evaluation works when it clears the way for new teachers with better prospects. DCPS’ system does. Districts can’t make a good teacher; they have to find them.”

‘Competition Works’

Shober says the amount of school choice in DC makes it conducive to such reforms.

“DCPS is one of the few districts in America to feature something like a real competitive market, with an independent charter school sector and a genuine voucher program,” Shober said.

Larry Sand, president of California Teachers Empowerment Network, says school choice causes government schools to improve.

“Study after study has shown that where private school choice has been introduced, public schools have improved,” Sand said. “Competition works. Most recently, a study from New York City found that being closer to a charter school led to small increases in math and reading scores, boosts in school safety, and fewer students being held back a grade in the traditional public school. The test score gains increased even more in traditional public schools that are co-located with a charter.”

‘May Not Travel Well’

Whether DCPS’ program is replicable needs further review, Sand says.

“Not all education programs work with all teachers and students,” Sand said. “While DC’s evaluation program has certainly worked well for teachers and students there, that same program may not travel well. One would have to look at DC and compare it to another program to see the differences, and take it from there.”

Shober says IMPACT succeeded because of special circumstances.

“DCPS has had to live with substantial teacher churn and significantly more hiring than virtually any other school district,” Shober said. “These are real costs, both financial and political, and it is unclear that other districts could maintain such a strong focus. It’s important to remember that IMPACT was authorized by Congress, and the U.S. Congress is an absentee landlord in zero political danger from DC.”

Unions will continue to fight high-stakes evaluations elsewhere, Sand says.

“As soon as it is acknowledged that some teachers are better than others, then you might have to pay better teachers more, and that in turn blows up the traditional step-and-column way of paying teachers, a union must.”

LARRY SAND
PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA TEACHERS EMPowerMENT NETWORK

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THOMAS DEE AND JAMES WYCKOFF
EDUCATION NEXT, FALL 2017

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Ohio Legislature to Consider Campus Free Speech Act

By Michael McGrady

Two Ohio state representatives announced they are introducing a bill to protect free speech at the state’s public colleges and universities.

State Reps. Andrew Brenner (R-Powell) and Wes Goodman (R-Cardington) announced at a press conference in August they plan to introduce the Ohio Campus Free Speech Act.

The bill, according to the Ohio House of Representatives website, would “[prohibit] universities and administrators from taking action, including communicating in an official capacity, that limits or chills the expression of any member of the campus community or their invited guests based on the content of the expression, [eliminate] ‘free speech zones’ by declaring generally accessible areas traditional public forums for expression and prohibiting universities from limiting the space for expression within those areas, and [require] universities to develop a free speech policy consistent with the act, and to educate their students, faculty, and administrators about the policy,” among other things.

“This common-sense legislation is based on a simple premise; that the laws, policies, and conduct of Ohio’s public universities be fully consistent with the First Amendment,” Goodman wrote in a September op-ed for The Hill.

‘Heckler’s Veto’

Daniel J. Dew, a legal fellow at The Buckeye Institute’s Legal Center, says the Free Speech Act would help prevent dominant groups on campus from using threats of disruption and violence to block expression of opposing points of view.

“Places of learning, especially college campuses, are supposed to welcome vigorous academic debate,” Dew said. “Instead of combating speech with speech, we are seeing what’s known in legalese as the ‘heckler’s veto.’ The heckler’s veto happens when government doesn’t allow speech based on the possibility of violence by those opposed to the speaker’s views. Universities across the country have been suppressing speech by uninviting unpopular speakers because of violent threats made by those opposed to the speaker. Or if they don’t cancel the speech, administrators are allowing protestors to go beyond speech and into threatening, blocking access to the event, or even violent behavior.

“This legislation would be a step in the right direction to ensure that college campuses fulfill the promise of the First Amendment by directing university administrators to do the right thing,” Dew said.

Praises the Bill

Jenna A. Robinson, president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says the legislation would make college campuses better places to learn.

“This bill will significantly improve free speech protections in Ohio,” Robinson said. “It will ensure that students’ First Amendment rights are protected and will help ensure that Ohio’s campuses are places of vigorous debate and open inquiry. It will enshrine public campuses as the centers of free, open, and transparent public discourse.”

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

Ohio Legislature to Consider Campus Free Speech Act

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Support of ‘Bourgeois Habits’ Embroils Professors in Dispute

By Jane S. Shaw

A recommendation to restore “bourgeois habits” is under fire at the University of Pennsylvania, revealing once again the deep conceptual divide in American campuses.

In an op-ed published in the Philadelphia Inquirer on August 9, law professors Amy Wax from Penn and Lawrence Alexander from the University of San Diego said the United States has lost touch with the “bourgeois habits” that once benefited all classes of American society. The professors described those habits this way: “Get married before you have children and strive to stay married for their sake. Get the education you need for gainful employment, work hard, and avoid idleness. Go the extra mile for your employer or client. Be a patriot, ready to serve the country. Be neighborly, civic-minded, and charitable. Avoid coarse language in public. Be respectful of authority. Eschew substance abuse and crime.”

Wax and Alexander went on to say “these basic cultural precepts” were standards for behavior between the late 1940s and the mid-1960s but lost force as “breezes over the truth of inequality and exclusion.” They acknowledged that was not enough. “Exclusion and discrimination against people of color was the norm, North and South,” the authors wrote. “During this period, home ownership, high-quality education, jobs with fair pay and decent working conditions and the social insurance benefits of the New Deal welfare state remained unavailable—by design—to most nonwhite Americans.”

Playing the Race Card
This critique and recipe for reform aroused a firestorm of protest, first by University of Pennsylvania law professors and then by Penn students and alumni. On August 20, five law professors issued a response in the Daily Pennsylvanian, the school newspaper. They accused Wax and Alexander of “nostalgia for the 1950s,” which they said “undermines the actions rather than look for ways to be victimized.” Thorne said. “Sadly, colleges teach students to blame bias first.”

“The only way to open minds in this generation to the blessings of right choices is for young people to decide to take responsibility for their own actions rather than look for ways to be victimized,” Thorne said. “Teachers should help them learn how to do this.”

“Once again, the academic left has proven itself to be either delusional or deceitful by finding nefarious intent behind Wax’s and Alexander’s support for practical, common-sense advice,” Schalin said. “Hard work, fidelity, patriotism, civic-mindedness, sobriety, and respect do not just date back to the mid-twentieth century. They have been lauded as proper behavior as long as history has been recorded. And for good reason, since such behaviors and attitudes have been proven over and over to contribute to human flourishing.”

‘Simplistic, Bigoted and Archaic’
The next day, a column signed by 54 Penn students and alumni took up the cudgel, claiming Wax and Alexander were “extolling the white cultural practices of the ‘50s.”

“We know that these claims are based on culturally-situated values of purity that safely legitimate one group’s superiority over Others: values which, in this case, are easily discernible as those associated with Anglo-whiteness.”

—Jay Schalin, director of policy analysis at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says the responses to the column falsely characterize well-established truths as racism.

“In America, we have a long way to go toward mitigating life’s difficulties,” Schalin said. “Sadly, colleges teach students to blame bias first.”

“The only way to open minds in this generation to the blessings of right choices is for young people to decide to take responsibility for their own actions rather than look for ways to be victimized,” Thorne said. “Teachers should help them learn how to do this.”

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‘Blame Bias First’
Ashley Thorne, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, says the protestors are doing a disservice to the young people they claim to represent.

“If campus communities would stop to consider what Wax and Alexander are saying, they might see that courtesy, commitment to family, and hard work can go a long way toward mitigating life’s difficulties,” Thorne said. “Sadly, colleges teach students to blame bias first.”

“The only way to open minds in this generation to the blessings of right choices is for young people to decide to take responsibility for their own actions rather than look for ways to be victimized,” Thorne said. “Teachers should help them learn how to do this.”

Jane S. Shaw (janeshaw5966@gmail.com) is School Reform News’ higher education editor.
Study of Higher Ed’s Use of Private Firms to Develop Online Education Questioned

By Jane S. Shaw

A new report suggests private firms that public colleges and universities use to digitize learning may not have students’ best interests in mind, but education reformers contacted by School Reform News disagree strongly.

“Driven by the desire and need to make money for investors or owners, ... these companies may prioritize profit over the interests of online students, to whom they owe no loyalty, financial or otherwise,” author Margaret Mattes writes in “The Private Side of Public Higher Education,” published by the progressive Century Foundation in August.

OPMs ‘Helping Universities’

Jesse Saffron, former managing editor of the Martin Center for Academic Renewal, says the Century report speculates about potential harm even though nobody has been shown to have done anything wrong.

“The report itself reveals that, so far, [online program managers (OPMs)] have not caused mischief,” Saffron said. “In fact, it shows that in many cases, these firms are helping universities cut costs and achieve economies of scale. And there’s no evidence that student learning has slipped. The Century Foundation’s concerns are based only on speculation.”

“Nevertheless, I agree that caution is warranted when OPMs go beyond providing learning platforms and start producing course content and degree programs,” Saffron said. “When a public-university delegate aspects of its core mission to an OPM, it should provide extra oversight and fully inform students.”

Digital Transition Difficulties

Public universities have found expansion to digital education isn’t always easy. The courses require special digital platforms and techniques; they must recruit nontraditional students; and many faculty don’t want to teach the courses. As a result, many have hired firms such as Academic Programs, 2U, EdX, Coursera, the College Network, and Pearson to create and administer these programs.

These firms convert traditional courses to online formats, recruit and follow up with students, and sometimes supply ready-made courses. The firms usually pay the upfront costs and often receive 50 percent or more of the revenue they bring in.

The Century Foundation reviewed 117 contracts between nonprofit schools (mostly public universities and community colleges) and private OPMs. Mattes concluded the companies provide “services so intertwined with the actual teaching and learning” that they could undermine the schools’ independence.

“Specifically, the growing use of for-profit intermediaries to provide online programming at public institutions raises important questions concerning whether these agreements appropriate-ly shield students from the profit-seeking motives of these companies, inform students about exactly who is responsible for the education they are receiving, and provide quality education that is up to the standards of institutions backed by the full faith and credit of states,” Mattes states in the report.

Conflicting Research

Alana Dunagan, a higher education researcher at the Clayton Christensen Institute, says working with private firms can be a good way for universities to enter the online market.

Dunagan is author of a report on online education issued earlier this year. In raising her concerns, Mattes acknowledges she hasn’t uncovered any actual problems.

“The report itself reveals that, so far, OPMs have not caused mischief. In fact, it shows that in many cases, these firms are helping universities cut costs and achieve economies of scale. And there’s no evidence that student learning has slipped. The Century Foundation’s concerns are based only on speculation.”

Jesse Saffron
Former Managing Editor, Martin Center for Academic Renewal

Victor Brown, a former faculty member and administrator at Ursinus College, says colleges can and should work in harmony with OPMs.

“Hostility to OPMs, just because they are OPMs, is misplaced,” Brown said. “Higher education institutions need to work with technology providers to offer digital courses reliably, and at costs that are as low as possible. Instead of distrusting the OPMs, colleges need to partner with the ones that will do the best job, much as students evaluate the colleges that they choose to attend.”

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


Arkansas Parents Fight for Local Control of District

By Jenni White

A group of Arkansas parents is demanding to know when the state will return their school district to local control.

The Arkansas State Board of Education voted narrowly (5–4) in January 2015 to authorize the state to take over the 25,000-student Little Rock School District (LRSD) after six of the district’s 48 schools were classified as “academically distressed.”

At an August 2017 town hall meeting at the state capitol in Little Rock, members of the state Board of Education, the education commissioner, legislators, and the LRSD superintendent answered questions from a large crowd of frustrated parents and the public regarding a timeline for the return of the district to public control.

Arkansas Commissioner of Education Johnny Key said during the meeting, “[This fall] we’re going to be looking at all the aspects of district operations,” THV11.com reported in August. “We’ll look at financial. The facilities. We’ll look at academics. And then we will determine what the next steps are.”

History of State Takeovers
Arkansas law allows the state to assume control of districts and individual schools exhibiting fiscal or academic distress as defined by state Department of Education criteria. The state has utilized this process numerous times.

As recently as 2011, the Arkansas Board of Education assumed control of the Pulaski County Special School District and the Helena–West Helena School District from their locally elected school boards after the state placed both in the category of fiscal distress. The districts were returned to their communities in 2015, the year LRSD was placed under state control.

Can State Takeovers Work?
Karen Lamoreaux, a board member and media spokesperson for Arkansans for Educational Freedom, says a private firm would do a better job of fixing LRSD.

“The message [of the takeover] is that if parents cannot elect responsible people to manage the district, then you lose your representation,” Lamoreaux said. “But a great deal of research has been done, and the finding overall is that state takeovers don’t work. While some states might be able to balance the books, this could arguably be done more efficiently by temporarily outsourcing an accounting firm.”

Lennie Jarratt, project manager of the Center for Education Transformation at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says state takeovers can work in some situations.

“A state should only take over a local school district in extreme circumstances,” Jarratt said. “When implemented properly, a takeover can work very well, as seen with the Illinois takeover of Round Lake School District 116.”

Diverse Interests
Kenny Wallis, an Arkansas activist who opposes tax increases and wasteful spending, says the crowd at the town hall meeting represented diverse interests.

“The majority of people just want the school system to actually work for them like it should,” Wallis said. “But there are angry parents and fiscal conservatives who have a vested interest in how their tax dollars are spent, as well as members of an organization that’s proud of Little Rock schools who are angry because if they have a school board they’ll have more control and more money will go to the public schools than the charter system.”

Growing Charter Schools
The Walton Family Foundation, located in Bentonville, Arkansas, has invested significant resources in growing charter schools in the state, including offering public charter startup grants. The foundation is also involved with the Arkansas Public School Resource Center and is the principal funder of Arkansas Learns, an organization “dedicated to excellent education options for all students to ensure the talent and workforce necessary for Arkansas to successfully compete in a global economy,” according to its website.

The Arkansas Board of Education voted in September to accept the recommendation of the state’s charter authorizing panel for five new charter schools, three to be located in Little Rock. Before the vote, LRSD Superintendent Mike Poore requested a more thorough review of the expected community impact of the proposed schools.

Concerned about Common Core
Lamoreaux says the people behind the proposed charter schools are pushing strong state standards and standardized testing, since public charter school curricula must comply with state-mandated standards. Arkansas initially adopted a set of standards aligned with the Common Core State Standards, and since January 2016 the state has been using tests more loosely tied to the controversial standards.

“These groups enthusiastically pushed [No Child Left Behind], Common Core, fought very hard for PARCC [Common Core-aligned standardized testing], and work daily to get approvals for their Texas ResponsiveEd Charter Schools [a system of state charter schools],” said Lamoreaux. “Interestingly, in the few short months since the takeover of LRSD, the city has seen the sale or gifting of empty buildings to charters, expansion of charter schools and applications, and the closure of schools altogether.”

Jarratt says although charters aren’t perfect, they can go a long way toward giving families much-needed educational alternatives.

“While private school choice is better, public charter schools are a step in the right direction toward education choice and allowing parents to decide what curriculum and how they want their children taught,” Jarratt said.

Dismantling State Control
Lamoreaux says all states would be better off without state-government interference.

“Arkansas needs to dismantle the state Department of Education and the state Board of Education,” said Lamoreaux. “Let the districts take their 10 percent in the form of block grants from Washington, DC. Let elected officials in their own communities be accountable to their residents for their results. That is local control. That is education with representation. That is what works.”

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“Conflicting messages of success and dissatisfaction were the predominant themes of a town hall meeting with officials from the Arkansas Department of Education, state lawmakers, and the Little Rock School District Thursday.

“Sen. Joyce Elliott, a Democrat of Little Rock, was the self-described referee of the event, which she organized along with seven of her Democratic colleagues from the Arkansas State Legislature.

“We missed the ultimate flexibility, and the Little Rock School District was in a position at that time, the schools could have been turned back over,” Elliott said. ‘That did not happen, and we were held under district control knowing a new law was coming into effect.’”

Florida Parents Could Face Arrest for Children’s Truancy

By Cassidy Syftestad

Rising truancy levels in Florida schools have administrators considering taking legal action against parents.

In Palm Beach County, approximately 27,500 elementary school students were absent 11 days or more during the 2016–17 school year. Palm Beach County Schools Superintendent Robert Avossa “said he’s willing to consider drastic action, including having parents arrested if their children habitually skip school,” the Sun-Sentinel reported in August.

Chronic absenteeism, which in Florida’s Broward County is 18 or more missed days of school, has also become widespread elsewhere in the state. Last year, more than 20 percent of all high school students in Broward County were chronically absent, up from 12.3 percent the previous year.

Some jurisdictions are responding with criminal charges.

“Duval County, which includes Jacksonville, conducted a ‘truancy sweep’ in 2014, arresting 18 parents whose students were chronically absent,” the Sun-Sentinel further reported. “The most recent absentee figures in Duval County shows [sic] that truancy doubled, The Times-Union reported.”

Opposes Compulsory Education

Arizona state Rep. Paul Mosley (R-Lake Havasu City), who has spoken out in opposition to compulsory school attendance laws, says schooling should be a family decision.

“The parents need to be involved in the planning of their child’s future,” Mosley said. “Education is a privilege, not something to be shoved down every student’s throat.”

Funding Factor

A major reason educators are concerned about absenteeism is “because [district] funding is completely based on the daily attendance of each student,” Mosley said.

Bill Mattox, director of the James Madison Institute’s Marshall Center for Educational Options, says public school proponents don’t like it when kids stay out of government schools, because they lose money if students leave.

“The way we fund public education assumes that a child in a particular ZIP code will attend a particular school in that district,” Mattox said. “As long as that exists, the people who run the school districts are going to be slow to encourage parents to consider alternative options.”

Illegal Alien Effects

Mattox says illegal immigrants’ fear of deportation may increase truancy, but punishing parents isn’t the answer.

“There is a measure of chaos that would naturally contribute to even greater truancy among undocumented immigrants that can’t be overlooked,” Mattox said. “What we have is a school system that says, first, ‘You must attend one of our schools. You get no choice in the matter.’ And second, the schools claim that if a student does not attend class, it will sic the authorities on him or her.”

Restoring Parents’ Authority

Mattox says the undermining of parental authority and involvement is the real problem with the current system.

“When parents believe … that their choices will affect the wellbeing of their children, they typically rise to the occasion and do a better job,” Mattox said. “Parental choice makes parents better too, because agency encourages parents to go the extra mile and find out why certain schools are better than others.”

Cassidy Syftestad (cassidysyftestad@gmail.com) writes from Hillsdale, Michigan.

Restoring Free Speech and Liberty on Campus

Donald A. Downs

“This book is an indispensable resource to anyone seriously interested in understanding the campus code controversy, or more importantly, the culture of the contemporary American university.”

—James Weinstein, Professor of Constitutional Law, Arizona State University

Academic tenure is viewed with suspicion by many. Faulty Towers sets the record straight by elucidating the history, legal status, and common misunderstandings regarding tenure. The book explains how restructuring university incentives to be more in line with those of market-based enterprises would produce greater accountability, stronger boards of trustees, more effective administrators, and a tenure system that protects academic freedom but not substandard education.

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Charter School Enrollment Hits Record High

By Ashley Bateman

The number of U.S. students attending charter schools has hit a record high, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports.

Enrollment in charters, which are publicly funded, privately managed schools, has increased by approximately 1.2 million students over the past five years. Approximately three million students attended charter schools during the 2015–16 school year. The NCES report, released in August 2017, reported nearly 6 percent of all public school students attend charter schools.

‘Positive Academic and Life Impact’

Vanessa Descalzi, director of media relations for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, says charter schools continually prove their value to families.

“Public charter school enrollment has increased dramatically in the past five years, and even more so in the over 25 years since the first charter school law was authorized,” Descalzi said. “During this time, study after study has shown the positive academic and life impact that attending a public charter school can have on a student. When families see these unique schools in person and familiarize themselves with the research, it makes sense that they would demand a high-quality public option to meet the unique needs of their child and community.

“Smart policymakers listen to these families, and that’s why we’re seeing smart policy passed at the federal and state level to create an environment where impactful, accountable charter schools can open,” Descalzi said.

‘Parents Want Choice’

Aaron Smith, an education policy analyst at Reason Foundation, says charters are popular because families want an alternative to traditional government schools.

“The reason charters have experienced such rapid growth is really quite simple: Parents want choice,” Smith said. “The practice of assigning kids to schools based on ZIP code is well past its expiration date, and choice mechanisms such as charters, education savings accounts, and open-enrollment policies are helping to overhaul a status quo that is fundamentally flawed.”

Failure Is an Option

Descalzi says schools should be held to high standards for the children’s sake.

“If a school isn’t doing the only thing it’s supposed to do—providing its students with a high-quality education that sets them up for success in life—then that school should close,” Descalzi said. “Every day a student is stuck in a school that is failing in this mission is an emergency. Unfortunately, too many schools are allowed to fail students year after year. This is why we need both a high-quality public option and accountability for public schools: so that a school doesn’t deny generation after generation of students the opportunity to succeed.”

Improving Student Outcomes

The authors of the 2016 study A Growing Movement: America’s Largest Charter School Communities and Their Impact on Student Outcomes examined student performance data from the 2014–15 school year in districts where at least one-third of students were enrolled in charter schools. The researchers found nearly all the districts had more students with proficient scores on state tests than their peer districts. Economically disadvantaged students also demonstrated higher achievement in districts with at least 30 percent charter school enrollment, the study found.

Descalzi says such student performance is a main cause of the charter boom.

“At the heart of family demand and charter school growth is the fact that charter schools are having a game-changing impact on student outcomes,” Descalzi said.

‘Lot of Work to Be Done’

Expanding choice well beyond charters is the important next challenge in school reform, Smith says.

“While charter growth is encouraging, I think we’ve only seen a glimpse of the results that parent-driven accountability could produce,” Smith said. “There’s still a lot of work to be done. We continue to allocate scarce resources to underperforming schools while shortchanging those that are in high demand. School finance systems that were inadequate for the needs of the twentieth century are even less suited for the twenty-first century. Money should follow a child to the school of [his or her] choice, regardless of what type of school it is.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Book Analyzes Campus War Against Freedom of Thought

By Jay Lehr

Eduction at American colleges and universities has taken a back seat to identity politics and the rise of so-called “social justice warriors” who are controlling most campuses today. Insanity has taken the place of inquiry. Scott Greer’s book, the title of which is a clever takeoff on the award-winning movie No Country for Old Men, offers a psychological and philosophical analysis of the people now controlling the nation’s college and university campuses, who want to disenfranchise and humiliate everyone who is not part of their designated victim groups, especially straight white men.

Political Takeover

If we are to overcome the domineering left on college campuses and on the streets of America, we must understand what is really going on. Greer has studied the campus takeover and describes it brilliantly, with 318 references that could make No Campus a handbook for dismantling leftist institutional power.

Greer details how, with speech codes favoring liberal views and silencing dissent, higher education has become toxic to intellectual development and our once-prized institutions have become incubators for extreme identity politics.

Rooted in Affirmative Action

Greer argues the foundation for higher education’s decline is in “Diversity America’s” worship of affirmative action, a policy that has turned out to be far more corrosive to society than constructive, creating more problems than it has solved.

While affirmative action was taking hold, political correctness came into vogue, and years later it spawned today’s infamous concern over “micro-aggressions.” Now a common complaint on college campuses, a microaggression is defined as any word, conversation, or action that could be construed, however implausibly, as a denigration of a minority group—or even a majority group, such as women.

Microaggressions, in turn, have brought on “trigger warnings,” which are notices placed before text or speech explaining that what follows might offend someone’s sensibilities. Schools began to publish handbooks of things that could be considered microaggressions, which led to the development of “safe spaces” on most campuses, locations where students would be safe from any communications that might make them uncomfortable.

Numerous psychologists now argue such absurdities are leading to depression and anxiety instead of critical thinking among the students whose childhoods are thus being extended instead of ended.

Who’s in Charge Here?

Greer’s book is filled with amazing stories of crazy student control and administrative cowardice.

My favorite illustration took place at Yale University, where a standard liberal professor and dean of housing defended his wife, a fellow Yale administrator, for stating students at Halloween should be allowed to wear any costume they wished, even if some students found them offensive. A black female student berated him for threatening her safety as a minority by allowing students to wear their choice of costume. She was supported by enough students to force the couple to step down from their positions at Yale.

The book deals extremely well with the impact of Black Lives Matter on college campuses, whose influence on the town of Ferguson, Missouri greatly affected the University of Missouri. That school was brought to its knees in 2015 by student protests that closed the school for a while. The administration fully sided with the protesting students. In 2016, the university suffered the consequences of its capitulation, as registration declined 20 percent and the school suffered a $32 million budget shortfall.

Phony Crime Stories

Probably the easiest target for social justice warriors has been the Greek fraternities and sororities, most of which are very white and stand for a tradition of good friends and good times on campus.

Similarly, most readers will recall the fraudulent story about the Duke University men’s lacrosse team a few years ago, and perhaps more recently the Rolling Stone story of rape at the University of Virginia, both of which proved to be without a shred of evidence. Greer supplements these with a dozen other stories of leftist-generated scandals on other college campuses, which activists likewise created out of thin air.

The virulent strain of identity politics Greer identifies has infected college campuses more than any other portion of society. The young people have energy and are willing to consider extreme political ideas, and the left has easily created this safe space culture.

“Colleges are no longer simply places where students go to learn for four years,” Greer writes. “A subsidized commune for maturing adults is a more apt analogy for the role universities now serve.” Students now expect the school to solve their personal problems, in addition to—or instead of—providing an education.

Trump vs. PC

In the epilogue to the book, written just after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, Greer explains what a horror Trump’s move into the White House was for the campus movement, where voting for Trump was characterized as a “hate crime.” In his election campaign, Trump had consistently derided political correctness, and his victory should give some strength to those on our college campuses who want to stand up against the abuse they have been taking.

This marvelous narrative will likely be followed by many similar books describing the blight on our campuses, but it is not likely that any will do it better.

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The Heartland Institute is a national nonprofit organization based in Arlington Heights, Illinois. Its mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to social and economic problems. For more information, visit our Web site at heartland.org or call 312/377-4000.

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