California Charter Advocates Show Power in Primaries

By Elizabeth BeShears

Groups supporting charter schools were responsible for nearly one-third of the record $27.9 million of independent expenditures in California’s primary races this year.

The groups—including the Parent Teacher Alliance, sponsored by the California Charter Schools Association Advocates and EdVoice—spent millions of dollars on more than 40 candidates pursuing seats in the California Senate and State Assembly. They also backed numerous candidates for local school boards and city positions, many of whom were victorious in the June primaries and will advance to the general election in November.

California uses a “top-two” primary system, meaning the two candidates who receive the most votes advance, and candidates from the same party can face off against each other in the general election.
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Illinois Avoids School Shutdown with Last-Minute Stopgap Budget

By Kenneth Artz and Andrea Dillon

Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner (R) signed a series of last-minute stopgap budget bills, ensuring Illinois public schools receive necessary funding to open on time in the fall.

Illinois has not operated with a full budget in nearly a year and a half. In a June press conference, Rauner said Democratic leaders wouldn’t agree to a budget deal “unless the funding formula changes and we get a lot more money for [Chicago Public Schools].”

The Illinois Senate passed legislation in May to provide CPS with $205 million in pension relief and an additional $175 million in funding compared to what was received in 2015, but the House did not act on the bill.

In June, Senate Democrats proposed increasing education funding by $750 million, sending $287 million of it to CPS. Senate Republicans expressed concern downstate school districts would suffer as a result of the “bailout” given to CPS, which faces a $1 billion budget deficit that was caused in large part by a lack of funding for teachers’ pensions.

CPS agreed to pay $676 million to the Chicago Teachers’ Pension Fund in June, leaving CPS with just $24 million in the bank.

Lawmakers had until July 1 to reach a deal to ensure schools opened on time. Rauner signed the temporary stopgap budget on June 30. The budget gives the state’s public schools $11 billion, which should keep them open for a year, and it will also provide $700 million to fund other social services for six months.

CPS will receive about $100 million in extra state aid compared to 2015, and the state will give $205 million to the Chicago Teachers’ Pension Fund. The legislation also allows the Chicago Board of Education to raise property taxes by $250 million to help pay for teachers’ pensions.

‘A Bridge to the Future’

State Sen. Karen McConnaughay (R-St. Charles) says the budget is a temporary fix.

“It is by no means a perfect solution. It’s a bridge to the future. There’s a bit of a sigh of relief, but there’s no reason to be celebrating, because we still have a lot of work to do.”

Ted Dabrowski, vice president of policy at the Illinois Policy Institute, says Illinois has many problems the stopgap budget doesn’t address.

“The stopgap budget, we have to realize, was a political decision, and it does nothing to fix Illinois’ problems,” Dabrowski said. “It doesn’t change how we spend money. It doesn’t reform anything. And so the same problems that existed before continue to exist from a structural standpoint.”

Holding CPS Accountable

State Rep. Ron Sandack (R-Downers Grove) says throwing more money at the problem is not a solution.

“The CPS plan transfers money from districts like mine to Chicago,” Sandack said. “Much of the state will subsidize Chicago, which has become a bottomless pit without a lot of accountability. I’m amenable to working on changes to the state’s funding system, but CPS needs to implement some accountability, become more transparent, and hold a referendum, and it needs a path to show better outcomes for its students. Throwing more money at a broken system doesn’t make sense to me.”

McConnaughay says freeing districts to innovate is necessary to reform education.

“I believe in local control, empowering local school districts with as many tools as possible to provide the highest quality education to kids,” McConnaughay said. “In some districts, privatization makes a lot of sense. I think it’s important that the General Assembly stays away from creating impediments to that and instead creates as many opportunities as possible to create alternatives where they make sense.”

Kenneth Artz (kartz@heartland.org) writes from Dallas, Texas. Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.
invited the public to comment within 60 days of the publication of the regulations.

As of July, DOE had received thousands of comments regarding the proposed regulations. More than 1,000 members of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union, submitted the same comment asking DOE “to support the flexibility afforded to local stakeholders, including educators like me.” The Network for Public Education’s website urges people to “stop [U.S. Secretary of Education John] King’s test and punish regulations.”

In June King met with Republican senators, who said the proposed summative regulations are not part of ESSA. Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chairman of the Senate education committee, told King in April after he was newly confirmed as secretary, “Not only are newly confirmed as secretary, “Not only is what you’re doing against the law, is what you’re doing against the law, the way you’re trying to do it is against the way you’re trying to do it is against the law, another provision in the law.”

House lawmakers told King the proposed new spending rules would harm school districts.

Persistent Federal Control
Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, says King is not committed to implementing the flexibility Congress intended to grant the states in passing ESSA.

“The congressional intent of ESSA is quite clear: to hand authority over key education policy decisions back to the states. Unfortunately, Secretary of Education John King [right] doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo. Perhaps it’s not surprising, but it’s still deeply disappointing that he is refusing to implement congressional compromises in good faith.”

MICHAEL PETRILLI
PRESIDENT
THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE

Proposed School Accountability Regs Criticized

“The congressional intent of ESSA is quite clear: to hand authority over key education policy decisions back to the states. Unfortunately, Secretary of Education John King [right] doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo. Perhaps it’s not surprising, but it’s still deeply disappointing that he is refusing to implement congressional compromises in good faith.”

MICHAEL PETRILLI
PRESIDENT
THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE

“The new law says that student engagement and school climate may be used as accountability factors, but this leads to invasive data mining on grit and perseverance,” Effrem said. “Even if that type of research weren’t creepy, invasive, and unconstitutional, the experts in the field admit that this type of data is subjective, unhelpful, and should definitely not be used in accountability schemes.”

‘A Looming Disaster’
Petrilli says DOE’s new ESSA rules have a rough road ahead of them.

“I do think we’re going to see some states push back on the executive branch overreach apparent in the rulemaking process,” said Petrilli.

Effrem says several factors may make the proposed regulations a “disaster.”

“We have terrible and invasive tests with a punitive, ineffective, unconstitutional, and federally mandated accountability system that has now been made worse by ESSA with all of these Alice-in-Wonderland rules and proposed regulations based on a very byzantine law with no statistical standard, multiple different indecipherable factors, and Orwellian psychological data mining,” Effrem said. “It’s a looming disaster.”

Jenni White (jwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
The United Teachers Union of Los Angeles (UTLA) spent the final weeks of the 2015–16 school year organizing protests against charter schools and releasing a commissioned study that claims charters have caused other Los Angeles public schools to lose hundreds of millions of dollars.

UTLA, together with the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, received a backlash from parents after announcing plans for a protest to be held outside a public school campus that cohosts charter schools. In response, more than 500 charter school parents signed a letter asking UTLA to cancel the protest, which read, “If these actions are anything like the ones we’ve endured in the past, they will be threatening, disruptive and full of lies.”

UTLA went ahead with the protest, and it also commissioned and funded a study titled “The Cost of Charter Schools to LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District).” The study was released in May 2016 on UTLA’s website with the headline, “LAUSD Loses More Than Half a Billion Dollars to Charter School Growth.”

“Unions often generate their own reports trying to claim charter schools are not serving all kids, as if our traditional system is.”
—JIM BLEW, PRESIDENT, STUDENTS FIRST

“Unions often generate their own reports trying to claim charter schools are not serving all kids, as if our traditional system is,” Blew said. “They like to talk about special education and how charter schools aren’t serving them. Anyone who studies it would see charter schools are serving a lot of special-ed kids and actually do a better job of serving them.”

Larry Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, says even the school district disagreed with the study’s findings.

“I was quite surprised that the district not only said that essentially the report is bogus, they said [charter schools] actually save money,” Sand said. “Just as importantly, the union did not come back to refute the piece.”

Jim Blew, president of Students First, says the reports the teachers unions produce are constructed to fit their agenda.

“The union has fixed costs that were promised to them by elected officials, and they see that it will be harder and harder to negotiate on behalf of their current teachers because they have so many retired and older teachers that are sucking up the resources,” Sand said. “You have to have an enemy to blame.”

According to data gathered by CCSA, charter school enrollment has steadily increased as traditional public school enrollment has declined.

“The evidence is accumulating that charter schools are working,” Blew said.

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

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**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

Restoring Free Speech and Liberty on Campus reveals how the deprivation of free speech, due process, and other basic civil liberties in the name of political causes harms the truth-seeking mission of universities. Drawing on personal experience and in-depth research, Downs analyzes the problem and the effectiveness of conscientious political resistance by faculty and students in renewing the principles of free speech and civil liberty.

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**Faulty Towers**

Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education

Roger E. Meiners and Ryan C. Amacher

“We must seriously reassess the rules and institutions that govern higher education. In the pathbreaking book, Faulty Towers, Amacher and Meiners are clear-headed and courageous guides for this important endeavor.”

—Donald J. Boudreaux, Professor of Economics, George Mason University

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.
By Michael McGrady

A South Dakota judge has ruled in favor of the state government in a lawsuit brought by two parents alleging the state’s adoption of a compact with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a group providing states with tests aligned with the Common Core State Standards, is unconstitutional.

"In South Dakota, we are, by law, supposed to develop our own educational standards, and instead we opted to ignore the will of the people and adopt the federal standards of Common Core," Hubbel said. “I dearly hope we will appeal.”

"They are guilty of malfeasance, because they used their official positions to surrender [South Dakota’s] state sovereignty over education policy to the governing board of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium."

TONCHI WEAVER, BOARD MEMBER
SD CITIZENS FOR LIBERTY

"They are guilty of malfeasance, because they used their official positions to surrender [South Dakota’s] state sovereignty over education policy to the governing board of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium," Weaver said.

"Common Core sacrifices the natural yearning for knowledge and truth on the altar of 'consensus' and collective thought," said Weaver. "Children have a right to be who they are, determine their own interests, develop their own talents, and blossom at their own pace."

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

Judge Rules South Dakota’s Common Core Adoption Legal

Calif. Charter Advocates Show Power in Primaries

Continued from page 1

Diane Ravitch, a well-known, outspoken critic of school choice, wrote on her blog following the California primary, "Public education in California is under siege by people and organizations who want to privatize the schools, remove them from democratic control, and hand them over to the charter industry."

Giving Voters a Choice

Lance Izumi, a senior fellow and senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, says the state’s top-two electoral system makes the primary victories even more significant.

"I think a lot of Republicans thought you would basically just have two liberals running against each other for a lot of these legislative seats, but it’s actually become a little bit more complex than that," Izumi said. "What’s happened is a number of pro-education reform organizations here in California have gotten into a lot of these primary races and have decided to support moderate Democrats who support education reform, and they’ve put in quite a bit of money into these targeted races.

“In some of these districts where you have two Democrats facing each other in the general election, one will be a pro-union, pro-California Teachers Association candidate, and another will be a pro-education reform candidate who supports charter schools," Izumi said. “So, at least on education issues, voters will have a choice on the two candidates. They won’t just be carbon-copy sympaths of the teachers unions.”

Seeking Balance

Richard Garcia, director of elections for the California Charter Schools Association Advocates, says his organization is trying to level the legislative playing field.

“We are looking to have a balance in the state legislature and across the state on education boards,” Garcia said. “Our goal is to have candidates and leaders who have that reasonable approach to issues and can filter through some of the nuances of education. We’re looking to have them put into seats at the state level and at the local level so there can be a fair approach to whether or not charter schools have an ability to petition for an opening or renewal, instead of having the more biased approach we’ve seen in recent years.”

Garcia says the California Charter Schools Association Advocates carefully selected the candidates it endorsed in the primary season and will continue to support them through the November general election.

“We’re looking at their background, community service, their professional careers as either sitting on boards or city councils, their track record for elevating student needs as a priority, and what they’ve done to help parents along the way as well,” Garcia said.

Elizabeth BeShears (liz.erob@gmail.com) writes from Trussville, Alabama.
N.C. District Pays Parents to Represent Schools

By Andrea Dillon

A North Carolina school district that has been using federal money to provide expense payments for parental involvement is experiencing a valuable return on its investment, the program’s director says.

The Guilford County School District began offering parents financial incentives to act as liaisons between their schools and the district during the 2013–14 school year. Twenty-four parents participated in the first year, representing district middle schools while earning $150 to help defray costs related to their volunteerism, such as gas for travel. The following school year, 65 liaisons took part in the program to represent the district’s elementary, middle, and high schools.

Guilford County Schools used federal Race to the Top grant money to pay the first 24 individuals and federal Title 1 money to fund the second group of 65 volunteers. School principals choose the parent volunteers, who attend monthly meetings on behalf of their schools.

‘A Solid Investment’

Lindsay Whitely, director of the Guilford Parent Academy, which runs the program, says the idea came from another district that used incentives “to help with parental outreach.”

“They were able to support parents and not pay them per se, but just provide additional considerations in the form of something that could help with gas money or materials that they might need in their roles as parent volunteers,” Whitely said. “For me, it has been a solid investment that has brought much larger dividends in terms of we’re paying those 24 parents. We’re giving them small rewards for doing different things. However, what they are doing is they are going out into the community and they are reaching a lot more parents than ordinarily we would be able to reach on our own.”

Whitely says the district conducts monthly meetings with the parent leaders to share best practices and educational tips for parents.

Some parents have even developed classes to reach specific school populations.

“We’ve had some of the parent leaders who have created English as a Second Language classes to reach their ESL populations at their schools,” Whitely said.

Sustainability Concerns

Not everyone sees programs such as the one in Guilford as having a positive return on investment in the classroom.

Terry Stoops, director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation, says these programs don’t have much data proving they actually increase parental engagement.

“If I don’t see a lot of empirical evidence that paying parents to participate in school activities does much to raise student achievement, I don’t believe these plans amount to much in the way of involvement,” Stoops said. “I don’t see a lot of empirical evidence that paying parents to participate in school activities does much to raise student achievement,” Stoops said. “I don’t believe these plans amount to much in the way of involvement. For one, with limited funds you are only able to capture a limited number of parents and get them involved. But more importantly, there is no guarantee that the activities that parents will engage in will enhance the education of students, of whatever school they attend, in a meaningful way.”

Stoops also questions the long-term sustainability of the program.

“Programs like this are not sustainable, financially,” Stoops said. “Usually, when these kind of pay-incentive programs arise, they are very short-lived, because the expense to maintain them usually exceeds the benefits that schools receive from them.”

Stoops says there are better ways funding could be used.

“Given the limited resources that schools already have, this is money that would be better much spent on other aspects of instruction,” Stoops said. “Whether it be instructional materials or personnel, … any number of things would be a better way to invest taxpayer money than to pay parents for what they already should be doing.”

Even some programs that start as good ideas—and I don’t count this as one—that have seed money from the federal government are usually very difficult to sustain at the local level,” Stoops said.

Stoops says Guilford County has a penchant for experimental programs.

“As far as experimentation, Guilford County is the one district in North Carolina that does more of it than any other district,” Stoops said. “They have used their student body as guinea pigs on more than one occasion, and in this case, they have brought in parents as well.”

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.
Colorado Board Votes to Keep Its Current School Rating System

By Ashley Bateman

The Colorado State Board of Education (CSB OE) voted to keep the state’s system for rating schools in place after a group of education reform and civil rights activists expressed concern over a proposed new plan.

Under the current system, schools are assigned points based on how well different groups of students perform on standardized tests. The number of points determines school ratings and school funding. At-risk students—who fall into various subgroups, such as low-income, special education, and “English as a Second Language”—are often counted multiple times, because they fall into multiple categories.

The system the state’s education department proposed would have created a combined subgroup of at-risk students, a move many education reform and civil rights activists deemed inequitable.

Twenty-two groups sent a letter to CSB OE in May urging it “to reconsider the adoption of a combined subgroup for accountability purposes, which would have significant implications for educational equity.”

The signers of the letter wrote “subgroup distinctions are meaningful,” and they claim ignoring “differences in history and identity” would mean school districts would not receive appropriate funding to meet the needs of very different groups of students. The letter also questioned “whether the use of super subgroups is consistent with the Every Student Succeeds Act as it is written.”

A majority of CSB OE voted in a straw poll in June to keep the current standards.

Holding Government Accountable

Ross Izard, a senior education policy analyst at the Independence Institute and a signer of the letter, says the proposed rating system would have reduced accountability and would not have benefited many students.

“The combined subgroup change was ostensibly proposed to increase fairness in our accountability system, but its effect would have been to sweep a challenging population of students under the rug and decouple hundreds of millions of dollars in spending from direct accountability,” Izard said. “I don’t think it’s just about ferreting out chronically failing schools and school systems. It’s also about making sure that all schools, regardless of performance level, are held accountable for producing results with the students they serve. It’s about making sure an enormous, taxpayer-funded government enterprise is held responsible for the outcomes it produces and the billions it spends.”

Counting Kids Twice

Izard says it makes sense to count at-risk students more than once.

“The complaint is that the current system can and does count the same student twice when he or she falls into more than one subgroup,” Izard said. “For instance, a low-income, minority, English-language learner would be counted three times, and a low-income, special-education student would be counted twice.

“Those students do indeed count more than once against a school or district when they perform poorly,” Izard said. “But the reverse is also true; they count more than once if they do well.”

Stephanie Garcia, executive director of Arc of Pueblo, a group that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and a signer of the letter, says counting low-performing students multiple times benefits them.

“Counting kids twice when they are high achievers doesn’t seem to be a problem, but it does when it comes to struggling students.”

Izard says schools should have a can-do attitude for students of all abilities.

“There’s an underlying assumption that ‘those kids’ can never do better, that schools can’t help them or be held responsible for them,” Izard said. “Our nation is built upon the notion that anyone, regardless of demography or background, can compete, succeed, and experience the dignity of earned success if he or she is willing to work hard and play by the rules. With that in mind, we ought to be running away from the idea that demography foretells destiny as quickly as we possibly can.”

Funding Individuals

Izard says the focus should be on the needs of individuals rather than broad initiatives.

“Our school finance system tends to fund programs rather than individual students,” Izard said. “Districts and schools receive millions in state and federal money for special-education programs, low-income programs, and English-language-learner programs. The fact that an individual student happens to be involved in more than one of those programs does not change the fact that the district receives specific funding for each, nor does it alleviate the burden of providing taxpayers with direct accountability for the results those separately funded programs produce.”

Izard says school boards have a can-do attitude for students of all abilities.

“There’s an underlying assumption that ‘those kids’ can never do better, that schools can’t help them or be held responsible for them,” Izard said. “Our nation is built upon the notion that anyone, regardless of demography or background, can compete, succeed, and experience the dignity of earned success if he or she is willing to work hard and play by the rules. With that in mind, we ought to be running away from the idea that demography foretells destiny as quickly as we possibly can.”

Aggregation Agenda

Garcia says education bureaucrats crafted the proposal in order to hide problems.

“The stakeholder group [included] 28 superintendents,” Garcia said. “Grouping [subgroups] all together, it may make a school district’s data look better, but it is not a way to provide transparency. “Parents want transparency,” Garcia said. “We have school choice. Parents want to get on the website and look at achievement, and if I have a kid with special needs, I want to see how that school is performing in that area particularly.”

Praises Board’s Decision

Izard says he’s satisfied with the way the board ultimately voted.

“I applaud the Colorado State Board of Education for making the right call for students and taxpayers,” Izard said. “We have a constitutional duty to provide a ‘thorough and uniform’ public education system in our state for all students. Progress isn’t incentivized or produced by simply shoveling ‘those kids’ into a bucket implicitly labeled ‘other.’”

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

INTERNET INFO

Mo. Court Rules Students Have Right to Transfer to Better Schools

By Michael McGrady

The Eastern District of the Missouri Court of Appeals ruled students from the failing Normandy School District have the right to transfer to higher-performing schools in other districts.

The Missouri State Board of Education (MBOE) labeled the failing Normandy School District “unaccredited” in 2013. In 2014, the board took over the district and created a new budget and academic calendar, changed personnel, and renamed the district the “Normandy Schools Collaborative” (NCS). Because the newly formed NCS had no past performance data, it became classified as “accredited as a state oversight district.”

The district’s failing accreditation status had allowed nearly 1,000 students to transfer to better-performing schools in other districts. The transfer law applies only to unaccredited districts, and after NCS was reclassified, most of the region’s school boards voted in August 2014 to send the transfer students back to Normandy.

A group of parents then filed a lawsuit against the school districts alleging their children were wrongfully prevented from reenrolling at their new schools outside Normandy. The parents also sued the state board of education, alleging the way MBOE reclassified Normandy’s accreditation was not valid.

In February 2015, St. Louis County Circuit Court Judge Michael Burton told area school districts their schools must accept Normandy transfer students, ruling, “The state board had no authority to create the classification that it did.”

MBOE appealed Burton’s ruling in March 2015. The appellate court wrote in its June 2016 opinion, “The Collaborative simply cannot move from ‘unaccredited’ to ‘accredited’ without following the required procedures. Accordingly, the unaccredited district, lapsed and proceeding under an alternative governing structure, is subject to the transfer statute.”

A spokeswoman from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch state attorneys are considering whether to appeal the case to the state’s supreme court.

“Protecting Students

Patrick J. Wolf, a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas’ College of Education, says state lawmakers must put a system in place to prevent such a situation from happening again.

“Missouri needs a ‘once in, always in’ provision to protect students from being forced back into their assigned public school if conditions change,” Wolf said. “Eligibility should be expanded beyond just students in ‘failing’ public schools.”

Michael McShane, director of education policy at the Show-Me Institute, says he has “mixed feelings” about the outcome of the court ruling.

“Limiting school choice options to a small number of students is going to stifle the supply of high-quality schools,” McShane said. “I think it is a useful escape valve, but it doesn’t address the underlying issue.

“The real solution for these problems is to allow students in these districts to enroll in charter schools and across district lines in higher-performing schools,” McShane said. “These students need to have the right to choose where they go.”

Michael McGrady (mmcgrady@uccs.edu) writes from Colorado Springs, Colorado.
Michigan Moves Two Bills to Replace Common Core

By Kimberly Morin

Two bills that would repeal and replace Common Core State Standards in Michigan are progressing through the two chambers of the state’s legislature.

Senate Bill 826, sponsored by state Sen. Patrick Colbeck (R-Canton), and its companion, House Bill 5444, would terminate the state’s use of Common Core and require the state Department of Education to adopt the standards Massachusetts used during the 2008–09 school year.

SB 826 passed the Senate Education Committee in April. The full Senate did not approve the bill before lawmakers adjourned in June. By passing through the Education Committee, SB 826 is eligible to be brought to the floor for a vote when the legislature reconvenes in the fall.

On the Stop Common Core in Michigan website, Karen Braun cites the Senate “Fiscal Analysis” as a possible reason for a delay in the Senate bringing the bill forward for a vote. The analysis’ authors wrote, “The bill would have a significant negative fiscal impact on the Department of Education and local school districts and boards.”

HB 5444 remains under consideration in the Michigan House Education Committee.

Fighting for Local Control

Colbeck says his desire to fight for local control of education was inspired by members of his own community.

“I had a lot of constituents and active members of the community who said, ‘You have to keep digging into this. This isn’t just about common standards across the board.’”

PATRICK COLBECK
STATE SENATOR
CANTON, MICHIGAN

Lawsuit Challenging Florida Education System Is Dismissed

By Michael McGrady

A Florida county judge dismissed a lawsuit challenging multiple elements of the state’s education system, including Florida’s scholarship program for children with disabilities, tax-credit scholarships, and the state’s charter school program.

A group of activists led by the Southern Legal Counsel first filed the lawsuit in 2009. In Citizens for Strong Schools v. Florida State Board of Education, the plaintiffs alleged the state failed “to make adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders,” as dictated by the state’s constitution.

During the four-week court trial, Circuit Court Judge George Reynolds analyzed the state’s policies on private school vouchers, standardized testing, educational funding, educational attainment, and graduation. In late May, Reynolds dismissed the case, writing in his opinion, “The weight of the evidence shows that the state has made education a top priority both in terms of implementation of research-based education policies and reforms, as well as education funding.”

Citizens for Strong Schools announced it plans to appeal the judge’s decision to reject the case.

Victory for School Choice

More than 100,000 students are enrolled in Flori-
Gates Foundation Acknowledges Common Core Shortcomings

By Jenni White

In her annual open letter detailing the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CEO Sue Desmond-Hellmann admitted the nonprofit had found it “a real struggle to make system-wide change” in U.S. education.

“The Gates Foundation has spent hundreds of millions of dollars developing, promoting, and lobbying for Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a set of national learning standards dictating what K–12 students should know in math and English. The foundation ‘underestimated the level of resources and support required for our public education systems to be well-equipped to implement the standards,’” wrote Desmond-Hellmann.

“We missed an early opportunity to sufficiently engage educators—particularly teachers—but also parents and communities so that the benefits of the standards could take flight from the beginning,” Desmond-Hellmann wrote.

“The mission of improving education in America is both vast and complicated, and the Gates Foundation doesn’t have all the answers,” said Desmond-Hellmann.

The letter closes by promising the Gates Foundation will “double down” on its efforts “to make sure teachers have what they need to make the most of their unique capabilities.”

Failure to Launch

Shane Vander Hart, editor of the website Truth in American Education, says Common Core was flawed from the beginning.

“The whole process behind the Common Core State Standards was flawed, because it was a top-down effort,” Vander Hart said. “It is nonsensical not to have engaged parents early on. Parents know their kids better than any teacher would know them, and parents are the primary stakeholders in their children’s education.”

‘Elitist Approach’

Emmett McGroarty, executive director of the American Principles Project, says the Gates Foundation used an “elitist approach” to push Common Core into the nation’s schools, instead of allowing states to create and adopt their own standards, as they had always done before.

Wyoming Cuts Ties with Testing Group Aligned with Common Core Standards

By Jenni White

The Wyoming Department of Education has ended its affiliation with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a group that provides states with high-stakes achievement tests aligned with Common Core State Standards.

Wyoming has been a member of SBAC since 2010. The state currently uses the Proficiency Assessment for Wyoming Students (PAWS), which is not an SBAC test. State Department of Education (DOE) officials announced in May 2016 they won’t be adopting the SBAC system when they seek bids for a new testing contract in the fall.

‘Nationalized Education’

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow says Wyoming is leaving SBAC, in part, because “[c]onsortia tests take states, like Wyoming, further down the road toward nationalized education.

“We have more freedom to move away from one-size-fits-all standards, such as Common Core, when we don’t also have a one-size-fits-all assessment,” Balow said. PAWS will sunset after the 2017 school year. Balow says it is in the best interests of students and taxpayers to collect bids for a new exam.

“Simply, we can do better than we have,” Balow said.

‘High Expectations’

“Statewide assessments should be carefully aligned to local and district assessments as part of a system that gives meaningful information about the performance of students and the effectiveness of education,” Balow said. “Wyoming wants to ‘have its cake and eat it too’ and will consider all proposals with high expectations.”

With the 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) formally giving states authority to determine their educational standards and assessment systems, “Now is the time to move further away from nationalized assessments and, hence, nationalized education,” Balow said.

Not Optimistic

Christy Hooley, a former public school teacher and a member of Wyoming Against the Common Core, says DOE does not share Balow’s view on Common Core.

“What the state superintendent says and what the Department of Education does are not always the same things,” Hooley said. “The steps the DOE takes are putting tools in the hands of the teachers to continue down the road toward Common Core, to embed it even more rather than to free up the districts to use whatever they want.”

Hooley says the Wyoming Education Association newsletters refer frequently to Common Core-aligned materials and provide links to make it easier for teachers to align their curricula with Common Core.

“We have more freedom to move away from one-size-fits-all standards, [such as] Common Core, when we don’t also have a one-size-fits-all assessment.”

JILLIAN BALOW
STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
WYOMING

“We missed an early opportunity to sufficiently engage educators—particularly teachers—but also parents and communities so that the benefits of the standards could take flight from the beginning,” Desmond-Hellmann wrote.

“They shunned world-class content experts and concerned parents alike, [and they] instead [put their trust in] a standards development and adoption process predicated on a monopoly and on an end-run around the checks and balances of our constitutional structure,” McGroarty said.

Vander Hart says there’s a reason members of the education establishment didn’t involve the public in the process.

“Federalism is inconvenient for educrats, because what they really want is national standards,” Vander Hart said. “They didn’t engage early on because they knew that effort would be sabotaged, because parents, educators, and state legislators would actually want to—gasp—read the standards.”

Jenni White (jlwplusdmw@gmail.com) writes from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is appealing a Las Vegas judge’s ruling determining the state’s education savings accounts (ESA) program is constitutional.

Ninety-six percent of K–12 students in Nevada are eligible for the state’s ESA program. Depending on the student, accounts are funded with all or a portion of the state money that would have been spent for his or her education in a public school. Parents are allowed to transfer their students out of public schools and use the funds in the ESA for private school tuition, textbooks, tutoring, or other services. The ESA program is available statewide.

ACLU sued Nevada in August 2015, alleging the ESA program violated the state constitution’s Blaine amendment, which bans the use of public money for “sectarian purposes.”

Parents in Charge, Judge Rules
In May, Nevada District Court Judge Eric Johnson dismissed the lawsuit, ruling, “The state has no influence or control over how any parent makes his or her genuine and independent choice to spend his or her ESA funds.”

Johnson wrote in his decision, “Parents, if they choose to use the ESA program, must expend the ESA funds for secular education goods and services, even if they choose to obtain those services from religion affiliated schools.”

ACLU is now appealing the ruling to the Nevada Supreme Court. The organization’s Nevada legal director, Amy Rose, said in a statement the purpose of the appeal is “to cease private religious schools’ ability to use taxpayer dollars to indoctrinate and discriminate against students on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and other grounds.”

Nevada’s education system has continuously been ranked as one of the worst in the country.

Michael Schaus, communications director at the Nevada Policy Research Institute, says the only solution ESA critics propose to solve the state’s education problem is to increase government spending.

“It’s hard to ignore that Nevada ranks 49th or 50th out of the nation in terms of student achievement,” Schaus said. “The critics’ ‘solution’ to the state’s failing education system is, unsurprisingly, to increase funding and continue the status quo.”

Schaus says critics are also unduly concerned about how public schools will be funded if money is diverted from them. “It is true that public schools won’t be receiving money for students that they are no longer obligated to educate, but this really isn’t different from normal,” Schaus said. “The only difference is that the state’s share of per-pupil funding, which was previously going to the school, will now go to fund the student’s ESA rather than revert back to the state’s general fund. Because schools will continue to receive all their local and federal funds, this means that the overall per-pupil funding, from all sources, will actually increase as more and more students take advantage of ESAs.”

Meeting Individual Needs
Tim Keller, managing director of the Arizona office of the Institute for Justice, says ESAs are all about meeting children’s needs.

“There is simply no one-size-fits-all approach to educating children,” Keller said. “Educational choice programs like Nevada’s ESA program empower parents to find the educational setting or settings that best serve each one of their children’s unique educational needs.”

Tori Hart (tori.heartland@gmail.com) is a government relations intern at The Heartland Institute.
Gov. Christie Proposes New Jersey Charter School Reforms

By Glen A. Sproviero

ew Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R) has proposed a series of reforms that he says would reduce regulation of charter schools in the state.

Christie has showed support for charter schools since taking office. During a news conference in March, Christie said charter schools are a “salvation for families, especially in failing urban districts,” and he told legislators, “If you try to stick it to charter schools, I will veto any bill.”

During the New Jersey Charter Schools Conference in May, Christie proposed several reforms aimed at giving the schools greater flexibility. These include allowing schools to hire teachers who meet the school’s own standards for certification to fill the growing number of teaching positions, greater access to public funds to upgrade facilities, and an expedited accreditation-renewal process. Christie also proposed allowing the creation of single-sex and special-purpose schools, such as institutions catering to older students.

Christie’s proposals received strong criticism from the state’s teachers union. The proposals must receive approval from the New Jersey State Board of Education.

‘Welcome Changes’

Janellen Duffy, executive director of the charter advocacy group JerseyCAN, says Christie’s proposals reflect the needs of the state’s charter schools.

“There has been tremendous growth and improvement with respect to charter schools under Gov. Christie,” Duffy said. “These reforms truly reflect feedback from the field and draw on best practices from other cities and states throughout the country. These are welcome changes that will allow charter schools to better serve the needs of students and families across New Jersey.”

‘Incentive to Succeed’

Donna Siminski, policy director of the New Jersey Charter Schools Association, says Christie’s proposals will give charters more freedom to improve on their own.

“The standards seek to take student performance and growth into account, along with finance issues, to create one whole picture,” Siminski said. “While charter schools often don’t know where they stand with respect to renewing their accreditation, the proposed regulations aim to provide schools an opportunity to know what they need to do to succeed.

“There are 89 charter schools operating in New Jersey, with over 40,000 pupils in attendance,” Siminski said. “There are an additional 20,000 students currently on waiting lists. The new regulations will allow schools to grow, be independent, and be responsible for their own success. Given the amount of work involved in starting a charter school, there is substantial incentive to succeed.”
Kansas Increases Funding to Avoid School Shutdown

By Michael McGrady

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback (R) signed legislation to increase funding for poorer school districts, ensuring his state’s public school system will avoid a shutdown.

Brownback called Kansas lawmakers back to Topeka for a special legislative session in June to determine how to come up with $38 million to prevent school closures after the Kansas Supreme Court ruled the state’s school-funding system was inequitable and unconstitutional. The court first made its ruling in February and reaffirmed its decision in May.

The bill Brownback approved increases the state’s total education budget of $4 billion by less than 1 percent, diverting $38 million from other parts of the state budget and from wealthier districts to poor districts.

"Judicial Bullying"

Dave Trabert, president of the Kansas Policy Institute, says the Kansas Supreme Court’s ruling on school finance was “a way to establish [its] desired dominance over the [state] legislature.”

The court’s behavior is bad for students and teachers, Trabert says. “Nothing is accomplished by the [Kansas] Supreme Court threatening to close schools because a tiny piece of funding isn’t allocated as the court prefers or by legislators vowing to stand firm against judicial bullying,” Trabert said. “In the meantime, almost a half-million students are threatened with loss of their constitutional right to education, and 70,000 school employees could lose their paychecks.”

Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, says courts use their power to impose their preferences on duly elected lawmakers.

“Courts think they have the right idea of the amount of money in educational funding,” Smarick said. “This is just the latest chapter in a fight between legislatures, governors, and courts over the right source of funding for schools.”

Will of the People

Trabert says consideration of equity should “absolutely be included in questions of the ‘people’s will’ and the Kansas Constitution,” but that was likely not the case in this instance.

“It’s hard to imagine that ‘the people’ would prefer to have schools closed than to have students be exposed to a system with a few possibly misplaced dollars,” Trabert said.

Trabert says the Kansas Supreme Court doesn’t give the Kansas Legislature any freedom to make real choices.

“The court repeatedly says the Kansas Legislature can resolve equity in a variety of ways of their own device, but that’s like Henry Ford telling customers they could choose whatever color car they wanted as long as it was black,” Trabert said.

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

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Georgia District: No Education Degree Required to Teach

By Ashley Bateman

To fill 450 open teaching positions for the 2016–17 school year, the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) in Georgia has extended eligibility to applicants who do not have an education degree.

As enrollment in college education programs continues to decline, Georgia schools are forced to find non-traditional teachers to head their classrooms.

Heather Bilton—the talent, acquisition, and retention coordinator for SCCPSS—said, “Even if we hired everybody from our two local universities, we would not have enough people to fill our vacancies.”

To be eligible for Savannah-Chatham’s Alternative Pathways to Teaching certification program, an applicant must pass a background check, possess a bachelor’s degree or higher, have a minimum overall GPA of 2.5 if the degree was obtained in the past 10 years, and pass two educator assessments.

The program allows a teacher to “work as you go” and become certified as a teacher in one to three years.

Value of Education Degrees

Ben Scafidi, a senior fellow at the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, says people who did not major in education are usually more qualified to teach than those who earned an education degree.

“Most studies find alternative teachers are slightly more effective relating to test scores,” Scafidi said. “A few studies have actually plotted the distributions. Under very plausible assumptions, you could hire alternative teachers randomly and do better in terms of effectiveness than if you banned alternative teachers.”

“Doesn’t Seem to Matter Much”

Éric Warene, assistant professor at the Georgia Gwinnett College School of Education, says teacher certification does not have much of an impact.

“Certification itself doesn’t seem to matter much at all,” Warene said. “There’s a lot more variation among teachers who are certified and among teachers who are not certified. There are really good certified teachers and really good uncertified teachers.”

Bilton says the Alternative Pathways program has allowed SCCPSS to diversify the classes they can now offer students.

“[Regarding] the career, technical, and agricultural education positions, almost all of our teachers come from an alternative pathway,” Bilton said. “We have law enforcement, cybersecurity, web design, the business and marketing positions; about 90 percent [of teachers in these subject areas] come from an alternative pathway. They have a degree, they’ve worked in the field, and they are retired or just want a career change and want to teach.”

Scafidi says public schools encourage the belief alternatively trained teachers aren’t qualified.

“A lot of research finds that public schools aren’t very good at identifying teachers on the front end,” Scafidi said. “Part of that is the bias against hiring alternatively trained teachers. They are people that had high GPAs in college [and] majored in content fields like math, English, or economics, so by having a bias against hiring those folks, they’re not hiring well on the front end.”

Local Control

In Savannah-Chatham County, the district relies on localized decision-making for hiring success, Bilton says.

“Our principals hire for their schools, so we don’t hire centrally and hire out,” Bilton said. “We want principals to have accountability. We screen for eligibility, and then we allow the principals to make the selection.”

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

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“We get people from all different places. People with really cool backgrounds who can help bring the content alive. We have teacher after teacher after teacher who has come through an alternative pathway who is highly effective with students.”

HEATHER BILTON
SAVANNAH-CHATHAM COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM
Common Core Does Not Prepare Students for College

By Jenni White

According to findings published by the American College Testing Inc.’s (ACT) National Curriculum Survey, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) fail to prepare students for college.

ACT conducts its survey every three to five years, during which it collects “data about what entering college students should know and be able to do to be ready for college-level coursework in English, math, reading, and science.” ACT surveys thousands of K–12 teachers, college professors, and workforce supervisors and employees.

ACT’s survey, released in June, concluded, “There are discrepancies between some state standards and what some educators believe is important for college readiness.”

According to the survey, only 16 percent of college educators said incoming students were prepared for post-secondary coursework.

Regarding mathematics, the report found, “Although implementation of the Common Core State Standards has led to changes in mathematics curricula, significant discrepancies remain between the standards and teachers’ instructional practices.”

Elementary school teachers reported they continue teaching some of the topics omitted from Common Core in later grades because they “perceive that students are entering their classrooms unprepared for the demands that later mathematics courses will make of them.”

Regarding reading and writing, the survey reported college instructors “find their entering students’ preparation in many of these skills to be lacking.”

Inadequate Expectations
Zeev Wurman, a former U.S. Department of Education official under President George W. Bush, says there’s a disconnect between what K–12 teachers think students should know and what college professors expect.

“Many K–12 teachers are unaware of, or misunderstand, which skills are actually needed to succeed in college,” Wurman said. “Most are aware of what SAT/ACT tests expect, yet those are not necessarily the skills needed to succeed in college but [are] rather, at best, skills necessary to be accepted into college.”

Mary Byrne, a former college professor and a member of the Missouri Coalition Against Common Core, says current curricula does not prepare students for college-level courses.

“It’s not that college instructors aren’t valuing what is being taught, it’s that what is being taught does not address all of the types of knowledge-based competencies for post-secondary writing assignments.”

MARY BYRNE
MISSOURI COALITION AGAINST COMMON CORE

“Common Core came along and pretended it could change and discard large chunks of curriculum overnight,” Wurman said. “Having been written by unqualified people with barely any record or experience with K–12 education, it is unsurprising they have failed. This failure is only now coming to light. How unsurprising. How shameful.”

‘Unsurprising’ Failure
Wurman says the developers of CCSS made vast, unjustified changes to K–12 curricula “overnight.”

Validation Process Was ’a Sham’
Wurman says students’ lack of career and college readiness is a result of the process by which CCSS was validated.

“The people most responsible for validating this set of skills for Common Core, David Conley of University of Oregon and William Schmidt of Michigan State University, launched their own ‘validation studies’ of Common Core long after they had already certified that Common Core is ‘aligned’ with college expectations,” Wurman said. “Unsurprisingly, they found what they had already previously certified is, indeed, aligned. Unsurprisingly, ... those studies, and the whole certification process of Common Core, were a sham.”

Careers Over College
Byrne says K–12 teachers are preparing kids for jobs, not college.

“The expectations of the college instructors are for students to demonstrate the college readiness of professional preparation that is not being taught by middle school and high school teachers, who are preparing students for knowledge and skills generally expected of students entering lifelong careers,” Byrne said.

“Common Core is ‘aligned’ with college expectations,” Wurman said. “The expectations of the college are for students to demonstrate the college readiness of professional preparation that is not being taught by middle school and high school teachers, who are preparing students for knowledge and skills generally expected of students entering lifelong careers,” Byrne said.

INTERNET INFO

www.cascadepolicy.org
The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi has ordered Mississippi’s Cleveland School District to desegregate its schools and combine the district’s middle school and high school.

More than 99 percent of students enrolled at D.M. Smith Middle School and East Side High School are black. Nearby Cleveland High School’s student body is 47 percent white and 45 percent black, and Margaret Green Junior High is 53 percent black and 41 percent white. Prior to the ruling, the district utilized an open-enrollment policy, so students could have attended either East Side High School or Cleveland High School.

The case, Cowan v. Cleveland School District, began in 1965, when parents and guardians filed a lawsuit alleging the Cleveland School District operated “on a racially segregated basis.” In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a motion “to enforce the previously-entered desegregation orders governing the district and compel the district’s compliance with federal law.”

The U.S. District Court filed its opinion in May. Judge Debra Brown ordered the district to comply with the Justice Department decision that “the only way to achieve desegregation is by consolidating Cleveland’s high schools and middle schools.” The district must consolidate its high schools and middle schools at the beginning of the 2016–17 school year.

“The delay in desegregation has deprived generations of students of the constitutionally guaranteed right of an integrated education,” Brown wrote in her opinion.

The Cleveland School District issued a statement saying it was “considering options for appeal.”

Federal Interference
Forest Thigpen, president of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy, says the federal government is responsible for the case having finally been decided.

“The courts have been involved in the Cleveland School District on and off for more than 50 years,” Thigpen said. “The Obama Justice Department decided to resurrect this case a few years ago and have been pressuring the court to make a decision.”

Ignoring the Facts
Thigpen says most people in the district believe the schools are complying with the law.

“The Justice Department looks only at the numbers, and despite the fact that students can attend whichever high school they want, and despite the fact that Cleveland High School is racially balanced, they see that East Side is almost 100 percent black and they consider that unacceptable,” Thigpen said. “They also ignore the fact that East Side is rated higher academically than Cleveland High School, which shows there is no bias in the quality of instruction toward the school with more white students.”

Leslie Hiner, vice president of programs for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, says the Cleveland School District has racially balanced open-enrollment policies.

“In the Cleveland School District, there are magnet schools, open enrollment, open enrollment for courses where students receive transportation between schools for courses of their choice,” Hiner said. “The racial composition for that choice is about 50-50, and it is well-supported by families in that district.”

Jamie Ferguson Jacks, an attorney for the Cleveland School District, says the district was satisfied with the status quo.

“Our district believes the open-enrollment, magnet-school plan is a constitutional plan,” Jacks said.

Honoring Parents’ Wishes
Hiner says the district court should have paid closer attention to the school district families’ wishes.

“It’s vitally important that the courts pay attention to the wishes of the family,” Hiner said. “Those areas in the school district where parents have been able to exercise independent choice have been successful in integration and academics. The wishes of the parents of those children are of paramount importance. They’re making good choices in the Cleveland district, and they’re just now starting to see positive results, and now is not the time to step in the way.”

“The board believes that many in the community support the district and the open-enrollment plan. This is evident from the participation of the community, both black and white parents, in our school system. We are very proud of that in Cleveland.”

JAMIE FERGUSON JACKS, ATTORNEY, CLEVELAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

“The board believes that many in the community support the district and the open-enrollment plan. This is evident from the participation of the community, both black and white parents, in our school system. We are very proud of that in Cleveland.”

JAMIE FERGUSON JACKS, ATTORNEY, CLEVELAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

“The delay in desegregation has deprived generations of students of the constitutionally guaranteed right of an integrated education.”

JUDGE DEBRA BROWN
U.S. DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI

Says Community’s Already Satisfied
Jacks says the attitude of the district school board reflects the community’s response to the court’s decision.

“That board believes that many in the community support the district and the open-enrollment plan,” Jacks said. “This is evident from the participation of the community, both black and white parents, in our school system. We are very proud of that in Cleveland. There is no other school district in our area that enjoys the kind of diversity in the classrooms as we do in Cleveland.”

Thigpen says parents were satisfied with the system in place before the district court made its ruling.

“Most people—both black and white—have been happy with the current setup, where students can decide which school to attend, and they don’t like the prospect of having to change that when there is no apparent academic advantage to doing so,” Thigpen said.

Hiner says parents of both races express their opinions by deciding where to send their children to school.

“It seems to me that if parents believed their children were going to get a better education, that would be a mitigating factor,” Hiner said. “Even the court did see that black and white school officials and parents and communities were working together, and their desire was an overwhelming desire to ensure excellent education for all children in the district.”

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

The Pennsylvania General Assembly is considering a bill that would prevent public school districts from enacting policies that allow for “ghost teachers,” individuals who accrue seniority and receive monetary compensation and benefits, including retirement benefits, while performing union duties on employment leave.

House Bill 2125, sponsored by state Rep. Rick Saccone (R-Allegheny), would ban school districts from including union leave in teacher contracts. For teachers who already have such a clause in their contracts, the bill would limit how much time they can spend on union leave, as well as how many teachers are allowed to be on union leave at one time. HB 2125 would also require unions to reimburse school districts whenever teachers leave for union business during school hours.

The House Education Committee passed HB 2125 in June, and the bill is now pending before the Pennsylvania House Rules Committee.

Saccone says ghost teachers have been a problem in Pennsylvania for a long time and he had never heard of the practice until he read news reports about it happening in Allentown and Philadelphia.

“It is an abhorrent practice,” said Saccone. “And yet, the unions defend it, and all the Democrats will vote it out of committee along party lines.”

Saccone says ghost teachers have been a problem in Pennsylvania for a long time and he had never heard of the practice until he read news reports about it happening in Allentown and Philadelphia.

“I knew right away we had to stop it,” Saccone said.

Wasting Tax Dollars

The Pennsylvania Public School Code does not restrict union leave, which costs taxpayers millions of dollars and impacts around 500 school districts across the state, Saccone says.

“The unions are strong and negotiate a lot of stuff like this into their contracts over the years,” Saccone said. “I read about one teacher who had 30 years of seniority, and he’d never set foot in a classroom, so that means if a layoff occurred, he would be retained while a good, experienced teacher with fewer years might be let go. By the way, that ghost teacher has also been accruing his pension and other benefits during this time.

“It is an abhorrent practice,” said Saccone. “And yet, the unions defend it, and all the Democrats will vote it out of committee along party lines.”

Paid to Teach

James Paul, a senior policy analyst at The Commonwealth Foundation, says ghost teachers are paid to do something other than what they were hired to do.

“Teachers are paid to teach, but many contracts allow them to do something else like union work, and Pennsylvania taxpayers are getting stuck with the bill,” Paul said.

Whether a district allows ghost teachers depends on its collective bargaining agreement, but the practice has been going for decades, Paul says. Allentown, for instance, has spent $1.3 million on ghost teachers since 2000.

“It’s hard to project how many millions of dollars taxpayers are spending to subsidize union work,” Paul said. “But if unions want workers, they should hire them and pay for them themselves.”

Taxpayer-Approved Reform

Saccone says teachers unions stand in the way of education reform being passed.

“The public-sector unions control a large enough section of the legislature that they can block bills like these and keep them from ever coming to the floor for a vote,” Saccone said. “I don’t think we’ll have much luck with it this session, but we’ll continue to keep pushing because the taxpayers are behind it 100 percent.”

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

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“The legislation comes on the heels of a lawsuit in Allentown exposing that since 2000, more than $1.3 million meant for educating students has instead funded the salary and benefits of the Allentown Education Association (AEA) president. Another lawsuit is pending in Philadelphia, where last year, 16 ghost teachers earned $1.5 million while working for the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, according to Watchdog.org.

“The Allentown lawsuit, filed by the Fairness Center on behalf of an Allentown taxpayer and a former Allentown school board member, recently spurred the Pennsylvania Public School Employees’ Retirement System to declare that AEA president Debra Tretter is not entitled to six years of pension credits she accrued since she became a ghost teacher in 2009.”


COMMUNICATED MILITARY NEWS
September 2016

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“[T]he best single resource for understanding and fighting back against Common Core that exists.”

Logan Albright, Policy Analyst, FreedomWorks
By Robert Holland

In a flash, the Classic Learning Test (CLT) has gained a foothold in the field of college-entrance testing dominated for generations by the ACT and SAT.

It operates in a philosophical world apart from the two standardized behemoths and the Common Core standards that now influence them. CLT asks aspiring college students to delve into the works of the greatest minds of Western thought, across literary and mathematical content, and show they understand timeless lessons concerning truth, ethics, and morality. The test incorporates both theistic and secular perspectives.

Valuing Virtue

Great writing that receives short shrift from Common Core is at center stage, from Plato to the likes of C.S. Lewis, Flannery O’Connor, G.K. Chesterton, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Unlike the “value-neutral” ACT and SAT, CLT openly embraces the pursuit of virtue as classically understood. CLT’s developers hope students will complete the test thinking not just about numerical scores but how to live their lives.

Modern vs. Classical

Jeremy Tate and David Wagner, two friends since fifth grade, long had pondered the troubled state of contemporary education before deciding in fall 2015 to start the Annapolis-based Classic Learning Initiatives, of which CLT is a part. They bring complementary know-how to the task.

Tate, a graduate of Louisiana State University and Reformed Theological Seminary, is a test-prep consultant and college counselor. Wagner, a business graduate of the University of Maryland, is an experienced manager of early-stage and established enterprises.

As Tate sees it, two schools of thought clash in the education world: “The modern approach, as seen in many public-school systems, reflects a utilitarian view of education, where the main function of education is skill development and résumé building. The classical approach, in contrast, understands that character development, even over the acquisition of knowledge, is the true purpose of education.”

A Growing Option for Colleges

Indicative of pent-up demand for an alternative to the ACT/SAT juggernaut, 18 liberal arts colleges have already accepted CLT as an option for their applicants. Some of them are Thomas Aquinas, Patrick Henry, Thomas More, The King’s College, and St. John’s.

Not surprisingly, the initial signees are from Catholic, evangelical, or “great books” traditions. Tate expects the number of participating colleges to double by this fall. Furthermore, he projects growth to about 20 percent of all U.S. colleges and universities within five to 10 years. That assumes the addition of “liberal arts colleges with strong core curricula and the objective of being formative as opposed to just imparting a skill set.”

A Straightforward Exam

CLT is a two-hour test taken online at testing sites to which students bring their laptops, and unlike most other entrance exams, students receive their scores before they leave the testing site.

The test has three sections: verbal reasoning, grammar/writing, and quantitative reasoning (the mathematical component). From the first CLT, which debuted June 2016, Tate disclosed how one question featuring a George MacDonald short story, The Lost Princess, required students to engage their moral compass for full comprehension.

“In the story, a young princess is given everything she ever wants from the time she is a young child,” Tate told School Reform News. “She is never told ‘no,’ as her parents give in to her every demand. And in giving her everything, her parents failed to give her that which matters most—a kind and generous heart.”

Common Core Competition

Undoubtedly, the push to make Common Core all-controlling for K–12 schooling and college-entrance testing has stoked a desire for competing tests among homeschooling parents, classical educators, and others who abhor enforced intellectual conformity. Another budding ACT/SAT alternative is Vector ARC, which recently underwent beta testing. Approaches may differ—not all necessarily will follow the strong values emphasis of CLT—but diversity will be a plus for choice and competition.

Tate foresees one certainty: “We are not going to be aligned in any way with Common Core, and we will be around long after Common Core is gone.”

Robert Holland (rholland@heartland.org) is a senior fellow for education with The Heartland Institute.
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Admission is free for elected officials and their staff. Tickets for others to attend are $100. The Heartland Institute also offers free accommodations at the host hotel and a limited number of $350 travel scholarships for members of its Legislative Forum.

To reserve your place at this event or learn more about how you can join the Legislative Forum, contact Lindsey Stroud, Heartland’s government relations coordinator, at 312/377-4000 or email lstroud@heartland.org. You can also register for the event online at eif.heartland.org.

Sponsorship opportunities are also available.

The Heartland Institute is a 32-year-old 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 website at www.heartland.org or call 312/377-4000.
The Heartland Institute is a national nonprofit research and education organization devoted to changing the world with ideas.

We play an essential role in the movement for limited government and personal liberty. Heartland is the pipeline between the freedom movement’s leading writers and thinkers and the nation’s 8,500 national and state elected officials.

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