By Joy Pullmann

School choice advocates are optimistic Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker’s education proposals released February 18 will become law in some form, but they predict more protests in the state capitol before then.

Walker’s proposals include expanding the Milwaukee and Racine voucher program statewide, developing an independent board to oversee public charter schools, allowing students to take as many as two state-funded classes outside their schools, creating a special-needs voucher program, and removing restrictions on homeschooled students taking a few classes at public schools.

He also proposed increasing fund-
The ABCs of School Choice

The comprehensive guide to every private school choice program in America

“There isn’t a doubt in my mind that Jaevion is exactly where he needs to be in order to thrive academically and mature spiritually, and it’s all possible because of the voucher program.” - Jeronna, whose son, Jaevion, is participating in Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program

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Lawmakers Rethink Indiana’s Common Core Participation

By Joy Pullmann

Indiana’s Senate passed a bill in February to withdraw the state from Common Core national education standards, after the bill morphed into a bipartisan bid to have the state reconsider with more public input.

Senate Bill 193 passed 38–11, with three Democrats joining every Republican in voting for it.

When 46 states signed the Common Core initiative in 2010, few held public hearings. Kentucky even agreed to adopt the requirements for what K-12 kids should know in English and math before they were published.

Even now, nearly three years later, legislators, teachers, parents, and the general public routinely report in interviews and opinion polls they’ve never heard of the standards.

Lack of public input is a central concern of state Sen. Scott Schneider (R-Indianapolis), Senate Bill 193’s original author. During a January 16 hearing on the bill, however, he publicly noted testimony from Indiana Chamber of Commerce Vice President Derek Redelman, who worried the state legislature overriding a state board of education vote to adopt the standards would thwart established procedure.

Bill sponsors amended the bill “to make it more acceptable to a greater number of members on the committee,” said Education Committee Chairman Dennis Kruse (R-Auburn), one of the cosponsors.

Public Hearings, Input

The bill will likely put the Common Core on hold in Indiana, Kruse said, except for kindergarten and first grade, where the state already has phased it in. Between the bill becoming law and the end of 2013, the state department of education would be required to hold one public hearing in each of Indiana’s nine congressional districts. The bill also would require the governor’s budget office to analyze the standards’ costs to the state over the next five years. After that, the bill requires the Education Roundtable, a board under the governor’s purview, and the state board of education to publicly reconsider their 2010 decision.

“More people are aware of [Common Core] now than the first time around,” Kruse said. “So even though groups may try to approve it again, we’ll have more people involved in the decision.”

DENNIS KRUSE
STATE SENATOR
CHAIRMAN, EDUCATION COMMITTEE
AUBURN, INDIANA

“More people are aware of [Common Core] now than the first time around. So even though first groups may try to approve it again, we’ll have more people involved in the decision.”

“This is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.

Vern Williams: A Teacher’s Thoughts on the Common Core: http://news.heartland.org/podcasts/2012/12/14/vern-williams-teachers-thoughts-common-core
Wisconsin Gov. Proposes Even More School Choice

Continued from page 1

ing for charter and voucher students to approximately $7,000 per student per year, about $3,000 less than the state spends for traditional public school students.

“Every child, regardless of their ZIP code, deserves access to a great education,” said Jim Walker said in a statement.

‘Shake Up the Status Quo’
Walker included the education initiatives in his budget request, as he did with the 2010 collective bargaining reforms that sparked pandemonium in the capitol and a failed recall campaign against him. That will make the provisions harder to vote against.

“The last budget cycle shook up the status quo, and these proposals will shake up the status quo,” said Jim Walker, president of School Choice Wisconsin.

The governor also proposed increasing state public school funding by 1 percent after cutting it in 2010 and paying state colleges, K-12 schools, and teachers more for high performance.

“There are very vocal critics and supporters, and they are going to come out in droves for this,” said Christian D’Andrea, an education policy analyst for the Madison-based MacIver Institute, a free-market think tank.

The odd thing about Wisconsin voucher opponents, he said, is they typically also oppose evaluating teachers using student test scores, saying they want parents and students to have a say in evaluations. But they don’t trust parents enough to let them pick their children’s schools.

Political Prospects
The voucher proposal is likely to pass the state Assembly but have a tougher time in the Senate, said former Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen, a senior advisor to the American Federation for Children.

“There are some more senior members of the legislature who remember when the [Milwaukee voucher] program was first created 22 years ago and thought of it as something for only the failing Milwaukee school district,” he said. “They’re having trouble understanding there are failing schools in their school districts as well.”

Even so, he said, legislators will actually consider “strengthening” the proposals. The proposed voucher and charter expansions are both limited to districts with at least 4,000 students and at least two schools the state has rated D or F. That’s currently just nine school districts, of 426 total across the state.

Senate Education Committee Chairman Luther Olsen (R-Ripon) and Senate President Michael Ellis (R-Neenah) have voiced concerns about vouchers, and Ellis blocked a voucher expansion last session. But not all state senators feel that way.

“Giving school districts the opportunity to improve access to quality education is a priority of mine,” said state Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa). Vukmir’s spokesman said she supports the governor’s proposals.

Bender, Jensen, and D’Andrea all said they believe some form of increased school choice will pass.

How Parents Feel
In a January poll, 61 percent of Wisconsinites said they support expanding the state’s voucher program to “every child.”

“Parents are really the only people well-suited to make the decision of what’s the best match between a student and a school, not a ZIP code and not a bureaucrat,” Bender said.

Jensen said many schools have trouble spots where some kids fall through the cracks. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Wisconsin Asian and African-American students score significantly below national averages in math and reading, he noted.

Rural families are likely to go for the course choice program, Jensen said. Wauwatosa schools recently cut Mandarin instruction, for example. Course choice means Wauwatosa students could take Mandarin online or from private tutors.

“The governor’s responding to parents across the state and leading as fast as the political system will allow,” Jensen said. “If there are kids attending failing schools, they need another option.”

Joy Pullmann (pullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Positive Reception for California’s 3rd Parent Trigger

By Ashley Bateman

Exercising their rights under California’s 2010 Parent Trigger law, more than 300 parents delivered petitions to the Los Angeles school district in January, calling for their children’s failing school to be improved or converted into a charter school.

Parents are now reviewing proposals from eight different organizations and Los Angeles Unified School District to change the school’s curriculum, staff, and extracurricular activities.

“California is beginning to show the law can be effective in some ways in pushing the bureaucracy to concede to changes they wouldn’t otherwise make,” said Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. “That seems to be the case here. At this point, the precedent has been set.”

Sixty-eight percent of parents whose children attend 24th Street Elementary School signed the petition. Under California’s Parent Trigger law, the district must do as they ask. Seven states have passed similar laws and about five are currently considering such legislation.

At 24th Street Elementary, 80 percent of third graders and 71 percent of fifth graders can’t read at grade level. The school has performed poorly for years.

Parent Trigger History

This is the nation’s third Parent Trigger attempt and the first in the second-largest U.S. school district. The first two attempts became protracted processes marred by court battles, but Los Angeles Superintendent John Deasy has pledged to work with parents in the current case.

“L.A. is kind of the birthplace of the Parent Trigger,” Boychuk said. In 2008, its school board created a school choice initiative where charter school operators and teachers unions could bid to run failing schools. “But it never really took off,” he said.

Although California has identified persistently failing schools for years, bureaucrats took few steps to fix them, notes the Parent Trigger’s original author, former state senator Gloria Romero (D-Los Angeles).

“If the bureaucrats didn’t have the courage to do the right thing and transform their school under existing federal laws, then I wanted to give the direct right to the parents themselves,” Romero said. “There was no sense of urgency in California. Kids and schools were just left to fail year after year after year, and nobody even seemed to blink an eye.”

Call to Action

Before the Parent Trigger, 24th Street Elementary’s parents attempted to petition for reform, but because they could not legally force action their school board ignored them.

In spring 2012, parents approached Parent Revolution, a nonprofit community organizer, to analyze their school situation under the new law. It did so in August and helped parents write and circulate a new petition.

“Parent Revolution [aims] to provide parents with a seat at the decision-making table when it comes to public education for their children, and to ensure that the one segment that has no other interest in children and education—that is, parents—are fully represented,” said Dave Phelps, national communications director for Parent Revolution. “[The] Parent Trigger is a tool that allows that to happen.”

Romero is not convinced the Parent Trigger should be used as a negotiating tool.

“I never intended for parents to run the school,” she said. “Follow the law. The law is precise, the law is concise; it’s about action.”

‘Unusually Cooperative’

24th Street Elementary School parents have so far encountered far less resistance than the first two Parent Trigger groups.

“Superintendent John Deasy has been unusually cooperative,” Boychuk said. He noted the district’s receptivity towards charter schools, public schools freed from many regulations in return for tighter accountability.

 “[Deasy] is much more inclined to embrace some of these reforms than the previous superintendents would,” Boychuk said.

LAUSD has identified 24th Street as one of the lowest-performing schools in the district. It proposed to parents a variation on its Public School Choice plan, which launched in August 2009, a LAUSD spokesperson said.

Calls for Action

Every year more children are harmed by failing schools, Romero said, so she urged quick action: “This is about transforming schools now.”

Media attention to 24th Street Elementary has generated more calls from parents interested in reforming their children’s schools, Phelps said.

California’s Parent Trigger law offers parents four courses of action: close the school, convert it to a charter, or two ways to replace staff and curriculum.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Montana Legislature OKs a Voucher-like Measure

By Ashley Bateman

As Montana legislators wrap up their legislative session, school reform measures have made some progress for the first time in a largely blue, traditional, and rural state.

Although a proposal to allow charter schools in the state failed in the Senate after six Republicans switched their votes, the House and Senate passed tax-credit scholarship proposals that now await the governor’s review.

Senate Bill 81, sponsored by state Sen. Dave Lewis (R-Helena), would create state income-tax credits for donations to nonprofit organizations that offer scholarships for children attending private schools.

“[Democrats] say our public schools are perfect, ... but almost 10 percent of students are either homeschooled or in private school now,” Lewis said. “That leads me to believe some people are making an [alternate] choice.”

Montana has approximately 130 private schools. The state spends approximately $10,500 per year for each of the 142,000 students enrolled in public schools.

Lewis had to make some concessions for SB 81 to clear the Senate. His original proposal allowed deductions to total $5 million, but the final measure is capped at $2.5 million annually. He also would originally have allowed donors 100 percent credits, but now individuals can write off 40 percent and corporations 20 percent. An individual donation of $100, for example, equals a $40 Montana tax deduction. “I think it will be used very quickly,” Lewis said.

SB 81 had the backing of Catholic bishops, representing the largest percentage of private schools in the state.

House Bill 213 would allow anyone paying private tuition to receive a tax credit for up to $550. “It’s fairly modest,” said bill sponsor state Rep. Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Great Falls). “This one is more palatable to the representatives of the legislature because it doesn’t have any direct funding impact on public schools. It just gives relief to people who are going to [private] school right now.”

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock may veto the tax-credit scholarship bills recently passed by the state legislature.

“Legislators don’t vote for these bills unless they think their constituents support them on it. All of a sudden we’re moving bills with some pretty good margins.”

Dave Lewis, State Senator, Helena, Montana

Idaho Reconsiders Common Core

By Lindsey Burke

Idaho’s House Education Committee heard testimony in January concerning the Common Core education standards, an effort to standardize what schools across the country teach through common K-12 standards and assessments in 45 states.

“We lose our educational sovereignty,” said Stephanie Zimmerman, founder of Idahoans Against Common Core, in testimony before lawmakers.

The Common Core deprives parents of a voice in what local schools teach, she said: “You have a hard enough time making changes with your school board. With the federal government, good luck.”

Linden Bateman

Representative - ID

State Rep. Linden Bateman (R-Idaho Falls) introduced a bill requiring the State Board of Education to include teaching of cursive writing in schools because Common Core omits it. The bill unanimously passed the House Education Committee in early February.

“Cursive leads to the development of motor skills, improves memory, encourages children to become graceful, and encourages artistic expression,” Bateman said.

Bateman acknowledges states created the Common Core but said he would closely monitor any move to federalize the standards. “If this is a vehicle that’s going to move us toward a national curricu- lum, I will oppose it,” he said.

Lindsey M. Burke (lindsey.burke@heritage.org) is an education policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation.

By Austin Knudson

Representative - MT

Restoring Cursive

The public charter school bill, House Bill 315 sponsored by state Rep. Austin Knudson (R-Culbertson), passed its second reading but failed a vote the next day, 49–50. From the first vote to the second, six Republicans switched votes.

“Governor’s Veto?”

Fitzpatrick said there is a “strong possibility” Gov. Steve Bullock (D) will veto the choice bills.

Bullock’s spokesman recently said parent “anecdotes” were inadequate to get the governor to support school choice, Laszloffy said. “I found that insulting,” he said. “These anecdotes are stories from real people.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
A South Carolina lawmaker has introduced a school choice bill that would give parents a $4,000 tax deduction per year for each child they send to independent schools, a $1,000 tax deduction for those sent to public schools outside their district, and a $2,000 tax deduction for those they homeschool.

After filing Senate Bill 279 in January, state Sen. Larry Grooms (R-Berkeley), a past winner of the National Coalition for Public School Options’ Golden Apple Award, posted on his Facebook page, “All parents strive to be able to provide the best opportunities for their children. … This bill brings market-based solutions to our education system in desperate need of reform.”

The bill also would let individuals and businesses receive tax credits for donations to nonprofit scholarship organizations that provide tuition grants for children whose families are eligible for Medicaid or free and reduced-price lunch, or those with special needs. This element of SB 279 is modeled after school choice laws in states such as Florida and Arizona, where thousands of children attend private schools on scholarships paid with tax-deductible donations.

The total amount of such deductions would be limited to $25 million. Scholarship organizations could give students grants of up to $5,000 per year or the cost of tuition, whichever is less. Donors would be allowed to write off no more than 60 percent of their tax bill.

School Choice Support
A homeschooling organization supports the bill. “While we oppose any form of tax vouchers, we do support tax credits, and a tax deduction would have the same effect. From a homeschooler’s perspective, this is a bill we can support,” said Gale Farrier, a board member of the South Carolina Home Educators Association.

Barton Swaim, communications manager for the South Carolina Policy Council, questions whether offering tax credits to organizations, instead of to individuals, is a step in the right direction toward universal school choice. “[I]t’s just a complicated way to deal with a problem that’s actually pretty simple,” Swaim said. “Instead of giving credits to organizations and deductions to individuals, we should be giving credits directly to individuals. The credit for scholarship funds isn’t a terrible idea, but we don’t think it will increase giving in any sizeable way. After all, organizations could already deduct contributions if they want to.”

South Carolina’s state superintendent of public schools, Mick Zais, supports the legislation, said spokesman Jay Ragley.

Grooms, who is running for Congress with an “eliminate the [federal] Department of Education” plank in his platform, had advice for constituents during National School Choice Week in January: “Demand action. Demand opportunity for every child. It is time for the South Carolina legislature to pass universal school choice. It is time for the South Carolina legislature to let all children—regardless of income, race, or social status—attend the school that their parents choose for them.”

Isabel Lyman writes from Petoskey, Michigan.
Alabama to Exit from National Common Core Tests

By Evelyn B. Stacey

Alabama will withdraw from two national testing groups, but state and national officials are being tight-lipped about why and what’s next.

In 2010, 45 states agreed to use the same set of requirements for what K-12 students should know in math and English. It’s called the Common Core. Since then, states have joined one or both of two groups developing Common Core tests to replace state tests. Alabama has now withdrawn from its membership in both.

“We are still moving ahead” on using the Common Core standards, Gloria Turner, director of assessment for Alabama’s department of education, told School Reform News in an email. “We will be assessing those standards, but we will not be using the assessment consortia for this. Recommendations will be forthcoming soon for the [state board of education] to consider.”

Both testing consortia refused multiple requests for comment on this story.

Switch to ACT Tests

Alabama will probably switch to Aspire tests developed by ACT, said state board of education member Betty Peters. Aspire tests students from grades 3 through 10 on how well they have learned what the Common Core requires teachers to teach, plus science. The tests are new, created in partnership with education giant Pearson, and are currently being field tested with plans to release in 2014, according to ACT.

According to earlier reports, Alabama officials were uneasy about the Common Core, so the state board agreed to shift gears.

“States such as Alabama are starting to pull out of the Common Core process as a result of the awakening of the American people,” said Lance Izumi, director of educational studies at the Pacific Research Institute in Sacramento. “It will reduce or eliminate the ability of individual parents to impact what goes on in their children’s classrooms. The Obama administration and their special-interest allies have overplayed their hand and spawned a growing popular backlash that will ultimately cripple, if not sink, the whole Common Core agenda.”

Tennessee Democrat Proposes Parent Trigger Bill

Continued from page 1

sions in state law, including lowering the petition threshold from 60 percent of parents to 51 percent. It also would allow parents to bring their petition to the state board of education if the local school board rejects it. This lets parents push for reform even if the school district resists to protect underperforming administrators’ or teachers’ jobs and salaries, DeBerry told School Reform News.

“Too often the local school board is about the maintenance of the status quo,” he said. “[Parents] can’t fix the school, they can’t fix the curriculum, they can’t do anything with the authorities. The parents are powerless.”

‘Faux’ Parent Trigger

Tennessee’s existing law is a “faux” Parent Trigger, said Brent Easley, Tennessee director of Students First, a nonprofit organization that worked with DeBerry and advocacy group Parent Revolution to craft the legislation.

DeBerry’s bill gives parents more power over their children’s education, he said. Currently, parents have little power in their school districts.

“We’re seeing the Parent Trigger law can both be an action and a negotiating tool,” Phelps said.

Michal Conger is a staff writer for the Washington Examiner in DC.
STAR Wars Begin Again over California Tests

By Evelyn B. Stacey

In January, California State Superintendent Tom Torlakson recommended $1 billion in changes to the state’s battery of tests so its 4 million students will have to complete tasks such as writing paragraphs and multiple-step math problems.

He also recommended suspending most state tests for a year as California, along with 44 other states, moves to tests aligned with the Common Core, national standards detailing what every K-12 student should know in math and English.

“The ability to engage in critical thinking and solve complex problems cannot be reliably assessed with the kinds of multiple-choice tests that are the centerpiece of our current system,” Torlakson wrote to the legislature.

Testing Knowledge, or Activity?

Testing experts disagree. “It is a radical change as to what the test is for,” said Doug McRae, a retired test developer who has worked on tests for K-12 students across the nation, “which is to measure the results of instruction.”

Before California enacted its State Standardized Reporting (STAR) tests in the late 1990s, McRae said, educators quarreled over opposite testing approaches: whether to measure what a student has learned over a course or to give teachers periodic feedback on student learning. “The two purposes are incompatible,” he said.

Typical multiple-choice tests such as STAR measure critical thinking well, said researcher Richard Phelps, who has conducted a systematic review of all the research available on standardized tests. “There is nothing ‘deeper’ about the constructed-response test item format,” he said.

In fact, the fewer multiple-choice questions a test has, the less reliable it is for indicating what a student knows, because multiple-choice can cover more topics faster, said Sandra Stotsky, a former Massachusetts standards and testing commissioner.

“All essay answers allows too much subjectivity in rating, especially if what is being assessed is ‘critical’ thinking,” she said. “I don’t know what is necessarily intended by that phrase, and it will vary with each topic.”

Practical Considerations

The current STAR tests will expire in July 2014. Torlakson wants to have the new computerized tests and Common Core curriculum in place by the 2014-15 school year. Some school districts have already started testing software and logistics.

“I don’t think California is anywhere near to having the hardware, bandwidth, or know-how, by 2015,” says McRae.

In Sacramento, legislators’ reactions are cautious. “I am very supportive of moving to the Smarter Balance assessments as part of the Common Core State Standards,” said Assembly Member Joan Buchanan (D-San Ramon). “My concern is whether schools have the capability. We need to undertake a thoughtful process of evaluating what it will truly take to convert to a computerized testing system.”

A central concern for legislators is the cost, Buchanan said. Torlakson acknowledged the greater expense of developing, administering, and scoring the new tests.

The new tests also will take more time to administer. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of two groups developing Common Core tests, estimates an increase in testing time of 50 to 300 percent.

Less Public Information

With less information about whether students actually have learned what parents expect in each grade, the tests will reduce public knowledge of school and teacher quality, McRae said.

“The Torlakson legislation is to help the teachers,” said McRae. “There a strong anti-accountability theme.” This leads to the question of how to measure teacher performance if the new tests do not accurately indicate the level of instruction or student knowledge.

The California Teachers Association did not return requests for comment.

“We have to look at the totality of our assessment system and what we expect, as a state, from our assessments and system of accountability,” said state Sen. Carol Liu (D-La Canada Flintridge), chair of the Senate Education Committee. “The tenor of the [superintendent’s] report, from my perspective, is about getting it right, not fast.”

Stotsky suggests it would be better for these new, instruction-focused tests to be administered at the local level, leaving the standardized tests intact for state accountability purposes.

Evelyn B. Stacey (ebstacey@yahoo.com) is a graduate of the Pepperdine Graduate School of Public Policy. She writes from Lancaster, California.
School Choice Gains Momentum in States

By Joy Pullmann

School choice is increasingly popular among families, teachers, and legislators across the nation. Twenty-nine governors officially recognized National School Choice Week (NSCW) this year and state legislatures are brimming with voucher and charter school legislation.

For the first time, a teacher association endorsed NSCW, during which 3,600 grassroots events took place across the country. So did an Olympic basketball athlete, CEOs of major companies, and the Jonas Brothers.

Educators nationwide also celebrated Digital Learning Day on February 6.

“After teaching in a traditional state school for many years, being able to have this opportunity to teach online made me realize that the typical approach we have for education does not fit all students, so to have that choice is essential,” said Amy Rosno, who has been an English teacher for 17 years and has taught in a Wisconsin online school now for eight.

Support from Teachers

Rosno belongs to the Association of American Educators, the nation’s largest nonunion teacher association. AAE’s members have diverse education backgrounds and largely support school choice.

In an annual survey released in February, seven in ten AAE teachers said they support or tend to support Washington, DC’s voucher program, Indiana’s tax deductions for private school expenses, and Arizona’s education savings accounts, a voucher-like program for special-needs and low-income children.

Although online learning is not right for every child, Rosno said, it “really helps our students to succeed” when they have a particular need like her several students with severe medical challenges, another temporarily living in Guam, and students with learning difficulties who can concentrate on a computer but not when surrounded by classmates.

Lawmakers Get Moving

Legislators in dozens of states have introduced legislation to give more people like Rosno and her students a flurry of education options. New or expanded voucher program proposals are currently alive in big states such as Alaska, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Texas and smaller ones including Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

And it’s not just red states, as lawmakers in Illinois, Iowa, New Jersey, and Ohio are also debating voucher proposals.

Most of these states are also considering legislation to introduce or expand charter and online schools. Other states focusing on these options include Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, and North Carolina.

That means about half the states are considering school choice legislation.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.

Fewer Children Means Challenges for Education, Economy

By Ashley Bateman

With Americans having fewer babies and fewer immigrants arriving since the 2009 recession, education institutions had better brace for change, a new study finds.

The number of high school graduates dipped in 2012 for the first time in decades and is likely to stay down until 2019, according to a new report by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). The commission projects a slow growth in graduates after 2019, due largely to immigration, and nothing like the past several decades of 8 to 10 percent increases each year.

This means education institutions will have to do two major things, said Brian Prescott, WICHE’s director of policy research: Stop expecting strong demand and figure how to improve retention and achievement for current-minority populations.

“The reality facing colleges and universities and the policy structures supporting them will be different in the next decade or so,” Prescott said. “The other side of the story is diversification. We’re seeing a real loss in white, non-Hispanics graduating from high school; almost a one-to-one replacement of those non-Hispanics with Hispanics.”

Losing Population

The number of white students graduating high school is projected to drop 13 percent between the 2008–09 school year and 2024–25. That presents challenges for teachers and institutions, as minorities currently have far higher dropout rates and far lower achievement rates. Northeastern states will be particularly challenged as they lose population to southern states, the report says.

The changing population means colleges must decide whether scarce dollars should go toward recruitment or maintaining the current student body, Prescott said.

Higher education will be further challenged by demographics, the economy, and decreasing interest among young people in college as its benefits decline, said demographer Joel Kotkin.

Fewer kids also mean less need for professors, teachers, administrators, and support staff. Education is one of the economy’s highest-employment fields. Accelerating the crunch on employment is a slow transition to having technology spread the reach of fewer, better teachers.

“People may just not have the money to spend, or they may go to a different kind of education [institutions],” Kotkin said.

Higher Education Expense

Public spending increasingly limited by health care and pension costs for an aging populace, combined with mounds of public debt soon due, will continue to plague education institutions and students.

“College is the second-most expensive thing people tend to buy” after a house, Prescott said. Recently, he said, states have reduced their higher education subsidies, meaning students have to pay more of the price immediately rather than later in taxes.

Many students attend college who don’t need to, Kotkin notes. Increasingly, college-educated people are working at jobs that don’t require a college degree—fully half of all recent college graduates.

“If we are allowed to build housing to match the population, there will be a lot more opportunities for plumbers, mechanics, and those kinds of workers,” Kotkin said.

Lower payoffs for college degrees also may lead more high school graduates to choose something
writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.

not recovered, Eberstadt said.

since the 2009 recession, and the economy has still
er than expected.

ever, immigrants tend to shift their childbearing
woman. As they move to the United States, how-
to just below replacement, at 1.9 children per

Catherine A. Hall, Nicholas Eberstadt, an American Enterprise
Institute economist and demographer.

the possibility of falling Latino birth rates, says
Nicholas Eberstadt, an American Enterprise
Institute economist and demographer.

Latinos are propping up the U.S. birth rate

Birth and immigration rates have taken a hit
since the 2009 recession, and the economy has still
not recovered, Eberstadt said.

by the people in the state.”

from are telling us
they don’t like this.
They want Georgia
to retain control of
its curriculum and
testing standards.”

STATE SENATOR
BRUNSWICK, GEORGIA

from Williamsburg, Virginia.

Bills Would Withdraw Georgia from Common Core Standards

By Joy Pullmann

Lawmaker has filed a bill that would withdraw
Georgia from Common Core national education
standards and prohibit personal information collected
on the tests from being shared outside the state.

That makes Georgia the eighth state to formally
reconsider the Common Core, a list defining what
K-12 tests and curricula must cover in math and
English. Forty-five states adopted the standards,
nearly all in a span of three months in 2010.

“What has really been surprising
to me is how many of our legisla-
tors had no idea Georgia was doing
this,” bill author and state Sen.
William Ligon (R-Brunswick) told
School Reform News. “Such a huge,
tremendous policy shift was not
vetted by the legislature, not vetted
by the people in the state.”

Common Core means changes in
curriculum, testing, teacher prepara-
tion, and teacher evaluations.

Ligon said his central concerns
were higher expenses and loss of
local control. Just the new, com-
puter-based Common Core tests
cost $30 per student, or $37 for a
paper version, whereas Georgia’s
previous tests cost $5 per child, he
said. That’s an extra $30 million
per year.

Teachers ‘Overwhelmed’

This school year was the first most
Georgia schools began implement-
ing the Common Core standards in every grade in
English and K-9 in math, according to the state
department of education.

So until a few months ago most parents had little
contact with it, and teachers started training for it
in January 2012. Some 80,000 Georgia teachers have
received some form of Common Core training, accord-
ing to the department.

“Teachers are truly overwhelmed with the Common
Core,” said a Georgia educator who asked to remain
anonymous to maintain good relations with local
school officials. “It takes every breathing moment
they have to figure it out.” She described the situa-
tion as “chaotic” because the standards are confus-
ing. For example, English teachers in her district are
incorporating social studies into lessons because of
the standards, and they’re not trained in the subject.

“Who knows what damage is going to be done with
the kids not having quality math and quality lan-
guage arts?” the teacher said.

Untested Program

Ligon introduced Senate Bill 167 in February, but
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STATE SENATOR
BRUNSWICK, GEORGIA

from the state
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in January 2012. Some 80,000 Georgia teachers have
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“Teachers are truly overwhelmed with the Common
Core,” said a Georgia educator who asked to remain
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school officials. “It takes every breathing moment
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Several superintendents, school board members,
School Choice Faces Repeal in New Hampshire

By Rachel Sheffield

The New Hampshire legislature voted its first private school choice program into law in 2011, but a new majority in the state House of Representatives may now repeal it. In addition, the program is facing a lawsuit.

“A number of [education] tax-credit programs have never been challenged in court, [such as those in] Florida, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, and we have won those that have, [in Arizona and Illinois],” said Dick Komer, an Institute for Justice attorney defending the program. “As in all of these cases, the plaintiffs try to characterize the program as a nefarious scheme to channel aid to religious schools, as if the program were enacted for those schools’ benefit rather than the benefit of the families being given new opportunities to choose the best available education for their children.”

The program gives businesses a state tax credit for 85 percent of donations to nonprofit organizations that help families pay private tuition or to attend out-of-district public schools. The scholarships must average $2,500 per student.

Most Recipients Are Poor

The application process for scholarships began January 1 and scholarships will be granted for the 2013–14 school year. Sixty percent of the recipients are from poor families and at least 40 percent must qualify for federal free and reduced-price lunch.

“The New Hampshire Opportunity Scholarship Program empowers low- and middle-income families to choose the education that best fits their kids’ individual needs,” said Jason Bedrick, a Cato Institute policy analyst.

State Rep. Peter Sullivan (D-Hillsborough) introduced House Bill 370 in January to end the program. Its fate may rest with state Sen. Nancy Stiles (R-Farmington), assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

Legal Challenges

The American Civil Liberties Union and New Hampshire Civil Liberties Union filed suit against the program, which with the first hearing set for April. As in many states, New Hampshire’s constitution includes a Blaine Amendment that prohibits tax dollars from funding religious organizations. The lawsuit claims the tax credits violate this law by allowing students to use their scholarships at religious schools.

Because the money never enters state hands and is thus private money going to private schools, “we are cautiously optimistic the court challenge will not succeed,” Pitre said.

Diverse Applicants

Approximately 300 children across the state have applied for scholarships since applications opened January 1, said Kate Baker, executive director of the nonprofit organization administering the scholarships.

“We’ve heard from single moms to families where they have one person that stays home to home school; [families] with children with special needs, as well as families with children with terminal illnesses,” she said.

The scholarships save the state money, Bedrick notes, because the deductions are far smaller than public school per-pupil spending.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

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For thousands of additional articles and reprints on issues important to you, visit heartland.org and click the PolicyBot™ button, or go to policybot.org.
By Ben DeGrow

Ryan Noel just wanted his fellow teachers to see him receive an award with extra money for his classroom. But teachers union officials in Valley Heights, Kansas barred him from receiving the award at school because it came from a nonunion professional organization, the Kansas Association of American Educators. “Here’s someone giving to education to help students, yet the strong arm of the union was really not willing to allow that to happen,” said Noel.

This February, more than a year after the incident, Noel testified in favor of House Bill 2221, legislation that would guarantee Kansas union and nonunion membership organizations equal access to school mailboxes, bulletin boards, e-mail systems, and meetings. Currently, unions get priority and can muscle out competitors.

Professional teacher associations that offer teachers liability insurance, professional development scholarships, and networking have begun cropping up around the United States. They do not conduct collective bargaining, so they are not unions, and they cost considerably less.

Membership in the Association of American Educators, for example, costs $180 a year, while union membership is often $600 or more annually. AAE also refrains from non-education political activism.

Principals in the Middle

On February 14, Kansas’s House Education Committee approved HB 2221. It closely resembles a 2007 Utah equal access law.

Garry Sigle, executive director of the Kansas Association of American Educators (KANAAE), said incidents like Noel’s are fairly commonplace in Kansas. Schools have shooed him from campuses during the school day while routinely welcoming his union counterparts.

“I’ve had appointments that were set up and scheduled. Then the union threw a fit, and the administrator had to cancel because of the pressure the union put on them.”

The Kansas National Education Association (KNEA), which has exclusive bargaining rights over most of the state’s teachers, opposes HB 2221. They argue local school boards should make decisions on equal access.

But Sigle said principals and superintendents are often caught between a powerful union and his nonunion group and seek to avoid controversy. “The change in the law will take [administrators] out of the middle,” he said.

Trashing Brochures

In August 2012, Tamara Krumm, a special education teacher, placed a KANAAE brochure on the Jefferson Elementary teachers lounge bulletin board. The school principal, citing the negotiated bargaining agreement, complied with the union’s request to remove the brochure.

“The state union told local union people to pick it up and throw it in the trash,” Sigle said. “That doesn’t seem like a local issue.”

Many public school teachers are not aware they have nonunion options. Claudia Boyles, a high school science instructor in western Kansas, first learned of KANAAE when she met Sigle through a mutual friend at a triathlon in fall 2012.

About the same time, she received a union mailer urging her to vote for political candidates she did not support. “That was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Boyles said. She dropped her KNEA membership after 10 years.

Boyles and a third of her colleagues at Holcomb High School since have become KANAAE members. Others don’t belong to any organization; Kansas teachers are not required to join or fund unions.

Leveling the Playing Field

HB 2221 is not the Kansas legislature’s first stab at leveling the field for teacher organizations. In 2011 the House passed a similar measure, but it failed to gain a sponsor in the Senate. Sigle notes this year’s legislation won more committee votes than its predecessor and the Senate is “more conservative.”

In legislative testimony, Kansas Policy Institute spokesman James Franko compared HB 2221 to 1900s “trust-busting” that broke business monopolies. The bill “offers a freedom to teachers that is currently hard for them to realize,” he said.

Noel says the proposal would provide long-overdue common-sense changes. “Part of me feels like we’re living in the Stone Age when only certain groups can be in schools,” the elementary teacher said. “My hope is that legislators would allow AAE into our schools, too, so teachers can have a choice.”

Parent-Driven Education Gains Ground in States

Ten states rank a cut above the rest in offering parents extensive opportunities to control their children’s education, according to the 2013 Parent Power Index from the Center for Education Reform.

Indiana ousted formerly first-ranked Florida for the top spot. Florida ranked second, followed by Ohio, Arizona, the District of Columbia, Louisiana, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Utah.

“Indiana surpassed Florida because they looked at Florida, saw their lessons, [and] tried to surpass them and do more,” said Kara Kerwin, a Center for Education Reform vice president.

Empowering parents increases student achievement, the center found. The Parent Power Index measures states five ways: school choice, charter schools, online learning, teacher quality, and transparency. It also provides summaries of state education laws and quick links to often-requested state sites, positioning itself as a parent-empowerment tool.

“Parents are very, very responsive to whatever information they can get; they’re hungry for it,” said Virginia Walden Ford, a mother who pushed for Washington, DC’s voucher program. “It makes for such a greater, more-informed citizen.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Missouri Legislators Move to Leave Common Core

By Joy Pullmann

Missouri legislators are filing companion bills to withdraw the state from the Common Core, a set of national requirements for what students should know in math and English.

Since 45 states adopted the standards in 2010, several states have reconsidered, usually motivated by local objections to the standards’ quality, cost, and potential for consolidating central control over U.S. education.

On January 24, state Sen. John Lamping (R-Ladue) introduced Senate Bill 2010, which rescinds the Missouri Board of Education’s decision to adopt the Common Core, forbids state agencies from implementing it, and requires the Missouri legislature to sign off on state standard shifts. State Rep. Kurt Bahr (R-St. Charles) plans to file companion legislation in the next week.

“Missouri’s having problems with funding schools,” Bahr told School Reform News. “Every year it’s, ‘We need more money,’ but [state boards of education] are advocating for adopting the Common Core to spend on things we’re not [already] spending on.”

Expensive Technology Demands
Legislators’ central concerns are cost and workability, Bahr said. The state has not published an estimate of costs for shifting to new tests and instructional materials, but independent studies estimated extra expenses at $282 million and $340 million.

The state has diverse school districts, from heavily urban to sparsely rural. Few have extra money for the technology upgrades and Internet strength Common Core tests will require.

“The infrastructure required to support that is a large bill,” Bahr said. “Our state has worked in the last couple of years to increase Internet connections, and we’ve made some progress, but not enough.”

KURT Bahr, STATE REPRESENTATIVE
ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has given 200 presentations on the Common Core, but none to legislators, she said.

This year several “powerful education legislators have all termed out,” Bahr noted, resulting in a new speaker of the House, Timothy Jones (R-Jefferson City), who promised to give Bahr’s bill a hearing, “which is better than I had last year.”

A likely concern among legislators is whether dropping the standards puts Missouri’s federal No Child Left Behind waiver in jeopardy or means losing federal education funding, said James Shuls, a Show-Me Institute policy analyst.

Concerns about Local Control
Teachers are used to standards frequently changing without their input, said Shuls, a former elementary school teacher, which means they have little opportunity to improve them using their experience with students.

“We have quite average standards that probably could stand to be improved, but we have a much better chance of doing that from within,” he said.

Missouri’s curriculum and standards reflect the state’s culture and values, which differ from those in Illinois, New York, and California, Bahr said. National standards thus quash cultural diversity.

“If government can plan and do a good job, there’s no reason we shouldn’t have state or federal or universal standards,” Shuls said. “But in reality we know central planning doesn’t work, and it’s hard to impose those things on individuals. The best form of accountability is not a set of standards, but giving parents options to choose what’s best for their kids.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Students Can Get College Credit for Free Online Courses

By Rachel Sheffield

College students may now be able to receive credit for free online courses known as MOOCs—“Massive Open Online Courses.” In what could be a significant step toward greater student access and lower costs for higher education, in February the American Council on Education (ACE) announced it will recommend five MOOCs for credit.

“Postsecondary education in America is at an inflection point, and the economic and social imperative to educate our citizens is greater than ever,” said Cathy Sandeen, an ACE vice president. “ACE is assessing where MOOCs may fit into this evolving landscape.”

Individual colleges will ultimately decide whether to grant credit for the online classes recommended by ACE. According to The Chronicle of Higher Education, ACE provides “a credit recommendation service” to colleges. ACE recommends certain classes to its 1,800 “member colleges,” but each college must decide whether it will grant students credit for that course.

Millions of International Students

The five recommended MOOCs come from Duke University, the University of California-Irvine, and the University of Pennsylvania. The courses are Introduction to Genetics and Evolution; Bioelectricity: A Quantitative Approach; Pre-Calculus; Algebra; and Single-Variable Calculus. The courses will be offered through Coursera, a company founded by Daphne Koller, Coursera’s founder.

End Game: Cheaper College

Over the past decade the number of students taking online college courses has quadrupled, said Tom Vander Ark, founder of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. More than 7 million U.S. students are currently enrolled in some type of online higher education course. He expects the demand will continue to increase.

“The real story is how the diverse web of nearly 5,000 institutions—broadly speaking—of higher learning in the U.S. are responding to cost pressure, calls for higher completion rates and better job preparation, and student demands for relevance. The answer is that they are adopting blended learning strategies at a remarkable rate,” said Vander Ark.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

Teacher Quality Not Linked to Advanced Degrees or Experience, Study Shows

By Rachel Sheffield

A new study from the Tennessee Department of Education shows teachers with these qualities, which traditionally increase their salaries, don’t create better student achievement than teachers without them do.

“Previous research has consistently shown there is little to no correlation between teacher graduate degrees and effectiveness” as measured by what children learn in a school year, said Kelli Gauthier, a Tennessee Department of Education spokeswoman. “Similarly, research has shown that teacher effectiveness is not correlated with experience after the first five years in the classroom.” This study reinforces those results. We have highly effective teachers with many years of classroom experience and highly effective teachers with relatively few years in the classroom.”

The study is “important news,” said John Chubb, a Hoover Institution fellow and author of The Best Teachers in the World, because unlike economists education authorities have done little study of the relationship between teacher quality and inputs such as degrees and experience.

“At a time when school districts are struggling to make ends meet with fewer state and local tax revenues, it is especially important that districts ensure their compensation systems are aligned with the goal of student achievement, and therefore reward the most successful teachers—regardless of degrees or experience—and not pay based on factors that do not predict student success,” he said.

Skewed Incentives

The common practice of tying salary hikes to advanced degrees and extra college credits means “teachers tend to take the fastest, cheapest route to earning a master’s degree,” said Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality. “A far better system would be one which rewards teachers for being effective, with teachers themselves identifying the specific coursework that would help them become more effective.”

Salary schedules push bright young people away from teaching, Walsh said, because they are confident in their abilities and want to earn more for high performance rather than receive “relatively small incremental raises over the next 25 years.”

As of 2012, 20 states required counting student achievement as a significant or the most significant factor in judging teacher performance, according to NCTQ.

The study and related research emphasize the importance of Tennessee finding ways to select, reward, and retain teachers based on effectiveness rather than meaningless credentials, Gauthier said. It also suggests the state needs to give current teachers better support and help improve teacher performance over time, she said.

Chubb is skeptical about the study making much difference in state policy, however. “Years of academic research have not persuaded policymakers to alter compensation practices; here’s hoping a study from the Tennessee Department of Education will,” said Chubb.

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

INTERNET INFO

School Choice, Not Pre-K, Boosted Florida

By Victor Joecks

In 1998, Florida and Nevada had the same score on the National Assessment of Educational Progress fourth-grade reading test.

In 1999, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) instituted a series of reforms, including tax-credit scholarships, vouchers, grading schools from A-F, ending social promotion from third grade, a robust system of charter schools, and expanded online learning. Nevada did none of these.

The results for Florida were remarkable. Twelve years later, its fourth-graders scored approximately two grade levels higher on the same NAEP test. Nevada, which is similar to Florida demographically, scored only about half a grade level higher. The gains in Florida were even greater for minority and non-native-English students, whose reading ability increased by up to two-and-a-half grade levels.

Florida and Nevada increased per-pupil spending by similar amounts during this time.

In light of Florida’s remarkable progress, researchers descended upon the state. Their studies confirmed allowing parents to choose any school for their children actually increased academic achievement in public schools.

Those comments reveal either ignorance or conscious dissembling. Although Florida did pass a universal pre-K program that was fully implemented in 2005, the earliest those 2005 pre-K students could have taken a fourth-grade NAEP reading test was 2011. And Florida’s 2011 fourth-grade reading scores actually decreased by a point from 2009.

Clearly, pre-K did not cause Florida’s remarkable gains.

Additional powerful evidence is in three federally funded studies of Head Start. Head Start is the federal government’s $8 billion-a-year pre-K program. The latest study was released in December 2012. Like the two previous studies, it found Head Start produced only minimal gains for students, and those gains almost entirely disappeared by third grade.

School Choice Produces Results

Florida isn’t the only state benefitting from school choice. Although such programs can be structured in numerous ways, the common feature is they empower parents with choices. Parents and students receive their public school funding and then decide among the education choices available, including private schools, virtual learning, and homeschooling.

Today, 21 states and Washington, DC have some form of school choice. Unlike what happens when money pours into a broken system, these programs produce results. School choice raised graduation rates in Washington, DC and it has increased reading and math scores in North Carolina, Wisconsin, New York, and DC.

Nevada’s children are the biggest losers when intelligent and powerful individuals such as Denis ignore the real cause of Florida’s remarkable education gains.

It’s time for Sandoval to spend some political capital showing Nevadans how school choice would improve our education system. And it’s time for legislators to give Nevada kids the education opportunities available in Arizona, Indiana, Louisiana, and 18 other states.

Victor Joecks (vj@npri.org) is communications director at the Nevada Policy Research Institute, on whose website an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission.
Fla. District Cuts School Competition Opportunities

By Sherri Ackerman

Gussie Lorenzo-Luaces and three classmates at Deer Park Elementary in Tampa, Florida wanted to find what sort of paper allows a paper airplane to fly the farthest. After five trial runs, they determined copy paper, with its smooth surface and stable weight, worked best.

The boys’ exhibit was among more than 1,800 presented at February’s annual Hillsborough Regional STEM Fair, which featured 2,000 students from district schools, charter and private schools, and home schools—the most ever, organizers said.

That diversity was a big plus for Gussie’s mom, Susie: “They don’t need separation. I like seeing them all together.”

Increasingly, though, Hillsborough students are not all together in academic competitions. In the past year district officials began excluding charter schools from district-wide contests, including Battle of the Books, a reading competition, and the Math Bowl and Math League for elementary and middle-school students.

The reasons for this are not clear. People have suggested a variety of possibilities such as cost, fear of competition, and a desire for charter school independence. Such actions point to potential pitfalls as school choice options mushroom across the United States, even in a district with a choice-friendly reputation like Hillsborough.

Separation Trend?

Although she understands district concerns, said Lillia Stroud, “separation at any level is disheartening.” She directs the King’s Kids Academy of Health Science, a new Tampa charter.

Robert Haag of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools said he had not heard any such stories from district-wide contests, including Battle of the Books, a reading competition, and the Math Bowl and Math League for elementary and middle-school students.

The reasons for this are not clear. People have suggested a variety of possibilities such as cost, fear of competition, and a desire for charter school independence. Such actions point to potential pitfalls as school choice options mushroom across the United States, even in a district with a choice-friendly reputation like Hillsborough.

Participation Spikes Expenses

Hillsborough district officials said increasing costs to staff the events and the growing number of charters—43 now, with seven more expected by fall—make it difficult to continue inviting them.

As participation in such events has grown, district expenses have climbed, said Jenna Hodgens, who oversees charter schools for the district. Hillsborough also recently lost a chunk of state money it receives to monitor charters. A law change two years ago reduced the administrative fee for “high-performing charters” from 5 percent to 2 percent.

“The bigger we have grown, the more sense it made to let them do for themselves,” Hodgens said. Despite multiple requests, the district did not provide this writer its costs for the events or estimated savings from excluding charters.

For events the district runs directly, like Battle of the Books, Math Bowl, and Math League, charters are no longer invited. But the district offers to help charters create their own events, said Hillsborough Superintendent MaryEllen Elia.

“We want to help them,” Elia said, but “charters want to be independent, too.”

Mixed Response from Charters

Charter leaders offered mixed views. Gary Hocevar, a former president of the Charter Leaders of Florida, said the district’s move was appropriate.

“MaryEllen made the right decision,” he said. “She’s not anti-choice. They’re receiving less funding from the state.”

With recent cuts, “there was not a thing we could come up with for a compromise.”

Instead, Hocevar advised his charter school peers to create their own competitions. “Invite the traditional schools,” he suggested, “and blow them away.”

Charter school operators held their own Battle of the Books in 2012 and will do so again in May.

“Last year, we had to scramble,” said Catherine Gorman, a media specialist at Advantage Academy of Hillsborough. The school, with 300 elementary students and 150 middle-school students, had already ordered the books for the contest when they learned they could not join it. So they created their own.

“If you ... do it on your own,” Gorman said, “you can see what went well and make the changes you want.”

Competition Benefits Everyone

Eventually, charter operators hope to hold math competitions and possibly form a sports league similar to the Florida High School Athletics Association.

Tahvia Shaw of Terrace Community Middle School said the district notified her a week before last school year’s Math League competition that charters could no longer participate. Her parents, whose children had been preparing for months, barricaded the district with phone calls. The district relented, and Terrace Community placed first overall.

Heightened competition is good for her school and the district, Shaw said.

Inspiring Young Minds

Five years ago, 150 schools participated in the STEM fair and the operating budget was $45,000, said Larry Plank, the district’s STEM director. This year, the number of schools doubled and costs rose to $75,000.

District schools each pay a $75 registration fee. Charter schools used to pay the same. But to offset rising costs, they now pay $150—just like private schools, Plank said.

The Hillsborough Education Foundation hopes to raise enough donations to offer all schools a discount, said its president, Phil Jones.

District administrators said events that lead to state competitions, such as Odyssey of the Mind and Hillsborough’s STEM fair, will still include school choice students. When Hillsborough finalists move up to state, they’ll be from every type of school, said Pam Caffery, a district science education director: “They’ll attend as Team Hillsborough.”

Sherri Ackerman (sackerman@sufs.org) is assistant editor of RedefinED. Reprinted with permission from RedefinED.
Why aren’t American students proficient in mathematics? Teens graduate from high school unprepared for college math and with a strong antipathy to the subject. Most graduates require extensive remediation. There is a dearth of K-12 math skills across the nation.

Why is the United States, long a global education leader, suffering a national breakdown in mathematics? The reason is simple: Schools don’t teach children enough math.

Beginning in the 1980s, most school districts adopted or experimented with a “reform” approach to K-12 mathematics, also known as “standards-based,” “student-centered,” “inquiry-based,” and “discovery-based.” Critics call it “fuzzy math.”

The national Common Core State Standards initiative is unfortunately leading many districts to adopt more of these kinds of materials.

Fuzzy Math, Fuzzy Teaching

Reform-based curricula downplay or avoid “traditional” procedures, focusing instead on less-effective strategies. They emphasize probability, data, and statistics, while de-emphasizing multiplication facts, long division, fractions, the number line, and algebra. But content isn’t the only weakness in reform math. The teaching method is problematic, too.

Direct instruction is a teaching method that entails teacher instruction, examples, and explanations. There are individual and group practice, special projects, and discussions, but the emphasis is on teacher-directed activity. There is structure, a logical progression of skills, an emphasis on correct answers and efficient processes, memorization, and “practicing to mastery,” with constant refreshers on previously learned skills. Most parents and professional tutors use direct instruction as their primary teaching method.

Reform math, however, is typically delivered via constructivism, a method of learning where students “construct” or “discover” their own strategies and knowledge. The teacher is a “guide on the side,” not a “sage on the stage.”

Constructivism prefers “discovery” over teacher instruction; estimation over exact answers; group work over individual work; explorations and supposed “real-world applications” over procedural knowledge and practicing; and the use of calculators and other technologies over proficiency with paper-and-pencil computation.

In constructivist classrooms, children are to learn math by drawing pictures, counting on fingers, playing games, acting, coloring, writing about their thinking, and taking all day to get practically nowhere. There are few definitions, explanations, or examples. Memorization and practicing are derided as “drill and kill,” an old-school philosophy that supposedly hinders understanding and critical thinking.

Techniques for Failure

Constructivists insist “traditional” math lacks conceptual understanding and that children are bored by “rote memorization.” Discovery learning, they claim, provides “deep” thinking and context, gets students to “think mathematically,” and makes math accessible. Children supposedly explore, create, make connections, communicate, collaborate, and become “math literate,” all while having fun.

This sounds great, except that proficiency won’t come this way. Math proficiency depends on a logical progression of skills. Fluency is key. Accuracy is critical. Skills build on skills, and practice is essential.

Reform math proponents call their method “best practices” (as if calling it that makes it so). After years of such classes, however, students rely on calculators and classmates. They lack procedural fluency, basic arithmetic skills, and number sense. They count on fingers and add instead of multiplying. They’re perplexed by long division. Fractions are a mystery. They don’t know the standard or “traditional” algorithms and terminology much of the world uses. They’re stuck with methods that are non-standard, not useful long-term, inefficient, inexact, and often incorrect.

Emotional Damage

Reform math also can damage children emotionally. Constructivists expect students to struggle. In their mind, if children learned efficiently, the lesson failed. Therefore, children who learn an efficient method at home can be reprimanded for using it or teaching it to classmates. They’re not allowed to deny themselves or their classmates the chance to struggle and fail.

But children are concrete thinkers. They want instructions, guidance, and things that make sense. Having to constantly struggle in front of classmates can be devastating. “I don’t get it” can turn into “I hate math,” which can turn into “I hate school,” then “I hate me” or “I don’t want to go to school today,” which can turn into illness, dropping out, or behavioral or emotional problems.

What’s really an instructional failure can become an emotional problem for children, where they literally panic over simple math.

Undeterred by Failure

Their panic won’t move committed reformers. I’ve heard adults call children “the low group,” “unmotivated,” “selfish,” “dummies,” “typical teens,” “lazy,” “problems,” “bad apples,” or students of “low cognitive ability.” In 2010, just 41.7 percent of Spokane’s 10th graders passed a simple state math test that required just 56.9 percent to pass. Local administrators dismissed what was obviously their failure with: “That number is irrelevant.”

My daughter commented: “Saying that kids need to learn in groups and need to struggle is ridiculous and cruel to kids. ... If you’re going to be an astronaut, if you’re going to be a lawyer, or change the world, school is where it starts. And you’re crushed before you even get half-way in the door.”

All over the world, students enjoy math and excel in it. American children don’t have a “math-is-too-hard” gene. They’re stuck in classes where they’re expected to “discover” complex mathematical procedures and work constantly in groups, trying to teach each other thousands of years of math. Most could develop solid math skills. The reason they don’t is because they aren’t taught enough math.

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