School Choice Increases Property Values

By Ashley Bateman

A new study finds school choice increases local property values.

Study authors Robert Shapiro and Kevin Hassett found property values increased in relation to student achievement gains. Expanding charter schools increased student performance in New York City schools. Graduation rates rose, net income rose, and housing demand in these neighborhoods increased.

Shapiro and Hassett also found opening a new charter school is associated with a 3.7 percent increase in home prices in the same ZIP code a year later.

Motivated by the rising value of his

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Oklahoma May Become Second State to Offer Education Savings Accounts

By Kathryn Shirley

Oklahoma lawmakers have proposed legislation that would create education savings accounts for students in low-income families, with special needs, or in military families.

A Friedman Foundation study released in January found 56 percent of Oklahomans favor education savings accounts (ESAs).

Under House Bill 398, parents who remove their children from the public school system could receive up to 90 percent of the state funds dedicated to the child’s public education.

Funds could be put towards a variety of education services such as private school tuition, charter school tuition, special education assistance, homeschooling, tutoring, counseling, online education,

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Chalkboard

Alt-Test-Delete

Alaska and Kansas will drop national Common Core tests and create their own. Page 5

Hot Supe

The leading candidates for Georgia superintendent, on both sides of the aisle, support school choice. Page 8

Credit Me

Thousands of New Yorkers turn out to support tax-credit scholarship legislation. Page 11

Stuck in St. Louis

Missouri lawmakers puzzle over what to do with kids trapped in failing St. Louis schools. Page 13

Holding Pattern

Wisconsin’s department of education pushes back against all attempts to limit Common Core. Page 15

Self-Regulation

School choice programs don’t need mandates for standardized testing to determine accountability. Page 17

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Happy Birthday, Heartland.

In 1984, The Heartland Institute changed the definition of a think tank.

We were the first think tank created to apply free-market ideas to the problems of a specific state, Illinois.

We quickly expanded our reach throughout the Midwest, and in 1993 we became a national organization.

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Many people helped us get to where we are today. We thank you all.

And we look forward to our next 30 years of fighting for your freedom.
Online Learning in Libraries Targets High-School Dropouts

By Bruce Edward Walker

The concept of the traditional library continues to evolve from rooms teeming with musty books, dusty shelves, and spinster librarians shushing patrons. The latest evolution involves offering online alternatives to high-school dropouts, allowing them the opportunity to earn a diploma rather than a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

On January 9, Cengage launched its Career Online High School program for public libraries. COHS blends online learning with academic coaches who assist students with career advice and curricula guidance.

Los Angeles Public Library is hosting the COHS pilot and hopes to launch it in March 2014 before the program goes nationwide.

“We’re excited to be the first library in the United States to offer Career Online High School,” said Peter Persic, an L.A. Public Library spokesman. “The program will allow us to award an actual high school diploma as opposed to a GED. We’ve found that both are important, but one significant difference is some colleges only accept a diploma. Students who participate will also receive a career certificate in a variety of different areas, including child care, education, and homeland security.”

The pilot is just the latest example of institutions moving beyond the walls of traditional classrooms to offer education through a variety of providers in a variety of forms.

Dropouts Earning Diplomas

Cengage’s high school courses are vetted by state-board certified instructors and accredited by AdvanceED. Previously earned high school credits can be transferred toward COHS diplomas, allowing some students to graduate in only four to six months.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, dropouts are defined as “16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate).” NCES reports high school dropouts in 2011 composed 7 percent of the age group, down from 12 percent in 1990.

According to a Cengage press release, however, 1 million high school students drop out every year, an average of 7,000 students each day. Citing U.S. Census Bureau statistics, Cengage states 25 percent of Los Angeles residents have failed to earn a high school diploma.

“Career Online is both face-to-face time and online learning at the students’ pace, which is the most convenient for them,” said Persic. “Additionally, students can learn together by choosing to gather together to discuss coursework in the library.”

Praised as ‘Disruptive Innovation’

The pilot program is open to all L.A. city residents, according to Persic. He said it will be initially funded by the Los Angeles Library Foundation but he’s unsure where future funding will come from once COHS is up and running.

“We anticipate that 50 percent of all high school courses will be online in some form or fashion by 2020,” said Julia Freeland, an education research fellow for the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, a research institute located in San Mateo, California. “Targeting dropouts in a space open to the public but not traditionally associated with education is the type of disruptive innovation that strikes our interest.”

COHS piqued her interest because it represents a new paradigm for learning, she said.

Freeland equates online learning with the advent of the transistor radio in the 1960s, when the new device became a vital information and entertainment source by providing an affordable and portable alternative to the bulky vacuum-tube radios that preceded them.

“The retail business model for the old, floor-model vacuum-tube radios was to sell people radios that would need replacement tubes when the old ones burned out,” she said.

Similarly, she says traditional evening classes held at schools and community centers are like the video manufacturer Sony, and Career Online High School is more like the retail innovator Target, which she says is aligned more closely with fulfilling the needs of a diverse group of students eager to complete their high school education.

Bruce Edward Walker writes from Michigan.
or a combination of these and more. If money is left over after the school year, parents could roll the funds over to the next school year or save them for their child’s future higher education.

The accounts are “potentially game-changing, a new concept,” said Brandon Dutcher, senior vice president of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs (OCPA). They present “another option on the menu for parents” for providing the best education possible.

Arizona’s ESA Legislation

State Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City), one of the bill’s original sponsors, drew upon Arizona’s successful ESA program while drafting legislation.

Calling ESAs a “perfect fit” for Oklahoma, Nelson explained they “would provide a number of options for those parents to find some kind of an education set-up that works for and fits their child.”

In 2011, Arizona became the first and so far only state to offer ESAs. Originally available only for students with special needs, the program has since expanded to include low-income students in failing schools, students in military families, and children in the foster care system.

“Children should go wherever they need to go. Public schools don’t work for every child,” Nelson said. “Majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents supported ESAs in the Friedman/OCPA poll of 606 representative Oklahoma voters. Of the 164 parents surveyed who have school-age children, 63 percent favored ESAs.

“Oklahomans have choices in everything from cell phone providers to grocery stores,” Dutcher said. “It’s no surprise that they want choices in something as important as the education of their children.”

Recent Choice Expansion

In recent years, Oklahoma has introduced new programs to expand options for students.

In 2010, the state began to provide vouchers to special-needs children. In 2011, a similar scholarship program was developed for low-income students, through tax credits for those who contribute. The poll found 63 percent of voters favor these tax-credit scholarships. Oklahoma also has two online charter schools.

ESAs differ in empowering families to use a wide variety of educational options, customizing an education plan for each student.

The public education sector likely will be the most vocal opponent of the plan, as some in it worry about money moving from public schools, those interviewed for this article said. Others may assert the plan lacks accountability.

To ensure ESA recipients are receiving quality education, the legislation requires recipients to take a nationally norm-referenced test each year and include their scores on their yearly renewal contract.

“We’ve got to show how these students are doing in the program, while at the same time not intruding on private schools and the delivery or mechanisms they are using,” explained Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute. Goldwater helped pass the first ESA law.

Passage Potential

The Oklahoma legislature convened on February 3. Republicans hold a supermajority in both state chambers and the governor’s seat.

But “it is still too early to tell” how much support he will receive from his party and the amount of pushback the legislation will face from the public school sector and others, Nelson said. Passing the state’s special-needs vouchers hinged on a few votes from across the aisle, he noted, saying he hopes the vote to approve more choice would be bipartisan once again.

Kathlyn Shirley writes from Washington, DC.

HELPING KIDS SUCCEED

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Kansas and Alaska to Write Their Own Common Core Tests

By Loren Heal

Kansas and Alaska independently decided to pull out of national Common Core tests and hire Kansas University’s Assessment & Achievement Institute to create their English language arts and math assessments.

The tests for both states will probably be similar, but they’re still in the early phases of being written, say AAI staff.

Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia belong to Smarter Balanced (SBAC), which Alaska and Kansas left, and the other national Common Core testing consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

“We were glad to see the Kansas State Board of Education vote to leave SBAC and continue to use Kansas assessments” through AAI’s Center for Educational Testing & Evaluation (CETE), said Kristin George of Kansas Against Common Core. In December she learned CETE also has received test questions from WestEd, a contractor that provides questions to SBAC. That led to questions over how different the Kansas tests would be.

CETE no longer receives test questions from WestEd, said Marianne Perie, CETE’s codirector: “All item writing will be done in-house with the assistance of teachers.”

Similar, but Different

AAI has begun working on Kansas’s tests, said AAI Director Neal Kingston, “so we have more of an idea what [the new Kansas] tests will look like. We proposed several ideas to Alaska, but we do not have a contract with Alaska yet, so they have not finalized their plans.

“We were glad to see the Kansas State Board of Education vote to leave SBAC and continue to use Kansas assessments” through AAI’s Center for Educational Testing & Evaluation (CETE), said Kristin George of Kansas Against Common Core. In December she learned CETE also has received test questions from WestEd, a contractor that provides questions to SBAC. That led to questions over how different the Kansas tests would be.

“We have not yet proceeded to negotiations with AAI to develop our tests,” McCormick said.

Although many of the individual test questions may look similar among all three tests, Kingston said, “the major difference will be in the ‘test specifications’ which tell the test developers exactly how many of what types of items measuring which aspect of content will appear on the test.”

AAI’s tests will require less human grading than national Common Core tests, Kingston added.

Illinois Schools Won’t Get a Billion More

By Benjamin Yount

Illinois State Superintendent Chris Koch is asking for an extra $1 billion in his new budget request.

Illinois is spending $6 billion on public schools in 2013–14. Koch’s request would push that number to a little more than $7 billion for next year.

But Koch and the state’s schools won’t get that extra $1 billion.

“I would love to,” said state Rep. Will Davis (D-East Hazel Crest), who authors Illinois’ education budget. “We’re just not financially in a position to do all of those things.”

Koch said if that’s the case, some schools will close.

“At the end of this school year, we will have 23 percent of our school districts with less than 100 days of cash on hand,” Koch said. “We have 63 percent of our districts in financial distress.”

Wake-Up Call for Parents
That may be what it takes to prove to parents in Illinois the state itself is in financial distress.

Davis said if schools have to cancel high school football or basketball because the district has run out of money, parents finally will pay attention.

“It certainly shouldn’t have to be up to the athletic program,” Davis said. “But I guess in some ways you say, ‘If that’s what it takes,’ then that’s what it takes.”

Parents and taxpayers are starting to realize something is not right, said Joshua Dwyer, director of education reform at the Illinois Policy Institute.

“It is difficult to tell where people’s breaking points are—what is going to be the catalyst that will cause them to demand change? They are closer to it now than they’ve ever been.”

Overspending on Pensions
Dwyer said a look at the state’s budget shows what is not right.

While Illinois spends $6 billion a year to educate kids, the state spends $7 billion a year on teachers and other public workers who have retired.

“The state has its priorities backward. It is willing to slash everything in order to fulfill its pension obligations,” he said.

Dwyer said reform will require moving government workers away from traditional pensions to 401(k)-style retirement plans. Davis said it might take a tax increase. And that, too, would grab parents’ and taxpayers’ attention.

Benjamin Yount writes for Illinois Watchdog, from which this article is reprinted with permission.
Survey Reveals Not All Teachers Toe the Party Line

The annual member survey of the nation’s largest teachers union alternative finds its members support school choice, are relatively wary of Common Core, reject higher taxes to fund education spending, and support giving teachers access to locked, concealed firearms in school after they’ve taken a training course.

“Teachers are just like any cross-section of the American public—there’s liberals, there’s conservatives, there’s libertarians,” said Association of American Educators spokeswoman Alexandra Freeze. “I don’t think our members are any more conservative than any other cross-section of the U.S. public.”

AAE surveys its members every year and supports only policies a significant majority endorse. The 2014 survey also found 59 percent support Milwaukee’s voucher program, 72 percent support Arizona’s education savings accounts, and 69 percent believe national Common Core standards will have no effect or an adverse effect on students.

AAE does not collectively bargain, as unions do. Instead, it offers teachers liability insurance and professional support, akin to organizations such as the American Bar Association.

Twenty-one states require teachers to enroll in a union.

— Staff reports

School Choice Raises Property Values, Study Shows

Continued from page 1

own neighborhood when a charter school opened, Hassett thought parents would want to know more than test results.

“Maybe test scores aren’t the best metric of what we’re looking at when we’re giving people choice,” said Hassett, director of economic policy studies and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. “If we trust that parents are stewards of their own kids, and we see they are lining up to send their kids to this place, … we should celebrate the place, even if it doesn’t make test scores go up.”

S$37 Billion in Added Property Value

From 2006 to 2012, New York City graduation rates increased 11.3 percent, the study noted. Hassett and Shapiro deduced this increased residential housing values by as much as $37.1 billion. The authors estimate adding charter schools accounted for more than $22 billion in housing value increases.

A 2009 study examining Edgewood, a San Antonio suburb, found similar results. When this area significantly expanded school choice, numerous people moved there and businesses followed, said study author John Merrifield, an economics professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

The results of Hassett and Shapiro’s study are not surprising, he said.

“One place’s gain is another place’s loss, so we can’t use this in a macro sense, but so that districts compete,” Merrifield said. “This is the shortcut to creating a wildfire of spreading school choice … without spending any more tax dollars.”

Benefits to Incomes, Integration

“Universal choice and budget resources tied in part to student enrollments have created much greater competition for students among schools,” the authors note in their study.

A 2012 study found open enrollment policies increased local property values by approximately 3 percent.

“You would expect an even bigger increase from inter-district choice because if you have two school districts you have direct competition,” said Randall Reback, an economics professor at Columbia University. “When you expand choice, not only does it increase the house values in places where people are interested in transferring outside of their districts, but can also increase the median income of residents. It can create residential integration as a result.”

The authors plan to replicate the study in other cities, but they have not determined the locales yet, Hassett said.

“There’s going to be a lot of new research on recovery school districts,” Reback said. “Maybe two or three years down the road, I think we’ll see the same results.”

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

Congress Kicks Off First-Ever High School App Competition

The U.S. House of Representatives has started an app-designing contest for high school students across the country in an effort to generate interest in science and math education.

“Sparking students’ interest in STEM fields is critical for a nation which has a strong history of innovative and technological achievement,” said Rep. Randy Hultgren (R-IL).

Hultgren sat down beside some young people in December and tried his hand at computer coding, which “showed me the promise that our students have shown as the next generation of pioneers,” he said.

To compete, students 13 and older must submit their app’s source code online between February 1 and April 30 at http://studentappchallenge.house.gov/. They also must submit a video explaining their app and what the competition has taught them. A panel will select one winner for each participating congressional district by the end of May.

Students may submit a detailed conceptual design for an app, instead of a full completed app. The app can be for any platform and operating system.

Winners will be featured at www.house.gov and in an exhibit at the U.S. Capitol.

— Staff reports
Teachers Unions Push Back Against Teacher Evaluations

By Kenneth Artz

Colorado’s largest teachers union is challenging a 2010 law that includes a new procedure for teacher firings.

The Colorado Education Association (CEA) has sued, saying the law is flawed because it allows administrators to approve or deny a teacher’s transfer to their school, a freedom known as “mutual consent.” They charge this will put some good teachers on unpaid leave. Supporters say this is an important modernization of the teaching profession.

Colorado’s 2010 law seeks to ensure teachers are paid based on merit instead of input-based measures such as years of experience and certifications, said Brittany Corona, a research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.

“Under Colorado’s law, teachers who work hard and demonstrably improve student outcomes will be rewarded for their success in the classroom, and those who are rated poorly for several consecutive years will lose their tenure,” said Corona.

Unions across the country are beginning to challenge new teacher evaluation systems the Obama administration has unilaterally required states to implement.

Fed Mandates vs. ‘Smart Policy’

Federally mandated teacher evaluations are distinct from Colorado’s current evaluation system, Corona notes.

“The pushback against federally mandated teacher evaluations in New York and Connecticut was driven by teachers’ unions who do not wish to adopt Colorado’s model,” she said. “The unions correctly recognize that state-level teacher evaluation systems which tie compensation to performance will impose a new level of accountability that has been missing from the vast majority of school systems across the country.”

She continued, “Colorado’s evaluation system is smart policy, but efforts by the Obama administration to implement a one-size-fits-all teacher evaluation system from the federal level are another misguided Washington overreach.”

People have to start realizing unions are in the business of protecting jobs, not improving education, said Terry Moe, a political science professor at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.

“Unions consider teacher evaluations as a threat. They are opposed to a truly serious system of teacher evaluations that may lead to many teachers being graded ‘unsatisfactory’ and thus losing their jobs,” Moe said.

But the political tide is against them, Moe says, even within the Democratic Party. President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top program mandates teacher evaluations, and since it was created in 2009, more than half the states have introduced them, he notes.

What Unions Want

Unions are very active in Colorado and oppose mutual consent, says Ben DeGrow, senior education policy analyst at the Independence Institute in Denver.

“Mutual consent … is a way to weed out bad teachers,” he said. “This is a common-sense measure. So we have to ask: Why do unions want to undermine reform efforts and inflict ineffective teachers on school children?”

Even though unions claim to support evaluations, they really don’t, says Moe.

“The unions, especially Randi Weingarten [current president of the American Federation of Teachers], constantly talk about ‘collaboration,’ or creating a ‘collaborative environment,’ but what they really mean is they want to determine how the laws are written, implemented, and work out in the trenches,” explained Moe.

“As far as they’re concerned, reforms are just a piece of paper. The reality is in the implementation and details. And that’s where they’re particularly strong. Their aim is to see fewer teachers get evaluated,” said Moe.

WASHINGTON state is very much like other states, says Liv Finne, director of the Center for Education at the Washington Policy Center. Race to the Top—required teacher evaluations, but the state reform law did not require teacher evaluations be tied to student achievement. That’s a direct result of the state teachers union lobbying against such a requirement, Finne said.

“Unions are out of step with serious efforts to reform education. They’re very powerful, and they have all their people on the right committees to protect their members,” she said.

Nationally Coordinated Effort?

The pushback against teacher evaluations, starting in New York and Connecticut, then spreading west through Colorado and other states, could be a nationally coordinated effort by unions, says Robert Maranto, a professor at the University of Arkansas.

“When No Child Left Behind was passed, my assumption was that it would fail because there were so many ways to sabotage it,” he said. “But the administrators agreed to it back then because money was tight and they were willing to undergo a little discomfort in order to get the funds. The same may be true for the new teacher evaluations required by Race to the Top—the unions may have agreed to them [then] because 10 years out they thought they could get them cut.”

An advantage unions have is that they share information among themselves, while state education agencies don’t necessarily do the same, Maranto said.

Part of the problem with teacher evaluations is that if they work as designed, some teachers will get a poor grade and eventually lose their jobs, he said. That creates a political risk because people who choose careers in education typically don’t do so to “take risks and be unpopular.”

“But in the end, it’s kind of good to be able to fire people. They tried not firing people in the old Soviet Union, and it didn’t work out so well,” Maranto said.

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School Choice Backers Fill the Ballot for Superintendent in Ga.

By Ashley Bateman

Three candidates for Georgia state superintendent are running on school choice platforms against current superintendent John Barge. All say an updated funding formula and new accountability measures are necessary to expand choice.

Calling herself a taxpayer watchdog, accountant Nancy Jester uncovered $54 million in deceptive budgeting while serving on the DeKalb County school board.

“If we had had financial integrity indicators in place, that wouldn’t have happened,” said Jester, a Republican candidate for superintendent. “Our funding formula is byzantine, and the cost of compliance is high so that’s a cost driver that does nothing for kids.”

Barge is challenging Gov. Nathan Deal in the gubernatorial primary. If he loses there, he will defend his superintendent spot in November.

Bipartisan Support for Choice

Jester notes parents whose children attended her local, high-performing public school jumped to place their children in a new language-immersion charter school that opened nearby.

“Choice drives success, so people aren’t trapped in failing schools,” Jester said. “And what people want is different.”

As a Georgia House Education Committee member, Democratic candidate for superintendent Alisha Morgan (D-Austell) has sponsored Parent Trigger legislation and voted for charter schools and vouchers.

“We have to move away from the one size-fits-all education system,” Morgan said. “Charter schools, intra-district transferring and a number of other options … are not available to all students, and particularly outside the urban and metropolitan [areas].”

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as too much educational freedom,” said Republican candidate Kira Willis, who has been a teacher for more than 20 years. “Students need to be able to pursue what excites them and keeps them interested in learning. That means choices.”

Republicans Against Common Core

Barge and Morgan support national curriculum and testing mandates called Common Core. Willis and Jester oppose Common Core.

“Nothing good comes of centralization,” Jester said. “Ask the Soviets about that. …We do need adjustments in Georgia’s core curriculum—I just don’t think Common Core is the way to go.”

Common Core restricts schools from specializing and offering parents different kinds of education to fit their children, Willis said: “We have changed the rules on teachers just about every year, and we’re changing the standards and teachers are trying so hard to keep up.”

Morgan wants to “allow educators to try new things, meet the needs of the twenty-first-century students.” Creating opportunities for community and parent involvement in schools can drive results, Morgan said.

Variety of Reform Ideas

Choice can’t occur until the funding formula gets fixed, Jester said.

“All state that borders us spends less per pupil,” Jester said. “We need to go to a model … where they accredit schools based on academic performance results and some financial metric.”

Although Morgan agrees the state’s funding formula needs an update, the highest priority should be how the state spends current education funds, she said.

“We need to make sure teachers have the support and resources they need to do their job well,” Morgan said. “We need effective teachers.”

Unifying the funding formula would foster differentiation across schools, leading to more options for students, Willis said.

“Where students go to school shouldn’t be based on ZIP code; we’re doing a huge disservice to our families by saying that,” she said.

States to Emulate

“There are lots of states that have methods we can adopt,” Jester said. She pointed to Texas’s financial accountability rating system.

Morgan pointed to Florida and North Carolina as states to emulate.

“In Florida … they’ve paid close attention to having high expectations and high standards for all of their schools,” Morgan said. “Where you measure, it matters.”

North Carolina has an impressive use of technology and personalized learning, she said.

“The school became the center of the community,” Morgan said. “Parents could come into the school and use technology and had access immediately through a longitudinal data system that was connected to the teachers.”

Willis says Georgia needs to find what is working within the state before looking elsewhere.

“We’ve got some school systems that have 80 percent graduation rates and some that have 90 percent, so what’s working there, what can we take and use,” she said.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
Senators Propose Redirecting Federal Money to Choice

By Joy Pullmann

tens of millions of children could attend schools of choice if $35 billion of their federal K–12 dollars follow them there, as two U.S. Senators proposed on January 28.

Whether those schools would be public-only or include both private and public would be up to state lawmakers, said Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC).

Alexander’s bill would shift approximately 41 percent of federal education spending from 80 programs into 11 million scholarships of $2,100 each. If states chose, parents below the federal poverty line could use the money for expenses such as tuition, extracurricular activities, tutoring, and homeschooling materials. Scott’s bill would work similarly for federal special-education spending and create a pilot voucher program on five military bases.

“All opportunity in America should mean that everyone has the same starting line, as much as possible,” Alexander said, announcing his proposal at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in Washington DC.

States that choose to distribute their federal education funds this way would be exempt from some provisions of No Child Left Behind.

‘Restoration of Dignity’

Scott explained his support for school choice by telling some of his life story. He was seven when his parents divorced. He moved with his mother from an Air Force base in Michigan to a two-bedroom house with his grandparents in Charleston, South Carolina, then proceeded to fail numerous classes in high school.

“This mess I created in my life is why education is so important to me personally,” he said. “I think I’m the only senator to fail civics.”

He illustrated further by telling about Rachel Lewis, a South Carolina girl with Down’s Syndrome. Her parents loved her elementary school but had to move to an area where the local public school “did not want to properly educate this young lady.” The Lewises fought for a year for Rachel to have the education they wanted.

“They lighted out [on],” Scott said. “The very people they had to fight with to get a good opportunity for little Rachel were going to be in charge of educating little Rachel. So they decided that was not right.” The Lewises sent Rachel to a small private school called Hidden Treasure. She graduated from high school and now works two jobs.

“We create portability so those parents have the resources to ensure kids like Rachel maximize their potential,” Scott said. “I consider that the restoration of dignity.”

Helping the Poor

The senators took pains to emphasize their interest in helping the needy, contrasting their approach with the redistributive policies President Barack Obama reinforced in that evening’s State of the Union address.

“I’d like for students to have the broadest possible choice of schools. Of course, the wealthiest students already do. It’s the low-income students who have the least amount of choice,” Alexander said.

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By S. Fred Singer

Global Warming’s Unfinished Debate

“In an important book, Hot Talk, Cold Science, S. Fred Singer sums up the evidence on global warming as neither settled, nor compelling, nor even very convincing.”

—Chicago Tribune
Common Core Tests to Cost South Carolina Taxpayers Millions

By Rick Brundrett

The 22-state consortium that is developing Common Core math and English tests for K–12 students will soon no longer be a cheap date for South Carolina taxpayers.

After a four-year, $175 million federal grant ends in September, states will have to pay membership fees to continue with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), said its director of higher education collaboration, Jacqueline King.

The initial estimated cost to stay in SBAC would be $6.20 or $9.55 per tested student, depending on the level of services provided, King said. Based on a projected 52,000 to 55,000 students at each tested grade level in South Carolina, the membership fee in the first year would run $1.93 million to $2 million for grades 3 through 8 at the $6.20-per-student level, and $2.97 million to $3.15 million at the $9.55 level.

If grade 11 is added, as the South Carolina Department of Education (DOE) has proposed, the projected maximum membership cost jumps to $2.38 million or $3.67 million, at each respective level.

Membership, Administering, Scoring Fees

In addition to membership fees, states also would be responsible for the costs of administering and scoring the assessment tests, King said.

“We think over time with having common assessments, it will help drive down costs,” she said.

DOE spokesman Dino Teppara said the cost of administering Common Core tests to approximately 380,000 students in grades 3 through 8 and 11 for 2014–15 is estimated to be $14.1 million, although he did not know offhand whether that includes membership fees. The tests are scheduled to be given over a five-week period during the last 12 weeks of the school year.

The projected $14.1 million tab is at least $2 million more than what it cost last year to administer the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) math and English language arts tests in grades 3 through 8 and the High School Assessment Program (HSAP) exam in grade 10, according to Teppara. Test costs for this school year are not yet available, he said.

Governor’s Conflicting Messages

Gov. Nikki Haley and Superintendent of Education Mick Zais, both Republicans, along with Gerrita Postlewait, then-state Board of Education president, reauthorized South Carolina’s “advisory” membership in SBAC in June 2011, according to a memorandum they signed. In June 2012, the state changed its membership status to “governing.”

Recently on her Facebook page, Haley gave a conflicting message: “We have been trying to repeal Common Core since 2011 when we came into office. Whether its [sic] education, healthcare, or any aspect of government, we will fight to keep all standards state based, not federal.”

King said neither Haley’s office nor the state department of education has expressed any opposition directly to SBAC, adding, “[South Carolina state employees] have been very active in the consortium.”

The June 2012 press release noted South Carolina representatives were serving on “three of the 10 state-led Smarter Balanced work groups.”

Haley spokesman Doug Mayer did not respond to requests for comment.

‘Stop the Bleeding’

Common Core supporters say the standards, developed by leaders from the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, will better prepare students for college and jobs.

“The Consortium involves educators, researchers, policymakers, and community groups in a transparent and consensus-driven process to help all students thrive in a knowledge-driven global economy,” the Smarter Balanced Web site states.

Opponents argue the standards are flawed and the consortium strips control from parents and teachers.

“This is all about not ceding authority to unknown persons in other states who have a different value system, different priorities, different philosophies— not ceding authority over the most precious thing we have, and that is the minds of our children,” said state Sen. Chip Campsen (R-Charleston), the sponsor of a bill (S 888) that would slow Common Core implementation.

The bill would require legislative approval of any new state content standard or revisions to existing standards if the changes are developed by any entity other than the state Department of Education.

“It would stop the bleeding,” Campsen said.

Ending Implementation

Another bill (S 300), proposed by state Sen. Larry Grooms (R-Berkeley), which was the subject of a Senate Education subcommittee hearing in February, would ban the state education board from implementing any Common Core standards.

Campsen is a cosponsor of that bill, but he says it faces an uphill battle this year: “It’s clearly going to be difficult to undo the standards that have been adopted.”

A state law requires new standards and assessments that will be used for accountability to “be developed and adopted upon the advice and consent of the Education Oversight Committee.”

The EOC, an 18-member group that includes Haley, has yet to vote on Common Core assessments. Melanie Barton, the EOC’s executive director, said the law doesn’t require EOC approval until after Common Core exams are “field tested” this spring.

“We have no test items to look at or results,” she said.

Asked whether the state education board has seen any of the Common Core tests, Teppara said, “The State Board of Education followed the typical approval process by approving the test design. The members never review actual test items because the items are secure.”

Rick Brundrett (rick@thenerve.org) is senior investigative reporter for The Nerve. South Carolina Policy Council analyst Dillon Jones contributed to this story. This article is reprinted with permission.
The system would be similar to Flori-equal Benefits children to attend a school of choice. Give more families the chance for their minorities and struggling economic tuition. Many private schools serve additional public schools. said, taxpayers will have to pay for doors for financial reasons, Golden announced they will close. If private lic schools in Buffalo that in January the tax table, not the education table." This money is coming from the tax table. … This money that's on the table. … This money is coming from the tax table, not the education table.”

Golden pointed to the ten Catho-lic schools in Buffalo that in January announced they will close. If private and parochial schools must close their doors for financial reasons, Golden said, taxpayers will have to pay for additional public schools.

Golden said the bill would especially affect families unable to afford private tuition. Many private schools serve minorities and struggling economic communities, Golden said. The bill would give more families the chance for their children to attend a school of choice.

Money for Everyone
State Sen. Martin Golden (R-Brooklyn), who sponsored the Senate bill, said it would benefit public and private education across the state by increasing revenue to both. “We’ll be able to keep open schools,” Golden said. “This is money that’s on the table. … This money is coming from the tax table, not the education table.”

Golden pointed to the ten Catholic schools in Buffalo that in January announced they will close. If private and parochial schools must close their doors for financial reasons, Golden said, taxpayers will have to pay for additional public schools.

Golden said the bill would especially affect families unable to afford private tuition. Many private schools serve minorities and struggling economic communities, Golden said. The bill would give more families the chance for their children to attend a school of choice.

Equal Benefits
The system would be similar to Flori-da’s, but New York’s plan would ensure public and private schools equally benefit, said Golden’s lawyer, Robyn Cotro-na.

 “[The bill creates] a pot of $250 million, half of which is designated for scholarship organizations and half of which is designated for public schools, districts, [and] local education funds,” Cotrona said.

After its first year, the fund would increase to $300 million. The state would tally donations, and donors would apply the credit to their end-of-the-year tax returns, Cotrona said.

Union Support
The bill has a diverse roster of support, Golden said: “Unions have stepped up to the plate here and are endorsing this education tax credit. Police departments, firefighters’ unions … and different [groups] across the state.”

Thousands of grassroots supporters have rallied to support the legislation. Invest in Education (IIE), a nonprofit advocacy group supporting the bill, says 5,000 supporters attended a November 19 rally in Westchester, and an April 2013 rally drew more than 10,000 students, parents, and teachers to Buffalo.

The rally’s cosponsors included the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, the Business Council of Westchester, the Children’s Scholarship Fund, The Jewish Education Project, and the Lutheran Schools Association, according to IIE’s press release.

Slow Train Coming
James Cultrara, director for education at the New York State Catholic Conference, represents the bishops of New York on the issue.

“This idea has been on the table for 21 years,” Cultrara said. “Tuition-paying families are paying at least $3 billion in tuition. … That is a tremendous commitment on their part to educate their children, but it is a dual burden of having to pay significant taxes to support their children in public schools.”

Families that send children to private schools save the public an estimated $9 billion a year, Cultrara said. “[The bill] is a balanced, moderate, and fair way to provide relief to tuition-paying families while at the same time helping public schools.”

The bill has substantial bipartisan support and passed with a vote of 55–4 in the Senate in June 2012. The Assembly version has more than 100 cospons ors but has yet to hit the floor for a vote.

Golden is optimistic, but he says the next few weeks require a final push in budget negotiations.

“This is the closest we’ve gotten,” he said, “We’re in about our twenty-sixth rewrite. … We’re looking to finalize our work so we can actually move it into the budget.”

Marion Gabl writes from Ann Arbor and Chicago.

Study: Tutoring Program Helps Needy Students
“High-dosage” tutoring for low-performing students helps close achievement gaps, finds a new study of a Boston charter school’s program.

Tutoring of the kind employed in Match Education schools “is less expensive and has proven far more effective than widely accepted reforms such as reduced class size and extended school days,” said study author Cara Stillings Candal.

After the tutoring program was implemented in 2005, student achievement gains in Match schools jumped, Candal writes in “Match-ing Students with Excellent Tutors.” A recent statistical analysis found its tutoring program helps students gain approximately an extra year’s worth of instruction. The U.S. Department of Education has cited Match as one of the nation’s most successful charter schools at closing achievement gaps.

The Match Corps, as the program is called, offers recent graduates of top colleges a paid residence and $14,300 stipend. They provide Match students two hours of after-school tutoring each day. The school initially funded the program through donations, then integrated it into its main budget after finding it so effective.

“Well’ll be able to keep open schools. This is money that’s on the table. … This money is coming from the tax table, not the education table.”

MARTIN GOLDEN, STATE SENATOR BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

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MARTIN GOLDEN, STATE SENATOR BROOKLYN, NEW YORK


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Marion Gabl writes from Ann Arbor and Chicago.
Feds Block MOOC Access in Sanctioned Countries

By Ashley Bateman

Last October, the U.S. Department of State announced a partnership with massive open online course provider Coursera to “expand learning opportunities worldwide.”

In January, that partnership received some alterations.

The State Department began requiring MOOCs, including Coursera, to block IP addresses in certain sanctioned countries. Students in Cuba, Iran, Sudan, and Syria are now blocked from Coursera’s free online classes.

Although Coursera is working with the State Department to remove blocks, the issue remains unresolved after new interpretation of export control restrictions led to the blockages.

Hostile to Information

Sanctions against these countries for human rights abuses forbid material support to them through trade or donations.

“Material support traditionally was understood to mean financial donations, equipment,” said Cato Institute scholar Julian Sanchez. “This isn’t material support, this is sanctions on entire countries.”

In the week after the ban went into effect, approximately 2,000 unique IP addresses were blocked from visiting Coursera. Students can log into the site from multiple devices, so the number is probably bigger than the number of students. Since then, access has been restored in Syria.

Cutting off educational services in oppressed countries imitates the work of those regimes in being hostile to information, said Atlas Network CEO Brad Lips. Atlas is an international network of some 400 free-market nonprofit organizations.

“Even if you were to think that economic sanctions were helpful in some circumstances … cutting [free online classes] off would be doing what the regimes do,” Lips said.

He continued, “Toward the end of the Cold War, countries talked about how important it was to have access to radio; our public diplomacy is much less effective these days, but the hunger in countries for educational services gives us an opportunity as a country to present our values as a society. These are services you’d think you would want to protect.”

“[T]he hunger in countries for educational services gives us an opportunity as a country to present our values as a society. These are services you’d think you would want to protect.”

BRAD LIPS, CEO, ATLAS NETWORK

‘Ineffective’ at Best

Savvy Internet users can easily route communications through a foreign IP address, making this an ineffective means of restricting information, Sanchez said. Instead, the restriction penalizes people who can’t get around the IP restrictions.

Elsewhere, the State Department is “trying to promote Internet freedom but … we’re requiring U.S. organizations to block certain countries,” Sanchez said. “There’s an uneasy fit between those two messages.”

Reinstatement Process

Coursera spokesmen directed questions to a blog post on January 28. “Coursera is working very closely with the U.S. Department of State and Office of Foreign Assets Control to secure permissions to reinstate site access for students in sanctioned countries,” it states.

A review of Syria General License 11A, which allows certain services into the country, led to a restoration of access there.

The post also notes some students in areas bordering sanctioned countries will be affected, but “our engineers are working to mitigate this issue while pursuing a broader solution to the restrictions.”

Fellow MOOC EdX is currently free from blocks in sanctioned countries, but it offers fewer courses.

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

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Missouri Lawmakers May Take Choice from Desperate Students

By Loren Heal

Several Missouri lawmakers have proposed bills to change how students transfer among unaccredited and accredited schools in the academically dismal St. Louis school system.

Currently, children who are zoned into a school district that has lost state accreditation have the option of attending school in another nearby school district, with the unaccredited district paying their tuition. Near St. Louis, the Riverview Gardens and Normandy districts are unaccredited.

The nearby school districts have complained at having to take in poor-performing students who don’t pay taxes in their area. The unaccredited districts have complained at being required to pay tuition and transportation costs for students leaving their schools. Normandy faces bankruptcy without a $5 million state bailout.

“Many see school choice itself as the problem,” said James Shuls, a Show-Me Institute education analyst. “Therefore, the overarching theme of most of the proposals is a limitation on transfers. Some proposals would do this by changing accreditation from the district level to the school level. This means students in accredited schools within an unaccredited district would not be allowed to transfer. Other proposals would give the higher-performing districts more discretion to limit the number of students entering.”

There is little consensus among lawmakers on the problem, much less a solution, he said.

Districts lose state accreditation when they score below 50 percent on the Missouri School Improvement Program criteria.

‘Dysfunctional Families’

“What is most important is the flawed premise upon which the entire ‘transfer’ issue has been based and framed,” said J. Martin Rochester, a politics professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, “namely, the assumption that the number one problem with Normandy, Riverview, and other such districts is the faulty schools, including bad teachers and curricula, when at least half the problem—indeed, the larger factor—is the often-dysfunctional families these schools serve.”

Rochester listed one-parent households, failure to read to the kids, excessive television watching, and unenforced or lack of homework as leading to a weak learning environment: “There is a limit to what any school can do, even the best school, in the absence of strong home support systems that support academics.”

He said “it is grossly misleading” for anyone to suggest the failing schools need more money, as Normandy spends more than the Francis Howell school district its transfer students are being bused into. He also doesn’t think transferring into better-performing districts will necessarily help the kids stuck in unaccredited schools.

It would help for the state to be “placing less emphasis on inputs and focusing more on the outcomes of students,” Shuls said.

“Urban schools remain an important, huge societal challenge, but we stand little chance of addressing that challenge if we keep coming up with simplistic bromides,” Rochester said.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.

Roberts’ Bill Would Prohibit Federal Common Core Coercion

By Bruce Edward Walker

On January 30, U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts introduced a bill that would prevent the federal government from ‘coerking states to adopt education standards.’

The bill takes aim at the Obama administration’s withholding of federal Race to the Top grants from states that don’t adopt national Common Core curriculum and testing mandates.

Roberts’ (R-KS) Learning Opportunities Created at the Local (LOCAL) Level Act would prohibit “the Federal Government from mandating, directing, or controlling a State, local educational agency, or school’s curriculum, program of instruction, or allocation of State and local resources, and from mandating a State or any subdivision thereof to spend any funds or incur any costs not paid for under such Act.”

The LOCAL Level Act addresses the current administration’s unprecedented tethering of federal education dollars to Common Core adoption, both through the $4.35 billion in federal grants known as Race to the Top and through eagerly sought waivers of the largest federal education law, No Child Left Behind.

NCLB prohibits federal influence on curriculum and tests, notes Sarah Little, Roberts’ spokeswoman.

“What was once a voluntary program at the state level has become a federal program under the Obama administration, coerced through Race to the Top, grants, and waivers,” she said.

‘State-Led’ Promise Endangered

The bill demonstrates the “increasing awareness” among citizens and lawmakers that “federal education over-reach benefits special interests and degrades the authority of the American people,” said Emmett McGroarty, executive director of education at the American Principles Project, a non-profit group.

Active legislation in approximately two dozen states would repeal, reconsider, or delay Common Core. So far, only Indiana has responded to growing grassroots opposition to the requirements by deciding to replace Common Core with homegrown standards.

“It’s clear that these Senators are feeling the heat from their constituents,” said Michael McShane, an American Enterprise Institute research fellow. “As the Common Core becomes more visible as state tests become aligned to the standards, test their students, unveil the results, and make high-stakes decisions—all while spending big bucks to properly implement the effort—we can only expect it to get hotter. If Common Core supporters are serious about the effort being ‘state-led,’ they should rally around the language used in this resolution.”

Bruce Edward Walker writes from Michigan.
By Jenni White

Since the inception of national Common Core curriculum and testing standards, how they would affect charter schools has been unclear.

Some charter schools are finding a growing rift between their unique missions and government-imposed accountability measures such as state tests that will soon be replaced by those from one of two national testing consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

“Charter schools are independent schools by definition,” said Jonathan Butcher, education director for the Goldwater Institute in Arizona. “The Common Core is driving the idea of uniformity.”

Forty-five states traded their state standards and tests for Common Core in 2010. The national standards govern math and English Language Arts, the two subjects the federal government requires states to test in order to receive federal funds.

Losing Autonomy?

Several classical charter schools in Colorado signed a resolution against Common Core in October 2013.

“Our most significant issue with the Common Core and PARCC exams is that we feel we will lose the autonomy and other protections granted to us when Colorado adopted its Charter Schools Act in 1994,” Ridgeview Classical School Principal Derek Anderson recently told columnist Michelle Malkin. Ridgeview signed the resolution. It consistently ranks among the top schools in Colorado and the country.

“The Common Core State Standards run contrary to the idea of education being either a private or a local matter, and are contrary to the idea of the states as ‘laboratories of democracy,’” the resolution says.

Anderson says what the national standards intend schools to do would destroy Ridgeview’s successful classical curriculum.

Lisa Frank agrees. She’s the cofounder and board president of another classical school, Adams Traditional Academy in Phoenix.

“We think Common Core is a violation of federalism and a violation of localism,” she said. “Education should happen locally. Anything beyond that is a set up for failure because it does not follow correct principles.”

Diluted Curriculum

This school year an Adams parent committee evaluated Common Core-aligned textbooks teachers collected. They concluded many did not promote the school’s values. Also, the second- and third-grade reading books were a grade or two below the reading levels of Adams students, and the math was typically a full year behind—especially in middle school, where Adams students take Algebra 1 in eighth grade.

Though the Arizona legislature has provided no funding for PARCC’s technology requirements, the state designated Adams as a test site for Common Core tests, leaving Frank to wonder how the new tests will force changes at the school.

For now, Adams will continue its traditional approach to education, employing the same curriculum but modifying parts—particularly in math—to meet the Common Core standards more closely.

“We will abide by the law in accordance with our charter, mission, and philosophies, but we are making our voices heard with legislators and others of influence, hoping there will be changes,” Frank said. “Educational choice should reside with the parent, not bureaucrats.”

Are Tests a Side Issue?

Standardized tests are often a specter, says Phillip Kilgore, director of the Barney Charter School Initiative at Hillsdale College in Michigan. The initiative helps develop classical charter schools.

“Well-educated students should be able to do well on tests,” he said. “For weeks, schools will abort their curricula to prep students to take tests due to fear of repercussions from the state level. A good school, with sound traditional teaching methods, doesn’t view state tests as a specter. They don’t abort their curricula, but instead continue to instruct their students as they’re obliged.”

A testing track record, however, is important, he said. If high-performing schools suddenly become low-performing on a new test, “a reasonable person would believe the explanation is the test.”

“The whole idea of a charter school is that it has freedom; it can demonstrate a better way to educate students,” Kilgore said. “When Common Core overreaches as it is, it undermines and nullifies the charter schools legislation legislators worked so hard to pass.”

Jenni White is cofounder of Restore Oklahoma Public Education and a former public school science teacher.
Wisconsin in ‘Holding Pattern’ on Common Core

By Loren Heal

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and state lawmakers are working on several bills to limit Common Core national education mandates or slowly replace them—but the state Department of Public Instruction opposes all the reform proposals.

State Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa) and other legislators are working to replace Common Core and its national tests. The bill she supports would “firmly repeal Common Core in the state, and would get rid of the Smarter Balanced tests,” said Jason Rostan, Vukmir’s spokesman. “And it would create a new State Standards Education Board.”

That board would put together new standards in math and English, then within three years propose standards for science and social studies.

On January 31, Walker “came out and spoke a little strongly, saying that we should create the board and work to get stronger state standards,” Rostan noted. “So we’ve kind of held off on introducing our bill for the time being.”

Vukmir hopes to work with Walker and other legislators to see what kind of bill is possible to pass “that still meets our goals,” he said.

“Gov. Walker is working with members of the legislature in both chambers to craft legislation creating a process that would develop Wisconsin-based model academic standards,” said spokesman Tom Evenson. “This process will allow public input and open discussion.”

Ed Department Opposes

DPI doesn’t like any of the proposals to amend or eliminate Common Core, says department spokesman Patrick Gasper.

The department particularly objects to this paragraph in Assembly Bill 616: “No school board may collect biometric data from a pupil, or use any device or mechanism to assess a pupil’s physiological or emotional state, unless the pupil’s parent or guardian consents in writing.”

“Assembly Bill 616 (AB 616) will create dangerous situations for students and staff in our schools and criminalizes actions staff may take to safeguard students,” DPI Legislative Liaison Jennifer Kammerud wrote in a memo to the Assembly Committee on Education.

These actions include monitoring blood pressure, designing and implementing academic and behavioral interventions, screening student health, and conducting special education assessments.

Various Proposals

State Rep. Dean Knudson (R-Hudson) has proposed requiring the state to review its academic standards every six years, which would give Common Core another two. Most school administrators supported a five- to seven-year review cycle for standards when responding to a recent legislative survey.

Another bill would require DPI to publish a comprehensive list of all data it collects about students and why, and would ban the agency from sending student data to any federal agency.

DPI objects to these bills, too.

“We’re kind of in a holding pattern, to see how this plays out,” Rostan said.

Loren Heal (loren.heal@gmail.com) is a research programmer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a reporter for The Heartland Institute.

Pennsylvania Governor Offers Education Grants—with Strings Attached

By Maura Pennington

If Pennsylvania schools hope for more money in the coming year, school leaders will have to jump through hoops to get it.

Gov. Tom Corbett (R) is willing to funnel new money into education, but the cash won’t go through the normal pipeline that runs into Pennsylvania classrooms. His proposal ties new money to targeted grant programs, and that’s not sitting well with some lawmakers and school personnel who say they would prefer to see resources go into the basic education budget.

Corbett’s basic education budget proposal—the dollars that get divided among school districts with few strings attached—remains close to the levels of previous years, at $5.53 billion. The extra funding would go to tailored initiatives he said could spread successful programs to classrooms around the state.

But Corbett’s programs are very specific. For instance, $1 million is available to the highest-performing schools through the Governor’s Expanding Excellence Program. These competitive grants would go to analyzing strategies for student achievement in an attempt to share with other schools.

“We would be looking for schools that bring forward ideas that are not widely known,” said Tim Eller, spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

To be eligible, a school must score 90 or above on the new School Performance Profile and show how its success can be replicated.

With 500 urban, suburban, and rural districts, Pennsylvania has diverse populations of students. Philadelphia has only three district schools that could apply for the grant.

“There is a benefit to finding out what’s working in high-performing schools, but you have to take into account environment,” said state Rep. Jordan Harris (D-Philadelphia).

School employees who work to win grants say they are concerned the targeted grant funding will not allow them the discretion to address their particular needs.

“We are worried that, at a time when we are facing reductions, we will have new money, but won’t be able to use it to stem personnel and program cuts,” said Jay Himes, executive director at the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly have made preliminary efforts to address basic education funding, with state Rep. Scott Petri (R-Bucks) introducing a resolution calling for a study of the funding formula.

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“Requiring us to hire certified teachers begins to restrict our ability to staff the building in a manner we think is best for our kids.”
TOM MARTIN
PRINCIPAL
VILLAGE SCHOOL

By Mary C. Tillotson

A bill that could have cramped the independence of Vermont’s independent schools has been set aside, at least for now.

“It would have been very burdensome,” said Mill Moore, executive director of the Vermont Independent Schools Association. “Its fundamental premise was that the state can take control of independent schools’ internal management policies, like admissions and teacher licensing, things that for 150 years have been separate from the state. It would have been a very massive intrusion of the state into the nonprofit sector.”

“[The bill] as introduced will most likely not pass this year,” said state Sen. Dick McCormack (D-Windsor), chair of the Senate’s education committee, at a committee meeting. “The issue, however, remains very much alive.”

Attempted Certification Mandate

Among other restrictions, the bill would require licenses for all teachers serving at independent schools receiving enough students on a public tuition program.

“Requiring us to hire certified teachers begins to restrict our ability to staff the building in a manner we think is best for our kids,” said Tom Martin, principal of the Village School, an independent school in North Bennington.

The requirement seems based on the idea certified teachers are better, Martin said, but “I’ve been doing this a long time, and I know that’s not necessarily the case.”

At the Village School, all the teachers except one are certified, so the initial impact of the bill on that school would be minimal. But it would deny the school the ability to hire quality teachers in the future, he said.

“I question whether or not a test is a valid measure of someone’s effectiveness as a teacher,” Martin said.

Freedom, Heritage at Stake

“Let’s make sure this happens,” Tom Honigford of South Royalton School Board told the Senate Education Committee. “[Independent schools] are already doing it; it shouldn’t be too much of a burden to keep going down that path.”

The bill’s opponents argue the issue is less about teacher licensing and more about the independence of independent schools.

“It would have blossomed beyond the educational issue and into ‘how far can the state go in intruding into nonprofits?’” Moore said.

Vermont is unique in that it has a large number of students attending nonprofits with public dollars. Towns are small—the state always has been rural—and it didn’t make sense to build a public school in every one. To fulfill the state’s obligation to provide a free education to all Vermont children, the tuitioning system has been running since the 1800s.

If a student lives in a town without a public school, public money follows that student to any non-faith-based school, public or independent. Some towns established private schools, which became “town academies”—guaranteeing admission to all the town’s students if the town agreed to make up the difference, through local taxes, between state funding and tuition.

Last year, residents of North Bennington responded to financial, demographic, and political difficulties by effectively converting their public school into an independent town academy—the Village School, which Martin leads. Other districts have considered similar moves.

Trying to Prevent Options

The conversions have irked the education establishment, and the bill was “absolutely” a response to North Bennington, said Robert Roper, president of the free-enterprise Ethan Allen Institute.

“In recent days … there seems to be a more focused discussion on trying to prevent more North Benningtons,” said state Sen. Don Collins (D-Franklin), vice chair of the education committee and one of four senators who introduced the bill.

“Many of these schools get a large amount of operating funds from public funds,” Collins said. “If you’re taking public money to fund your programs, ... you should meet the same requirements that public schools do.”

He said he understands the independent schools’ concern about losing their independence.

“I would say the same thing if I were an independent school. We’ll leave you alone, but if we leave you alone, you won’t get the state money, either,” he said.

Equity in Competition, Too

Roper said that argument is inconsistent.

“The arguments proponents are making are equity. If public dollars are being given to independent schools, they ought to follow the same rules and regulations [as public schools]. If they’re going to make that argument, then the independent schools should be getting the same amount of money, which is a difference of about $5,000 per pupil,” he said.

“If they’re really going to make it equitable, public schools should have to compete for students as well, which of course they’re not going to go for,” he said.

Vermont legislators are considering other ways to reduce local control of schools, including a two-year moratorium on communities converting their schools from public to independent and consolidation of public school districts.

“We’ve gotten a great deal of support for the notion that there’s a problem with deflection of public school dollars into private schools,” McCormack said. “We have heard from virtually the entire education establishment, which seems to agree that that’s a problem.”

Restricting local control and parental say over children’s education is the problem, Roper said.

“If you’re a parent and you’re sending your kid to an independent school or you live in a choice town,” he said, “you ought to be up in arms.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com) is an education reporter for Watchdog.org, from which this article is reprinted with permission.
Should School Choice Programs Mandate Standardized State Tests?

By James Shuls

In December 2013, the Fordham Foundation put out a clever parody video of “What Does the Fox Say?” Playing on Fordham’s online presence under the moniker “The Education Gadfly,” the video was titled, “What Does Gadfly Say?”

More recently, Fordham released a paper calling for private schools in state-sponsored school choice programs to be subject to state accountability tests. We have listened to what the Gadfly has to say. Maybe Fordham should listen to what many private schools and parents have to say. What I’m hearing is: “Don’t test me, bro!”

Survey: Already Testing

I recently surveyed private schools in St. Louis and Kansas City, Missouri regarding their participation in a potential state-sponsored private school choice program. I found many schools—88 percent, to be exact—are already administering some form of standardized tests. Nearly half the schools said they would not participate in a school choice program if they were forced to administer state accountability tests. Aside from upholding admissions criteria and allowing students to opt out of religious services, this was the most important factor for Missouri private schools.

The Fordham Foundation conducted a similar survey among private schools in states with private school choice programs. Seven items were similar between the Show-Me Institute’s survey and Fordham’s survey. A rank ordering of the survey items shows the responses in the two were quite similar. germane to this conversation is the requirement to participate in state testing. A quarter of schools in the Fordham study said this was “Very Important” or “Extremely Important” to their participation in a school choice program. That figure was higher, 37 percent, among nonparticipants in school choice.

Parents Value ‘More than Scores’

Is this reason enough to excuse private schools from being required to administer state tests? No, but private school leaders aren’t the only ones saying, “Don’t test me, bro!” This cry is also ringing out from many parents and students.

Last September, the AP reported on the growing movement to opt out of standardized tests. Only a fraction of parents are participating in this form of “civil disobedience,” but many others don’t value standardized test scores either. Recent reports by the Friedman Foundation and the Fordham Foundation note parents care about a lot more than test scores.

The Fordham report, What Parents Want, categorized just 23 percent of parents as “test-score hawks.” More parents, 24 percent, fell into the “Jeffersonian” category. These parents are inclined to choose a school that “emphasizes instruction in citizenship, democracy, and leadership.” Still more, 36 percent, were categorized as “Pragmatists,” meaning they valued vocational and job-related training. “Multiculturalists” were just behind the “test-score hawks,” with 22 percent.

What Parents Want makes the same point found in a recent paper by the Friedman Foundation: parents value “more than scores.”

Who Decides?

The real question behind this debate is: Who should be the arbiter of school quality? In other words, what is the purpose of school choice?

The Fordham Foundation suggests private schools that accept students receiving state support should be held accountable to the taxpayer. This means, Fordham argues, they should be subject to state tests. In essence, Fordham is saying the state is the arbiter of quality. The state has selected the standards, the state has chosen the state tests, the state will set performance standards, and the state will not allow low-performing schools to participate.

If you believe the ultimate goal of school choice is to improve student achievement, as measured by state accountability tests, then you should agree with Fordham. If, however, the goal of school choice is to afford parents the ability to choose the school that meets their needs, you should probably disagree with Fordham. If parents are the arbiter of school quality, Fordham is wrong.

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Private College Aid Improves Grades for Black Students

African-American students in Kalamazoo, Michigan who received college scholarships based on how many years they attended school in the district had fewer behavior problems and higher GPAs by two-thirds of a letter grade over the average of comparable students, a new study finds.

“Policies focused on making higher education more affordable may be usefully supplemented by helping students better understand how their behavior affects their future,” the study authors conclude.

The scholarships, funded by anonymous donors, are available to all public school students in the district. Students who start in Kalamazoo in kindergarten receive 100 percent of the costs to attend any Michigan college or university for four years. The scholarship declines by 5 percent each year a student has not attended school in the district, stopping at 65 percent in ninth grade.

To receive the Kalamazoo Promise Scholarships, students must be admitted to a Michigan college, take at least 12 credits, and maintain a 2.0 college GPA.

For a typical student, the total value of the scholarship ranges from $18,000 to $27,000.

— Staff reports

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“The Kalamazoo Promise Scholarship,” Education Next, February 2014; http://educationnext.org/the-kalamazoo-promise-scholarship/

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How to Prompt New Schools with Choice Programs

By Anna J. Egalite

At the International School Choice Research and Reform Academic Conference in January, researchers, practitioners, and advocates convened to compare and contrast the state of school choice in the United States and across many European and South American countries. One thing was clear: The conversation regarding school choice has shifted to implementation.

Private school choice programs are here to stay, so what steps should policymakers take to ensure they operate optimally? The promise of private school choice, in particular, relies on a steady supply of high-quality private schools willing to participate in such programs. In the short term, under-enrolled private schools can absorb increased demand. In the long term, however, policymakers would do well to think of innovative solutions that will entice new schools to enter the marketplace and encourage existing schools to scale up.

Lawmakers must address at least three school supply barriers if choice programs are to meet these goals.

Calculating Enrollment

The first barrier is deceiving in its simplicity: it’s the inefficient allocation of available private school seats.

Every year, private school choice program administrators are faced with the difficult task of allocating private school seats in a way that satisfies eligible student demand with the available supply of grade-appropriate spots in participating private schools. If this task is performed less than optimally, viable seats remain unfilled and eligible applicants are turned away from the program.

This kind of congestion in the student/school assignment process is certainly unfortunate for the students affected by this barrier, but it also has serious long-term implications for the private school market. Participating private schools cannot adequately prepare for teacher hiring, facility expansion, and textbook purchases, for example, if their perception of the demand for private seats by voucher or tuition tax credit is clouded.

The administrators of the Louisiana Scholarship Program avoid this interruption to the market signal by using a “Roth lottery” to assign voucher students to private schools. This multi-stage matching algorithm, designed by Nobel Prize laureate Alvin E. Roth in response to the waste of transplantable donor organs, ensures the maximum number of students is matched to open seats in private schools. Choice program administrators in other states would be smart to investigate whether this matching technique can be adopted to improve their seat allocation process.

Finding Facilities

The second barrier to maximizing private school supply is accessing facilities.

Charter schools’ woes in this regard tend to dominate the headlines, but private schools can face serious facilities barriers too. In certain cases, traditional public school districts flex their monopoly advantage to prevent new private schools from establishing or existing private schools from expanding.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, home of the nation’s oldest school voucher program, provides an instructive example. In 2010 the Milwaukee Public School District (MPS) was spending more than $1 million per year to maintain 27 empty buildings. Meanwhile, enrollment in the voucher program was continuing to expand annually by the hundreds.

In an effort to accommodate more students, St. Marcus Lutheran School Superintendent Henry Tyson attempted in early 2013 to purchase a vacant MPS building close to the school’s current campus, but MPS refused to sell the property. When the building eventually sold, a condition of sale prohibited future use of the building for any purpose that would “diminish the annual average number of pupils enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools.”

Instead of preventing sale or renting of unused buildings, states and localities should assist current and aspiring private school operators in accessing appropriate school facilities.

There are numerous examples of states intervening to ensure charters have access to empty school buildings or allocating grants for the construction and development of charter school facilities. Perhaps it’s time to consider similar interventions for private schools that accept choice students.

Innovative Thinking

The third barrier is a failure to think outside the box.

Choice programs are intended to give students new options, not just variations on the same theme. If new providers are expected simply to replicate the structure of existing public schools, innovation is limited. To accommodate hybrid offerings and unbundled courses, administrators will have to have flexibility in configuring student schedules, coordinating multiple providers, and taking an individualized approach to reimbursement.

States overlook school supply dynamics at their own peril. It’s not hard to imagine how a dearth of high-quality private school seats could derail even a politically popular, fiscally sound voucher or tuition tax-credit program, even one with demonstrated advantages for students’ short-term test scores and, more importantly, long-term achievement and labor market outcomes.

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