Maryland Family Sues Government School Over Religious Class Assignments

By Kenneth Artz

A Maryland family is suing its local government school district after its daughter was allegedly disciplined for refusing to complete a school assignment that required the participants to recite an Islamic profession of faith. The assignment was part of a history class lesson on Middle Eastern culture. The plaintiffs, John Kevin Wood and Melissa Wood, claim completing the school assignment would have deprived their daughter of her constitutional rights and subjected her to deliberate religious indoctrination.

Andrew Kloster, a legal fellow for The Heritage Foundation, says political correctness run amok in the government school system is a symptom of a larger cultural problem.

MARYLAND, p. 10

St. Paul School Violence Sparks Strike Talk

By Tony Corvo

Government school teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota have started proceedings to go on strike this year, citing teacher safety as one of their primary concerns. Almost 30 teachers filed gross misdemeanor and felony assault charges against students in the school district in 2015.

The St. Paul Federation of Teachers, a local chapter of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers public-sector unions, filed paperwork in December 2015 calling for negotiations with district administrators after a 16-year-old student assaulted and choked a Central High School teacher, rendering the teacher unconscious.

According to media reports, student-
Judge Andrew Napolitano
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Tawfik Hamid
author, “Inside Islam”,
Defeating Radical Islamic Terrorism

Christina Tobin
Free & Equal Elections
Is Democracy Killing Freedom?

Bill Bonner
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Chicago School District Audit Finds Widespread Corruption and Theft

By Kimberly Morin

A report released in January by the Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) inspector general shows rampant corruption and misbehavior among government school teachers and administrators in the district.

The audit detailed incidents of government school employees illegally using taxpayer-funded resources to campaign for political causes, stealing from taxpayer-funded accounts intended for purchasing student materials, and abusing educational discounts to buy three Stooges DVDs for personal entertainment. Other citations include documentation of government school teachers using illegal drugs with students and committing sexual acts with minors in the classroom.

Too Big to Function

Lennie Jarratt, project manager for education transformation at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says the public school system has little incentive to change.

“There is nothing that will clean up Chicago schools in their current form,” Jarratt said. “When a bureaucracy becomes too big, corruption becomes inevitable. The system has no reason to change as long it remains funded.”

Parental Power

Jarratt says the only way to fix the problem is to break the government’s monopoly on education.

“The solution is to put parents completely in charge of the purse strings,” Jarratt said. “This can be done via an education savings account being started for each child. Then the parent can choose the school he or she wants a child to attend. This would be the best accountability system ever implemented. Schools would no longer tolerate bad behavior of teachers or administrators stealing from the taxpayers, because they would rapidly lose their students and the money tied to them. Fund the child, not the bureaucracy.”

Dysfunction Junction

Ted Dabrowski, vice president of policy at the Illinois Policy Institute, says those at the top of CPS should be held responsible for the district’s problems.

“A lot of these individual items exemplify or capture the dysfunction we see in the Chicago Public Schools,” Dabrowski said. “I think the problem is the corruption. We have a superintendent who has been indicted and faces serious allegations of fraud. It starts at the top, so it’s not unreasonable to expect bad behavior at lower levels.”

Dabrowski says government schools have little reason to improve, because the parents, who are the customers when it comes to education, are forced to make their children consume a product, regardless of that product’s quality.

“This is the biggest issue of Chicago Public Schools: Families that don’t have the means to send their kids to another school or to move or to find another alternative to CPS,” Dabrowski said. “They’re trapped. They can’t hold the school accountable. They can’t hold the administrators accountable. They’re forced to accept bad behavior from the districts, bad financial behavior, and bad educational outcomes, because parents have no other choice.”

Glimmer of Hope

Dabrowski says school choice provides some hope for Chicago parents and children, but there could be more.

“They have some school choice in Chicago, but it’s limited, and some lucky children get to participate, but the fact is the majority are still forced … to go to schools that don’t meet their needs,” Dabrowski said. “This is why it’s so important to have school choice, because that would put the power in the hands of the parents, allowing them to choose whatever school is best for them. And if those public schools didn’t fit their needs, they could go somewhere else.”

Kimberly Morin (kimberlyamorin@gmail.com) writes from Brentwood, New Hampshire.

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“He admitted that he had bought these and other items for personal use,’ the inspector general said. ‘In other cases, he claimed that the purchased items might have had classroom uses as well. For example, he thought there might be beneficial parts of the Breaking Bad TV series that he could show to his class. He also said that he used other DVDs, like Star Wars, for ‘student self-improvement.’

“A school nurse bought a PlayStation 4, an iMac computer, a DVD of The Hunger Games, and a TurboTax package tax-free.

“Another teacher bought an $880 computer, a $750 laptop, a $432 notebook computer, a $130 Kindle Fire, an $80 satellite radio receiver, a $20 The Wizard of Oz DVD, and an $80 electric razor.”

Detroit government school teachers have been illegally walking off the job in an attempt to force the state government to increase capital improvement and entitlement spending in the state’s largest school district.

Beginning in January, an unspecified number of teachers have been calling off work on prearranged days. On one day in January, Detroit Public Schools (DPS) administrators were forced to cancel all classes in the district’s 64 schools because a majority of teachers called in sick.

In response to the strikes, state Sen. Phil Pavlov (R-St. Clair Township) has offered a bill that would shorten the deadline for the state Employment Relations Commission to conduct hearings on labor complaints from 60 days to two days. It would also empower the state superintendent of schools to revoke the licenses of government school teachers found guilty of engaging in improper labor practices.

The bill, Senate Bill 713, was approved by the Senate Education Committee and awaits consideration by the full Senate.

**Would Create Stronger Safeguards**

Pavlov says DPS has had problems for a long time, and three governors have tried and failed to fix them.

“Strikes by teachers are illegal in Michigan, and the previous law preventing teachers from striking was not strong enough,” Pavlov told School Reform News. “Otherwise, the teachers wouldn’t continue to strike, so that’s why I introduced this legislation. There are lots of avenues to discuss bad buildings, but locking students out is not one of them.”

PHIL PAVLOV, STATE SENATOR, ST. CLAIR TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

**‘Serious Financial Mismanagement’**

Ben DeGrow, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, says Detroit’s government school system is on the verge of bankruptcy.

“The organized sick-outs are symptomatic of a deeper dysfunction within the district and how the schools are managed,” DeGrow said. “At its best, this bill will take away the incentive for adult employees and interest groups to punish students for the failures of crisis-driven policymaking. But something much more fundamental needs to be done; [the power must shift] from the district office into the hands of parents demanding better options and opportunities for students.”

Kenneth Artz (iamkenartz@hotmail.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.

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Common Core Creator: Subtract Parents from Math Education Equation

By Kenneth Artz

One of the three lead writers of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a national initiative with roots in No Child Left Behind and other federal government education programs, recently told a Columbia University education magazine parents should avoid helping children with their math homework.

Jason Zimba, co-author of the CCSS math standards, told a reporter for The Hechinger Report, Columbia University Teaching College’s trade magazine, parents should not help children with their homework because government school teachers are trained professionals who are better equipped than parents to help students learn.

Uneducated Experts

Ze’ev Wurman, a former senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education and a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution, says Common Core’s expert authors aren’t really experts.

“Common Core math standards have been written by three people: two mathematicians with very limited educational experience and one English major, and it shows,” Wurman said. “Its recommendations have no empirical support, and many professional mathematicians and professionals using math object to them. Further, the objections to parents teaching their kids with different and more efficient ways to do math are akin to complaining about telling teenagers that they can use bikes or cars, rather than walking everywhere.”

Parental involvement in the education process facilitates learning, Wurman says.

“I wouldn’t say it’s a given, but all studies indicate that children do much better when parents are involved,” Wurman said. “If parents are discouraged from helping, their involvement, by definition, gets lower. The general effects are bound to be more disengaged children, many of whom will come to dislike the unnecessarily convoluted math taught in the classroom. Teachers will become the gatekeepers to knowledge, since parents will not be able to mitigate teacher failures, and we know that many teachers are not very strong in math.”

Hey, Parents, Leave the Kids Alone ...

“One of the chief creators of the Common Core math standards is warning America’s parents to stop teaching their own children basic math because, he says, public school teachers are well-trained experts who understand rudimentary arithmetic far better.

“The directive to leave children submerged in confusion as they try to do homework comes from Jason Zimba, who was part of a trio that originally wrote the Common Core math standards.

“The math instruction on the part of parents should be low. The teacher is there to explain the curriculum,” Zimba told The Hechinger Report, an education journalism website published by Columbia University’s Teachers College.

“The most important rule as a parent is to make sure it gets done,’ said Zimba, who believes he himself is too busy to stoop to math assistance. ‘I may not have time to do an impromptu lesson on math but I can make sure everything is completed.’

“Zimba, who has a Ph.D. in physics, also founded Student Achievement Partners, an outfit which coaches teachers in Common Core implementation.

“The entire story by The Hechinger Report strongly urges parents to avoid attempts to help their struggling children with Common Core math homework and implicitly blames parents for getting frustrated.”


“I wouldn’t say it’s a given, but all studies indicate that children do much better when parents are involved. If parents are discouraged from helping, their involvement, by definition, gets lower. The general effects are bound to be more disengaged children, many of whom will come to dislike the unnecessarily convoluted math taught in the classroom.”

ZE’EV WURMAN
VISITING SCHOLAR
HOOVER INSTITUTION

Fuzzy Math

Barry Garelick, cofounder of the U.S. Coalition for World Class Math and a math teacher in the California government school system, says Common Core math homework, which can be confusing to parents, is a sign of a problem in education.

“Common Core math homework is not the problem; it is a symptom of the problem,” Garelick said. “That problem is the math reform agenda that has been active for more than 20 years and thus predates Common Core. The Common Core math standards lend themselves to interpretations along math reform ideologies. The words ‘explain’ and ‘understand’ crop up in many of the content standards and serve as code words to have students as young as 1st graders ‘explain’ math problems so simple as to defy explanation.”

Garelick says government school officials are pursuing trendy education fads, instead of using proven methods to educate children.

“Schools and districts are quick to tell parents, both suspicious and unsuspecting, that such circumvention strategies are part of a deeper understanding of math facts,” Garelick said. “In those derided eras, the standard algorithms were taught first and alternative strategies were taught later as a side dish, not one of an endless supply of main dishes.”

Garelick says parents should be included in the education process.

“Parents, to the extent they can, should teach their children the standard methods, as well as what they need to do to comply with what’s required of them at school,” Garelick said. “As far as expanding options for students and their families, [schools] should drop the dictates that parents not teach their kids the standard methods and allow students the option to learn them and use them if they so desire.”

Kenneth Artz (iamkenartz@hotmail.com) writes from Dallas, Texas.
Common Core Support Weighs Down Presidential Hopefuls in GOP Race

By Ashley Bateman

As the race for the 2016 Republican Party presidential nomination continued, advertisements were aired in key primary states against candidates who have said they support Common Core.

Among those targeted were Ohio Gov. John Kasich and former Florida governor Jeb Bush, who suspended his campaign on February 20 after placing fourth in South Carolina, where he had been expected to perform well.

In 2015, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a former full supporter of the national curriculum standards created by academic experts, lawmakers, and educational materials companies, revised his state’s implementation of the federal education initiative, retaining most of the standards.

After finishing sixth in the primary in New Hampshire, where he had been expected to perform well, Christie suspended his campaign.

‘Liability’ with Voters?

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, says education policy may not be a deciding factor in most voters’ minds, but it does contribute when voters decide who to support.

“Common Core could be a liability, but I don’t think it is at all a major factor in the campaign,” McCluskey said. “One reason it is not a major factor in the campaign is the only well-known supporter was Gov. [Jeb] Bush. I think there was some expectation that he would be the leading candidate for the Republicans, and he has never been in that position.”

McCluskey says Kasich’s embrace of Common Core may become an important issue.

“It could be used as a powerful way to differentiate [him] from small-government conservatives,” said McCluskey.

Emmett McGroarty, education director for the American Principles Project, says voters recognize the brokenness of the government school system in the United States.

“The whole Common Core system was pushed onto the states and was developed by special-interest groups, and that was the strategy in getting it pushed across the country: using the federal government as a tool,” McGroarty said. “People are realizing that this Common Core is highly defective. It locks children into an inferior education that fails to prepare them for authentic university studies, and that’s really upsetting to people. I think people realize this dynamic between special interests and the federal government really enabled this to happen.”

‘A Threshold Issue’

McGroarty says voters believe Common Core is an important issue, but he does not think its voters’ top concern.

“I think Common Core is a threshold issue … but if [a candidate shows he or she has fought Common Core,] I think voters will tend to look at them further,” said McGroarty. “Everyone sort of claims their support of local control of education, so if you’re not going to stand and fight with parents on a clear-cut issue [related to] their children’s education … it’s pretty significant.”

McGroarty says there is a pattern evident in the rise and fall of presidential candidates.

“What’s happened on this election cycle is that … those candidates who had been proponents of Common Core [early on] or were in office and failed to push back against it suffered tremendously,” McGroarty said. “You look at the order of things in this presidential race, and that rule of thumb pretty much holds true.”

McGroarty says Common Core will become more of an issue as time goes on.

“I think Common Core has the makings to be a big issue in the general election, if not more so in this primary season,” McGroarty said. “I think that as the field narrows, the candidates are going to be called upon to add more specifics to their vision of America and to add more specifics as to exactly what they will do, so I think it will start to play out.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Pa. Homeschooling Family Beats False Truancy Charge

By Andrea Dillon

During a January 2016 hearing, a Pennsylvania homeschooling mother was found not guilty of truancy after her local government school district accused her of failing to file required homeschooling paperwork, even though she is no longer homescooling her children.

In 2014, the York, Pennsylvania mother removed her children from the government school system because, according to the parent, teachers were unable to accommodate her children's educational needs.

In February 2015, she enrolled her children in a local charter school. Four months after her children began attending the charter school, government school district officials demanded she file paperwork required by the state’s homeschooling laws or face truancy charges.

Pennsylvania homeschooling laws require government school districts to schedule a hearing before the local government’s school board if it is believed the paperwork requirements have not been met, but the government school district failed to do so before filing charges.

‘Tension’ and ‘Conflict’

James Paul, a policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation, says this is another example of government-operated schools’ antagonism toward homeschooling families.

“It’s an example of the tension and apparent conflict that exists between a government school system, or the government that exerts a monopoly over the school system, and families that choose a different approach,” Paul said.

Unstated Goals

Paul says the current system is not engineered to encourage the best educational outcomes for children.

“The whole process is so onerous, and there becomes excessive paperwork for both the families and for the local district and local government … you can’t help but wonder: Is this about empowering families and helping students to get the best education they need, or is this about exercising control?” Paul said. “In cases like the one in Pennsylvania, I think it’s pretty clear that the underlying motivator is control and not freedom and not a family’s right to get the best education.”

Nothing New

Barbara Snider, administrator of the Mason-Dixon Home Schoolers Association, says this case is typical of public school districts’ hostility toward homeschooling.

“I am not surprised,” Snider said. “After more than 30 years of experience in the homeschooling movement, nothing a school district may do in order to prevent or punish homeschooling is new to me. Ever since the modern homeschooling movement began in the 1970s and 1980s, educational professionals have been at odds with parents and sometimes belligerent and aggressive.”

Breaking the Law?

“The school district did not just circumvent their own policies; they defied the homeschooling law in Pennsylvania,” Snider said. “That law was written to protect homeschoolers from the dishonorable treatment that they had received prior to the passage and implementation of the home education law in 1988.

“It appears that local school districts purport to make support ‘available,’ but [districts] do not have a strong desire to actually provide that support to public school or homeschooling parents,” Snider said.

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.

Illinois Gov. Rauner Backs Plan Giving More Authority to Local School Boards

By Mark Fitton

Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner (R) and Republican state officials are proposing legislation that would give local government schools more authority to make financial decisions and save money on non-instructional costs, allowing more tax dollars to be used in the classroom.

At a February 19 press conference, Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti said government school districts should have more flexibility in setting financial priorities.

“As a mother of three, I think local school districts and parents should be deciding what’s best for our children, not Springfield,” Sanguinetti said. “We need to give the power and flexibility back to local communities and parents, and this bill does just that.”

Education Money for Education

Bills freeing school districts from state mandates and saving money in three areas—physical education, driving education, and non-instructional services—were announced at the February press conference, which was held in Lombard, Illinois.

State Rep. Ron Sandack (R-Downers Grove) says his legislation, House Bill 6164, will allow school districts to redistribute funds to core functions.

“While physical education is important, the requirement it be taught every day was hurting teachers’ ability to offer and students’ ability to take advantage of Advanced Placement classes, vocational training, and computer education,” Sandack says. “Our bill simply says that the school board can make a decision to waive physical education when a student is an athlete or engaged in physical activity and education outside her or his curriculum, and, under the bill, the school board can set a policy so that some flexibility and control at the local level can occur.”

Spending Flexibility

The bill allows flexibility with other expenses, such as driving education, Sandack says.

State Sen. Jason Barickman (R-Bloomington), lead sponsor of the Senate counterpart measure, Senate Bill 3098, says the proposed reforms are important.

“We need to remove the rules that tie the hands of our schools all around the state,” Barickman said. “This relief, to me, is necessary.”

Conditional Support

Some lawmakers, such as state Sen. Don Harmon (D-Oak Park), say they will consider the bills if they believe they will save money through increased efficiency, not simple wage-cutting.

“The third parties merely have to demonstrate that they will achieve savings through better business practices and not just by cutting the bus drivers’ wages or taking health insurance away from the lunch ladies,” Harmon said.

Mark Fitton (mfitton@ilnews.org) is a reporter for the Illinois News Network, a project of the Illinois Policy Institute. An earlier version of this article first appeared at Illinoispolicy.org. Reprinted with permission.
Maine Lawmakers Replace Repeal of Common Core with 'Review'

By Andy Torbett

A bill intended to remove Common Core curriculum standards from Maine government-operated public schools has been amended, removing provisions that would have established a process to make school curriculum standardization more transparent and responsive to community feedback.

The original bill, introduced by state Rep. William Tuell (R-East Machais), was rejected by the Maine House of Representatives’ Education Committee and replaced with a bill that would create a new standards review protocol, which would include new ways for parents to give feedback and trigger government curriculum reviews.

Good Points Cited

Tuell says although the new bill leaves Common Core in place, it forces the state Department of Education to be more accountable and responsive to parents.

“The bill no longer repeals Common Core,” Tuell said. “It will better serve Maine’s educational needs by involving more people in the standards-setting process. One of the big knocks on Common Core is that parents feel left out of the process. Hopefully, the new process the Education Committee has agreed upon will give folks more say, more input, and more opportunities to make real changes to what many see as an inflexible system.”

‘No Guarantee’ of Change

Heidi Sampson, executive director and co-founder of No Common Core Maine, says the legislators let down the state’s parents and students.

“With the replacing of the bill, the Education Committee unanimously passed an amendment to the bill,” Sampson said. “It was more than an amendment. It was a total replacement. ‘Not starting from scratch’ is code language for ‘keeping everything as is,’ but we’ll make you feel good by allowing you to exercise your right to voice your concerns. There is no guarantee the voice of the public will be acted upon.”

‘Edu-Speak’ Barrier

Sampson says the Maine Department of Education has a history of unaccountability and opaqueness, and the new bill will not change that.

“The track record of the review process with the Department of Education is less than stellar,” Sampson said. “The average person will not know how to comment on specific Common Core standards, and the bureaucrats know this. These standards are written in a very ‘edu-speak’ manner, making them not just developmentally inappropriate, but also confusing to interpret.”

‘Entrenched’ Interests

Sampson says the new “review process” is merely a cosmetic change to a corrupted educational system.

“The entire process will be intimately managed and organized by deeply entrenched bureaucrats in the Department of Education, who have no intention of removing the current standards,” Sampson said. “To have them be the final gatekeepers is no guarantee the voice of the public will be acted upon.”

St. Paul School Violence Sparks Teacher Strike Talk

Continued from page 1

on-teacher violence rates in Minneapolis-St. Paul government schools doubled from 2014 to 2015.

‘A Major Problem’

Katherine Kersten, a senior fellow at the Center of the American Experiment, says student-on-teacher violence is a growing problem in government schools, and public officials have no clue how to solve it.

“It’s a major problem in St Paul’s schools,” Kersten said. “However, the superintendent is still suggesting addressing this problem by doing more of the same, another task force to study the problem and so on, instead of coming to grips with the fact that changes in the discipline policy on the district level have contributed to this rise in violence.”

Kersten says local and federal lawmakers share the blame for increasing anti-teacher violence in government schools. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education released a report claiming minority students were disciplined with more frequency and severity than other students.

“They have greatly relaxed disciplinary standards, behavioral expectations, and penalties for misbehavior, basically along the lines of policies advocated by the Obama administration in its 2012 initiative to erase what they called the racial discipline gap in schools,” Kersten said.

Leadership and Expectations

Kersten says expanding school choice would allow students to experience real leadership from teachers, while also giving teachers more safety in the classroom.

“I think it’s really interesting to look at the success of charter schools,” Kersten said. “Many of these schools are having very substantial success with student behavior, and in many cases with academics. I think there is a certain climate of expectations that students pick up early on. If you have strong leadership in the schools, very clear behavior expectations, and penalties when students misbehave, you’re not going to have the sort of chaos and disorder we now see in St. Paul public schools.”

Sacrificing for Student Safety

Mary Clare Reim, a domestic policy studies research associate with The Heritage Foundation, says parents are willing to make sacrifices to keep their children safe in school.

“With parents who send their children to private schools, student safety is often considered their number-one priority, and it was also their number-one satisfaction with their new schools,” Reim said. “It’s definitely something parents are talking about, and it’s a major concern with a lot of these public schools. We believe school choice is the way to solve these problems, because it empowers parents to leave these environments.”

For parents concerned about school safety, Reim says education choice is a sure bet.

“This is a no-brainer, good policy,” Reim said.

Tony Corvo (tcorvo54@gmail.com) writes from Beavercreek, Ohio.
Lake Villa, Illinois Students Caught in a Crossfire

By Andy Torbett

Government school teachers in Lake Villa, Illinois, a village about 53 miles north of Chicago, called off a strike that was planned after 10 months of collective bargaining failed to produce a contract agreeable to the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers.

The Lake County Federation of Teachers filed an intent-to-strike notice with the Illinois Education Labor Relations Board on February 10. The teachers union demanded pay hikes and increased entitlement benefits.

Seniority vs. Success

Mary Clare Reim, a research associate in education policy at The Heritage Foundation, says educators’ pay should be based on how well they do their job, not how long they’ve been employed.

“Teachers should be paid based on the merit of their work,” Reim said. “Unfortunately, teachers are too often paid based on seniority and rank rather than job performance. To improve the quality of teaching and retain good teachers, schools must reward good teachers for good work and be free to terminate the contracts of teachers who underperform.”

MARY CLARE REIM, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

“Teachers should be paid based on the merit of their work. Unfortunately, teachers are too often paid based on seniority and rank rather than job performance. To improve the quality of teaching and retain good teachers, schools must reward good teachers for good work and be free to terminate the contracts of teachers who underperform.”

MARY CLARE REIM, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Students ‘Take the Brunt’

Lennie Jarratt, project manager for education transformation at The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says it’s unfair for government unions to use children as bargaining chips during contract negotiations.

“Students always take the brunt of a strike,” Jarratt said. “They miss much-needed education time, which is never fully made up. During a strike, all sporting events are cancelled, which can be detrimental to the athletes who will miss games and potential recruitment opportunities.”

Jarratt says most parents’ only option is to send their children to a local government school.

“Parents look for options after a strike,” Jarratt said. “However, Illinois parents have very few education options in most districts across the state. Students are typically provided teachers union propaganda in the classroom, which they are then instructed to take home. This tactic not only uses the students as pawns, it alienates and divides the communities. Many families choose to move out of the district or out of the state to escape failing government schools.”

Leaving Illinois

Jarratt says the declines in government school funding are driven by Illinois’ high taxes and spending.

“Illinois is losing one resident every seven minutes,” Jarratt said. “This exodus from the state is a major reason for the decline in available funding. This is happening in nearly every district in the state.

“In addition, the disparity in resources between different districts in the state means children stuck in poor districts get a substandard education and are more likely to have their education disrupted by teacher strikes,” Jarratt said. “Until school funding is student-based instead of geography-based, this phenomenon will not change.”

Andy Torbett (meconservative voice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.
South Dakota Education Board Will Reevaluate Common Core Curriculum

By Andy Torbett

The South Dakota State Board of Education has announced it will begin a review of the state’s curriculum standards for government schools later in 2016. The current standards are based on Common Core, a national initiative popularized by the Obama administration through its Race to the Top grant program and other education policies.

The review, announced in January, was triggered by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a replacement of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2015. The South Dakota board says it intends to review the state’s curriculum standards to ensure compliance with federal mandates, as ESSA standards differ from NCLB standards in some ways.

Mary Scheel-Buysse, co-founder of South Dakotans Against Common Core, says the timing of the curriculum reevaluation is suspect.

“The timing of the announcement—four days before the legislative session—to move up the review of the math standards ... is curious,” Scheel-Buysse said. “I have to wonder if this announcement was timed to head off another Common Core battle in the legislature.”

A Lost Generation

Scheel-Buysse says repealing Common Core, rather than revising it, would be an essential step toward improving education outcomes in South Dakota government schools.

“Our children can never get back the learning years that have been lost, while the state has played games to cause Common Core to become embedded in our schools.”

MARY SCHEEL-BUYSSE, SOUTH DAKOTANS AGAINST COMMON CORE

“Calls for ‘Serious Evaluation’

Neal McCluskey, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, says it’s important South Dakota lawmakers really evaluate the effectiveness of the Common Core standards instead of merely pretending to do so.

“If they give it a serious evaluation, not just a public display that is really intended to give cover for keeping Common Core, then it should satisfy a lot of people with concerns about Common Core,” McCluskey said. “It is not yet clear, however, how they plan to reexamine their standards.”

Calls for More Choices

McCluskey says one problem with the curriculum standards is they disenfranchise parents, who are central stakeholders in their children’s education.

“Everyone would be better off if they could choose schools best suited for their unique children and [if] schools could use all sorts of different things, including curricula, to tailor their services to different subsets of children,” McCluskey said. “The way Common Core got into schools—federal coercion through Race to the Top funding competition and waivers for the No Child Left Behind Act—almost totally cuts parents out of the picture.”

Andy Torbett (meconservative-voice@gmail.com) writes from Atkinson, Maine.

Maryland Family Sues School District Over Religious Assignments

Continued from page 1

“...the worst part of this is most of the time the schools aren’t voluntarily trying to do it; the culture in the schools is so permeated and bad that things like this are just a matter of course,” Kloster said.

‘Parents Need to Pay Attention’

Kloster says giving parents more power over their children’s education and getting parents more involved in the educational process would help stop the absurdities in academia.

“...the way Common Core and the transformation of public education has been lost, while the state has played games to cause Common Core to become embedded in our schools,” Scheel-Buysse said. “Our children and grandchildren are the guinea pigs in this experiment. Our children can never get back the learning years that have been lost, while the state has played games to cause Common Core to become embedded in our schools,” Scheel-Buysse said. “It is not yet clear, however, how they plan to reexamine their standards.”

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By Leo Pusateri

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) is urging the state’s legislature to approve a proposal that would restructure Detroit Public Schools (DPS), splitting the system into two districts.

In his January 2016 State of the State address, Snyder proposed bailing out the floundering government school district by diverting $720 million in other government funds, such as revenues intended for economic development efforts, to pay off the school’s debts. The proposal would create a new government commission to manage the newly created districts until new board members are elected by voters in November 2016.

Kyle Olson, founder and chief operating officer of the Education Action Group Foundation, says debt is a symptom, not the cause, of the district’s problems. He says Detroit’s government schools are suffering from mismanagement at all levels.

“The factors are many: self-serving school board members, incompetent administrators, and a teachers union more interested in power and scoring administrators, and a teachers union more interested in power and scoring instead of their students’ needs,” Olson said. “Par-ents abdicating their authority and handing it over to this band of misfits hasn’t helped.”

Government System Crash

Olson says more government involvement is not the solution to Detroit’s school problems.

“Legislators need to stop trying to ‘fix’ DPS,” Olson said. “Let market forces—that is to say, parents—do it. Gov-ernors and legislators have been trying for years, decades in fact, to fix DPS, with little effect. How many more stu-dents need to be lost before they realize solutions don’t come from government, but rather parents?”

Ben DeGrow, education policy director for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, says Snyder’s plan may show short-term results, but it’s not a long-term solution.

“To the extent the proposals preserve and expand choice to families, they will be a benefit,” DeGrow said. “But anything that props up centralized control and ongoing mismanagement will just kick the can down the road and make future reform efforts even more pain-ful and difficult. There’s more the state needs to look at doing that will put more power and accountability in the hands of parents.”

Need for New Options

DeGrow says Detroit government school administrators should look to other districts for ideas.

“There are no easy solutions or quick fixes for education in Detroit, but the well-documented dramatic turnaround in New Orleans offers the closest par-allel,” DeGrow said. “Top-down programs may have some potential to help the situation, but one can hardly expect them to lead to real transfor-mation. The keys are to attract more charter operators with successful track records, give them autonomy while ensuring rigorous accountabil-ity, empower parents with the means and needed information to access these options, and to rebuild a culture of high expectations from the ground up, with examples of success breeding more success.”

Denver School Choice Policies Are Best Among Nation’s Big Cities

By Ashley Bateman

A report published by the Brookings Institution says Denver, Colorado has the most pro-school choice policies in the nation, compared to similarly sized districts.

The report, published in February, cites Denver’s facilitation of school comparison websites and its single application process for both charter schools and their tradi-tional counterparts as reasons for the high ranking. In its 2015 report, Brookings ranked Denver as fifth-best in choice policies.

The Brookings Institution report suggests Denver could improve further by requiring “every family to choose in order for their child to enroll, just as every district requires, for example, evidence of vaccinations.”

Spearheading ‘Important Reforms’

Ross Izard, an education policy analyst with the Indepen-dence Institute, says Denver is embracing school choice and empowering parents.

“Opening school options and a unified choice system comparing schools really bumped Denver up,” Izard said.

“A few months before this came out, a report from the Fordham Institute echoed a lot that the Brookings Insti-tution did. Denver spearheaded important reforms and political progress.”

Always Room for Improvement

Izard says Colorado is leading the nation in promoting school choice, but there are still things lawmakers could do better.

“Colorado has always been at the forefront of public school choice, charter schools, and open enrollment, but we are still behind the power curve when it comes to pri-vate school choice,” Izard said. “The state’s constitution contains the Blaine Amendment, which is interpreted to limit programs that may fund religious-affiliated institu-tions. Vouchers are tough to pass, but perhaps tax credit scholarships could pass to open up private school choice.”

‘Pretty Strong Bipartisan Support’

Nora Flood, president of the Colorado League of Charter Schools, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the state’s charter schools by providing information and resources, says several factors have come together to make the state relatively friendly to school choice.

“There are a few statewide things that lend themselves to school choice and parent choice and opportunity,” Flood said. “We are very much a purple state, so we enjoy pretty strong bipartisan support for parental choice, charter schools, and quality schools for kids. I think the other is that we are a strong local-control state, and so I think that also speaks to parents who choose what school meets their chil-dren’s needs and their families’ priorities ... and recognizing that may or may not be their traditional public school.”

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

LEARN MORE

Poll: Millennials, Minorities Strongly Support Choice

By Andrea Dillon

A merican voters, including younger voters and minority groups, overwhelmingly support school choice programs, a new poll has found.

The poll, commissioned by the American Federation for Children, a national education policy think tank, questioned 1,100 likely voters across the country about their support for school choice policies. According to the results, 70 percent of voters say they generally support school choice policies, and 42 percent “strongly support” choice. Voters of Hispanic descent and 18- to 35-year-old voters, often referred to as “millennials,” support school choice policies at higher rates than the general population.

The survey was conducted by polling research agency Beck Research LLC and released on January 28.

Minority Support

Matthew Frendewey, national communications director for the American Federation for Children, says school choice supporters are more diverse than some may believe.

“Setting aside polling on party identification and the respective demographic crosstabs, in terms of strictly polling demographics, African-American voters are typically more open to school choice,” Frendewey said. “That support remains strong when drilling down on specific programs, like charters, vouchers, opportunity scholarships, etc.”

Frendewey says Hispanic families are also becoming more supportive of school choice policies.

“Hispanic families have traditionally trailed African-American support,” Frendewey said. “This was the first poll where we saw Hispanics mirror their support with African-American families.”

‘Extremely Popular’

Mary Claire Reim, a research associate in domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation, says the poll’s findings are not surprising.

“School choice is extremely popular among minority and low-income families, because it is these groups who struggle the most to overcome the achievement gap present in our public schools and need alternatives,” Reim said. “Limitations on school choice directly prohibit families who do not have the means to attend private school from pursuing the best possible education for their child.”

Success in Washington, DC

Reim says the success of Washington, DC’s school choice program is further evidence of the popularity of choice among underserved demographic groups.

Well over 90 percent of the participants in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, for example, are minority students, and parents and families have reported extremely high satisfaction rates with their schools of choice,” Reim said. “In fact, participation in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program led to a 21 percent increase in graduation rates. Minority and low-income families benefit immensely from school choice options, which is why growing support for such programs is to be expected.”

Andrea Dillon (thell1885@gmail.com) writes from Holly Springs, North Carolina.

LEARN MORE

African-American Families Take to Homeschooling

By Kimberly Morin

As homeschooling becomes increasingly popular among families across the nation, research shows African-American parents are becoming more interested in homeschooling as an alternative to local government schools.

Widely Popular Alternative

Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to conducting and collecting research about home-based education, says homeschooling is growing quickly in popularity in the United States, especially among minorities.

“Based on research, we do know that homeschooling has been growing at a fast rate for the last 30 years,” Ray said. “We do know from empirical evidence—not a lot, but some empirical evidence—that over the last 10 to 12 years, it has grown disproportionately faster among minorities, including blacks, than the general rate of growth. My experience confirms that.”

Ray says minority homeschooling families largely have the same concerns as others who have left the government education system.

“The reasons why black parents choose to homeschool are marginally the same as everybody else,” Ray said. “There is an added reason—but it is not the primary reason that they sometimes give—of racist experiences in public schools or not enough emphasis on what they would like to see in terms of cultural education.”

‘Why Do Parents Homeschool?’

Ray says all homeschooling families want what’s best for their children.

“Why do parents homeschool? It’s really simple,” Ray said. “They want a good academic education for their children. They think they can do as well [as] or better than public schools. They want stronger family relationships. They can spend more time together. They want to give more guidance to their children’s social interactions. They want a more customized education for their children for their strengths and weaknesses. They want a safe environment. They want to pass on their own views and worldviews and not have the government schools do it.”

Joyce Burges, founder of National Black Home Educators, a non-profit organization supporting African-American homeschooling families by connecting parents with local and state support groups and building cooperation among homeschooling families, says parents can see government schools are failing their children.

“I think it’s growing because parents, especially new parents, are seeing children being misused or abused or falling among the cracks, and they aren’t going to put their children in that system at all,” said Burges. “Then you have another group of people who are homeschooling, like it was in my case, where your children are literally being labelled or pulled out of the system, and no one is taking the time with them.”

Teaching an Important Story

Burges says homeschooling allows African-American parents to teach their children about their unique heritage.

“Another reason [parents are homeschooling] is because black heroes aren’t being taught in our schools anymore. Of course, years ago they took black history out of the curriculum, so they aren’t learning about our heroes.

Homeschooling Benefiting Black Students

“The researchers noted this drop is significant because black students do better in school when racially paired with teachers.

“Teachers of color also can serve as powerful role models for minority students, who are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods than white students and less likely to know other adults who are college graduates,’ The Huffington Post reported. …

“It’s helpful, too, that these students’ test scores are so high, experts said. It gives black families even more of a reason to teach their students from home.

“The black homeschool children’s high achievement test scores were remarkable,’ Brian Ray, president of [the National Home Education Research Institute], said. ‘Parents without teaching certificates helping their children from a traditionally low-achieving minority group excel this way should cause all educators and social advocacy groups to take special note.’”

A
fter his bill was passed by the Alabama Senate’s education committee, a state senator says his legislation, which would have repealed the state’s Common Core standards, has been weakened and rendered ineffective.

Senate Bill 30, sponsored by state Sen. Rusty Glover (R-Mobile), was amended in February by the Alabama Senate Education Policy Committee. The bill would allow government schools to decide whether to retain Common Core curriculum standards, a national curriculum standardization initiative with roots in No Child Left Behind and other federal government education programs, or develop their own set of standards.

Little Support from Parents, Teachers

Glover, a retired government school teacher, says parents and teachers alike are expressing unhappiness with the Common Core standards.

“Most of the complaints come from parents and grandparents who attempt to assist children who struggle in math,” Glover said.

“The elimination of a portion of literature, to be replaced with informational readings, has not been appreciated by some teachers,” he said.

Glover says Common Core’s adoption by Alabama’s government schools has led to a reduction in student achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

“The Alabama standards that were in place prior to Common Core were praised as being some of the best in the nation and yielded very positive results. I feel that the significant decline in recent NAEP rankings for Alabama will convince enough of the legislators who have been against previous repeal bills to join our efforts.”

RUSTY GLOVER, STATE SENATOR, MOBILE, ALABAMA

“Not a Surprise”

Alabama State Board of Education member Stephanie Bell says lawmakers’ defanging of Glover’s bill was all too predictable.

“It’s very frustrating,” Bell said. “It’s not a surprise to me. It’s just another attempt to make it look like they’ve done something when they have not. Locals will never be able to repeal Common Core, and they know that. The legislators who voted for this and added this amendment know that can’t be done.”

Going Through the Motions

Bell says lawmakers are only pretending to care about improving the quality of government school curricula.

“They wanted this amendment because it sounds popular, like real local control, but there’s no reason to think local school boards will want to repeal Common Core, because they can’t,” Bell said. “The local boards still have to meet the state requirement to give the Common Core-aligned assessments and use the state standards, which are Common Core.

“All of this is, of course, being funded by the legislature,” Bell said. “Their appropriations support Common Core.”

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

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Activists Predict ‘Chaos’ If NY Repeals Common Core

By Jenni White

As New York lawmakers review the state’s Common Core-aligned curriculum, a coalition of businesses and government school officials is predicting change would create educational and fiscal “chaos.”

High Achievement New York, an organization created to support and promote New York government schools’ adoption of Common Core, released a report in January predicting a repeal of the state curriculum standards would cost state taxpayers more than $480 million in wasted funds, creating chaos in government school classrooms.

New York lawmakers are formally reviewing Common Core, a national education curriculum initiative with roots in No Child Left Behind and other federal programs, and will issue their findings in June.

Doomsday Prediction

Joy Pullmann, a research fellow on education policy for The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, says Common Core supporters’ predictions of doom are inconsistent with their past prognostications.

“So, let me get this straight: Common Core supporters are the same people who told us that changing standards would cost essentially nothing more, because states periodically update standards and buy new textbooks, but now that it’s [the state government] changing away from Common Core, suddenly standards-switching is expensive?” Pullmann said. “These people need to get their arguments straight.”

System Is Already ‘Struggling’

Valerie DiCaprio, a co-founder of Stop Common Core on Long Island, says New York government schools are already in a state of chaos because of Common Core.

“Race to the Top funds have dried up, yet schools are still struggling to stay afloat in the face of greater financial demands for training, materials, and attempts to meet the technological problems of online testing, including computers and broadband ability. Schools are drowning because of Common Core’s onerous mandates.”

DiCaprio says a high-quality curriculum can be found and implemented easily.

“Any state could essentially alter its standards to the best in the nation for free, because those arose from Massachusetts, which is no longer using them,” DiCaprio said. “To do easy standards improvement on the cheap, simply adopt Massachusetts’ [previous] standards. The state led the nation in student achievement and improvement, until it adopted Common Core.”

Sees Common Core as Costly

DiCaprio says the cost of repealing Common Core is ultimately irrelevant.

“Critics want to talk about the chaos and financial implications which would ensue if we repealed Common Core,” DiCaprio says. “We are in the midst of an educational crisis. What is the cost to our country with an entire generation devoid of architects, scientists, doctors, engineers, creators, inventors, and entrepreneurs? What is an acceptable cost for lost childhood? Lost years of education with no second chance? That price is inestimable. Our children and our future should not come with a price tag, and yet that is exactly what High Achievement New York is proposing.”

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

Oklahoma Considers Establishing Statewide ESA Program

By Leo Pusateri

Oklahoma lawmakers are considering a bill that would establish a statewide education savings account program that allows a portion of the money otherwise directed to government schools to follow children for education in private or charter schools or for purchasing homeschooling educational materials.

House Bill 2949 was proposed by state Rep. Jason Nelson (R-Oklahoma City) in February and approved by the state House Committee on Common Education.

Public Education vs. Educated Public

Brandon Dutcher, senior vice president of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, says taxpayer money spent on education belongs to taxpayers and their children, not government schools.

“Race to the Top funds have dried up, yet schools are still struggling to stay afloat in the face of greater financial demands for training, materials, and attempts to meet the technological problems of online testing, including computers and broadband ability. Schools are drowning because of Common Core’s onerous mandates.”

“To say that ESAs will take money away from the [government-operated] schools implies that the money belongs to schools in the first place. It does not. The end goal of public education is an educated public. It doesn’t matter whether that education takes place in a traditional public school, a charter school, a private school, a virtual school, or wherever.”

Brandon Dutcher
Senior Vice President
Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs

“ESAs will cause per-pupil funding in traditional public school [systems] to increase,” Dutcher said. “When a child leaves with an ESA, he only takes a portion of his per-pupil funding with him. The school district gets to keep the rest of the money, to educate a child who is no longer there. Thus, ESAs relieve overcrowding and increase per-pupil funding.”

Empowering Parents

Renee Porter, executive director of Choice Matters, a nonprofit organization established to inform Oklahoma parents of the educational choices available in the state, says ESAs give children access to educational experiences tailored to their individual needs.

“ESAs are about empowering parents and improving the range of educational options for children,” Porter said. “All children are different and learn differently. Some children have disabilities that require special attention. Other children are so advanced that their time in the classroom isn’t really benefiting them. It’s unrealistic, and quite frankly unfair, to expect every public school to provide for the exact needs of every student. That’s why it’s important to give parents options like charter schools, private schools, and virtual schools.”

Empowering Children

Porter says helping all children reach their potential by allowing greater access to high-quality education helps everyone.

“I don’t believe in telling low-income families there is nothing we can do to help them,” Porter said. “A lot of the children who stand to gain the most from ESAs are in desperate financial circumstances. ESAs could change the entire trajectory of their lives in a positive fashion.”

Leo Pusateri (psycmeistr@fastmail.fm) writes from St. Cloud, Minnesota.
Virginia Lawmakers OK Ballot Question Allowing Charter School Expansion

By Darren Nelson

Eighteen years after Virginia lawmakers passed a law bringing a limited amount of school choice options to the state, lawmakers are putting a question before voters that could revise the state’s constitution and increase the ability of parents to enroll their children in alternatives to traditional government schools.

If approved by voters in November, the ballot question would remove government school boards’ ability to veto the founding of charter schools within the school district’s geographic boundaries.

Voter Power, Not Veto Power

State Del. Robert Bell (R-Charlottesville), the sponsor of the legislative referendum question, says the current way of doing things gives government schools the power to quash potential competition.

“There are only nine charters in Virginia, and the reason is that the current law requires local approval,” Bell said. “The total local veto power means that the school boards don’t have to work with the charter proponents; they can just say ‘no.’ The amendment would allow an alternate route for charters, such as other states have done, like in North Carolina, which has created many more charters than Virginia.”

Getting Kids Unstuck

Bell says it’s all about choice and making schools compete to attract students.

“There are always going to be kids that aren’t optimally served by the traditional public school model, and if they are not from a wealthy family, then they are stuck,” Bell said. “I am aware that some charter schools do great and others don’t, but that is true for public schools as well. But even in the really good public school districts, there are still students for whom it is better to attend a charter school.

“Firstly, charter schools provide students and their families with choice,” Bell said. “Secondly, such schools also provide choice for public schools, as a sort of pilot to adapt what works well.”

Getting ‘Real’ About Education

Christian Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, says the state’s lack of charter schools is evidence of what economists call “regulatory capture.”

“Virginia’s constitution puts all authority for operating public schools in the hands of local school boards,” Braunlich said. “The [Virginia] School Boards Association has been proud of the fact that when the initial charter school law came about, they wrote it so they could live with it. The result has been few charter schools.”

Colorado School Choice Advocates Seek Funding Parity

By Arthur Kane

School choice advocates in Colorado are calling for legislation that would guarantee all students receive the same funding, whether they’re attending traditional or charter schools or other programs.

“The big fight this year will be over the funding,” said state Sen. Owen Hill (R-Colorado Springs). “We have to continue to make sure we don’t discriminate between students, no matter what type of schools they choose.”

Lake Ragland, vice president of policy at Colorado Succeeds, a non-profit coalition of Colorado business leaders supporting school choice, said students who attend nontraditional schools receive about 20 percent less funding than those attending traditional government schools.

Unequal Access

The state requires 95 percent of state funding given to schools for each of their students, roughly $7,000, to follow the student, but school choice attendees miss out on other benefits enjoyed by students at traditional schools.

“Those charters might not have access to facilities and buildings and may have to pay for them with part of per-pupil funding,” Ragland said. “And they might not have access to local mill levies and local revenue.”

Calls for Test Score Accountability

Ragland says Colorado Succeeds is pushing to make sure the state publishes student test scores in 2017 because the information helps parents make the best choice for their kids. The state skipped publishing the scores in 2016 because of recent changes made to the state’s standardized tests, but Ragland says he’s heard rumors some educators and lawmakers may want to delay the information release for several years.

“There’s a strong push to delay accountability and school ratings,” Ragland said. “We want to make sure the accountability system is available.”

Other Issues

Hill says he thinks there will be a push for other proposals as well, such as legislation that would increase the availability of courses that award college credit in high schools, which could help to reduce loan burdens for those who pursue higher education.

Hill also wants to see a greater emphasis placed on alternatives to attending a four-year college—such as certifications in trucking, cosmetology, and plumbing—for students who aren’t interested in college or don’t want the loan burden that often comes with a university education.

“Dealing with debt is a big frustration for students, but you have to have a good, well-paying job to take care of your family,” said Hill.

Arthur Kane (akane@watchdog.org) writes from Denver, Colorado. An earlier version of this article was published by Watchdog.org. Reprinted with permission.
School Choice Vouchers Are Everywhere … What Now?

By Joy Pullmann

The school choice movement has reached a milestone: The majority of states offer a school choice program that includes access to private schools. This is a major accomplishment, but those of us who advocate for individual and family self-determination are nowhere near finished.

Tinkering at the Margins

The school choice programs that exist are mostly very small and often highly regulated. This means they tend to tinker at the margins of culture and education policy, instead of making the necessary significant changes the nation needs to accelerate school quality quickly.

The smallness of choice programs that include private schools has given charter schools a market edge over private institutions over public ones, a sclerotic government monopoly. School choice is also an important social endeavor that creates a space in which groups of individuals can collectively and freely apply their talents to address different aspects of a societal issue.

This is yet another reason to prefer private institutions over public ones, such as charter schools, and a reason to push for sufficient government funding to support a “startup phase” that should end once the new educational institutions are off and running. Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow at Heartland Institute.

Charter Schools and Private Schools

In an earlier version of this article was published by The Heartland Institute in School Choice Weekly.

The smallness of choice programs that include private schools has given charter schools a market edge over private schools, even though the latter offers more scope for deeper curricular, structural, and cultural diversity. Private schools also offer better buffers against the reabsorption of families’ education opportunities into the government-industrial complex through choice programs’ permission gates, which stifle quality, innovation, and individual liberty.

Paul Hill, founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education and a University of Washington-Bothell research professor, wrote, in a February blog post, education freedom leaders should invest energies in promoting charter schools’ success.

“Even in localities where the average voucher effects have been positive, most new schools created from scratch to take vouchers drag down the average,” Hill wrote. “And, existing private schools will fill their available seats but are unlikely to build new facilities or replicate. To date, most voucher programs have provided too little money and have been too politically unreliable to generate a strong supply response.’”

Hill is right. In order for real, widespread choice to take hold, suppliers—educators—must be able to trust their students will be able to bring sufficient monetary resources with them to support the necessary investment in facilities over the long term. Underfunded programs with unreliable political support can’t bring on the education revolution the nation sorely needs.

School Choice Vouchers Are Everywhere … What Now?

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Joy Pullmann is a research fellow on education policy for The Heartland Institute.
Parents and classroom teachers have rarely, if ever, had a say in the imposition of centrally devised K–12 standards, and the standards now sweeping the country, deceptively dubbed the Common Core State Standards by their backroom architects, are especially harmful for our children.

Some states are now finally listening to parental objections, but many are ultimately continuing the great deception by merely tweaking the nationalized standards and providing revised standards with a localized name, rather than offering real reforms. The time may have come for the people to bring Common Core to a public vote.

Citizens may initiate ballot questions in 24 states, and if just a few of those efforts produce dump-the-Core results, pressure would mount for the formulation of legislator-sponsored ballot initiatives, which are possible in all 50 states.

Massachusetts, which had the most rigorous academic standards in the land before adopting the phony “rigor” of Common Core, may become the first major proving ground for these ballot initiatives.

Grassroots Effort

Common Core Forum (CCF), a grassroots citizens’ group in Massachusetts, has done the hard work of collecting more than 76,000 verified signatures in order to put a referendum on the November 8 ballot. A majority vote in favor of the proposition would rescind the state education board’s July 2010 decision to adopt Common Core and restore the highly rated pre-2010 English and math curricular frameworks.

Among other provisions, the initiative would require the state education commissioner “to publicly release all test items, including questions, constructed responses, and essays, for each grade and for every subject.” Clearly, the secrecy of the experimental Common Core testing has bothered many parents.

Ballot Access

It’s not surprising the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) is leading efforts to keep this issue off the November ballot, considering the affection many big businesses have for nationalized standards geared wholly to improve workforce preparation. MBAE is advising plaintiffs who are seeking a court order that would invalidate Attorney General Maura Healey’s certification of the ballot question and forbid Secretary of State William Galvin from placing the question before voters.

CCF founder Donna Colorio, a former school committee member and mother of three, alleges the same special interests that concocted Common Core behind closed doors are bankrolling this “frivolous lawsuit.” In an e-mail, Colorio wrote, “The business interests are not concerned with the overwhelming will of the people. They are concerned with big corporations [that] stand to make billions of dollars off our kids.”

Some business leaders, including members of the Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, have touted Common Core as a uniform program that educators and parents must accept because it somehow serves business interests.

Fortune, in its New Year’s Day issue, quoted Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson as asserting schools must view big business as their “customer.” The schools, Tillerson said, are “producing a product at the end of that high school graduation. … Now is that product in a form that we, the customer, can use it? Or is it defective, and we’re not interested?”

That doesn’t leave much room for the idea kids should receive a well-rounded education so they can think for themselves and be discerning citizens. Nor does it pay any heed to whether parents want their children to be “products” or something with intellect, dreams, and a soul: human.

People Power

The hard-nosed, big-business attitude does suggest a lot of money could be rolling in to fight citizens’ efforts to terminate Common Core. However, the colorful populist history of the initiative and referendum process in Massachusetts suggests victory might not always go to those with the deepest pockets.

“‘The hard-nosed, big-business attitude does suggest a lot of money could be rolling in to fight citizens’ efforts to terminate Common Core. However, the colorful populist history of the initiative and referendum process in Massachusetts suggests victory might not always go to those with the deepest pockets.

According to the California-based Initiative and Referendum Institute (IRI), initiatives in 1948 to legalize contraceptives and clamp down on organized labor provoked a heavy Democratic turnout that not only defeated the initiatives but kicked many Republicans out of office.

IRI says the state’s “most famous” initiative was “Proposition 2½,” which was passed in 1980. It was part of a tax revolt that limited property taxes and repealed school boards’ fiscal autonomy. The most popular initiative, which received support from 73 percent of voters in 1986, mandated the cleanup of toxic waste dumps.

It’s unlikely a Common Core referendum will receive much media attention in the midst of a heated presidential race, but a victory for everyday citizens over the Common Core’s corporatist proponents could become a landmark event in restoring local control of education in America.

Robert Holland (rholland@heartland.org) is a senior fellow for education policy with The Heartland Institute.

By Robert Holland

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

“A group of educators and business leaders wants to block a ballot initiative that seeks to reject the Common Core, arguing that a move to abandon the educational standards would be disastrous.

“The group wants a state judge to keep the referendum off the November 2016 ballot. It says the question is vaguely worded, conflicts with the state Constitution, and never should have been certified by Attorney General Maura Healey and Secretary of State Bill Galvin.

“Supporters of the ballot question call the challenge weak, and say voters should decide whether to adopt Common Core.

“They’re grasping at straws right now,’ said Donna Colorio, founder of Common Core Forum, a nonprofit group that is leading the campaign. ‘And, by doing so, they’re trying to deprive parents and taxpayers of the right to vote on this.’”


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