Common Core language arts standards reduce the amount of classic literature students in 46 states will read for school, with potentially destructive consequences for students' future college study and careers, concludes a new report from the Pioneer Institute. In "How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk," authors Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky encourage policymakers "to emphasize Common Core's existing literary-historical standards" and augment the standards with "state-specific guidelines."

The Common Core standards detail what K-12 students should know in English/language arts and mathematics. They are set to be fully implemented in 46 states by 2014.

The vague English requirements give states and districts little guidance on what texts to assign students, and policymakers "to emphasize Common Core's existing literary-historical standards" and augment the standards with "state-specific guidelines."
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the authors write. They conclude college readiness and analytical thinking will suffer if English classes cut out complex, classic literature.

“Common Core says wonderful things in its sidebars and introductions, but they’re not in the standards themselves,” Stotsky said.
The standards specify that fourth-grade students read half “informational texts” and half literary fiction, gradually shifting the ratio to 70 percent information and 30 percent literature by 12th grade.

No More Huckleberry Finn
The Common Core states, “certain critical content for all students, including: classic myths and stories from around the world, America’s Founding Documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare,” should be included in curricula, but state and local officials will determine the remaining texts.

Previous state standards required literature such as Huckleberry Finn, one of the greatest American masterpieces, Stotsky noted. The Common Core requires no specific texts, but only places examples of grade-level complexity in an appendix, she said.
The standards do not imply a set percentage of informational texts for English classrooms only, but throughout the various subjects, said Brenda Overturf, chair of the International Reading Association’s Common Core committee.

Lite Lit
In recent decades, schools have abandoned more rigorous works, Stotsky said. She called the standards “literature-light.”

“Literature is extremely important to a student’s education,” Overturf said. “Literature teaches us about the human condition and lessons from the past and the experience of others so we know how to solve problems.”

Studying complex literature expands students’ vocabulary and knowledge, said Jamie Gass, director of Pioneer’s Center of School Reform. He noted Massachusetts’s No.1 standing on the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2005 to 2011. Before adopting the Common Core, Massachusetts based 90 percent of its English standards on literature.

“Unfortunately, public education for decades in this country has had an infatuation with faddishness, such as ‘twenty-first century skills’ and ‘hands-on learning,’” Gass said. “Given the success in Massachusetts, you think they’d try to replicate what we know quantitatively works.”

Determining Curriculum
English teachers have been trained to teach literature, not informational texts, Stotsky said.

“One of the big selling points for Common Core was we’re now going to have the same expectations for all children. If all English teachers are interpreting these standards in different ways, ... we still haven’t got the same standards,” she said.

But a set list of required texts does not benefit all students, Overturf said.

“We have a diverse culture in the United States,” Overturf said. “We need a variety of different, but equally challenging, literature.”

But the Common Core’s minimal guidelines force teachers to plan in the dark, Overturf said.

Different Route
Texas chose to maintain its own standards, said Debbie Ratcliffe, communications director for the Texas Education Agency.

“It would have cost us millions of dollars to toss out [textbooks and tests] and develop ones based on the national standards,” Ratcliffe said. “Our state law also requires us to involve very specific groups of people, such as educators and business leaders, when we develop standards, and the Common Core development didn’t.”

Although informational texts remain in Texas standards, students are expected to comprehend various poetry, drama, fiction, and literary nonfiction, she said.

Gass says he doubts the Common Core standards will be revised soon.

“They’re really in the implementation process,” he said. “The standards were devised in such a quick, closed-door, and hasty manner it really avoided having a substantive policy discussion.”

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

COMMON CORE PROS & CONS

Pros
- Discourages self-centered, weak writing; encourages grounding arguments in evidence.
- Encourages classic works over young adult popular fiction.
- Reading research shows children need broad background information; Common Core emphasizes “informational text.”
- Significant emphasis on source documents.
- Requires more than previous state standards except in California, Indiana, and Massachusetts.
- Provides course alignment across teachers, grades, and nearly all states.

Cons
- States can only add to the standards, not alter them.
- Eliminates algebra before ninth grade. Provides students no accelerated path.
- Requires English teachers to explain “informational text” and historical documents they are not trained to teach.
- Already being used to promote “fuzzy math” in some areas.
- The draft science standards endorse as fact Darwinian evolution and manmade catastrophic climate change.
- Requires specific percentages of fiction and nonfiction, starting more even and ending with a ratio of 30 percent fiction to 70 percent nonfiction in 12th grade.
- Implements an experimental form of geometry that failed with gifted Russian students.
- Creators admit it prepares graduates for a two-year college, not four-year college or university.

Sources: Bill Evers, Pioneer Institute, Common Core State Standards, David Coleman.

LEARN MORE


PODCAST INFO

Election Results Mean More Gridlock

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Achieves and New Leaders for New Schools. He noted the administration’s waivers of No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, “doubled down” federal education spending, and significant changes to teacher evaluations and charter school laws states had to make to receive a federal Race to the Top grant.

In November, voters in South Dakota and Idaho overwhelmingly overturned state laws tying teacher evaluations to student test scores, a link the Obama administration prioritized.

Waivers Displace Congress

Although NCLB has been due for reauthorization since 2007, the president in his victory speech promised to focus on immigration and energy and a country in fiscal disarray, meaning the law will likely remain lapsed. In its place will remain the patchwork system of waivers granted to 34 states and pursued by seven more.

“The waiver process did not just grant flexibility to states but set forth a whole host of conditions states had to subscribe to [that] have no basis in the law,” said Martin West, an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who advised Mitt Romney.

The massive amount of paperwork and monitoring required by those waivers and $4.15 billion in Race to the Top grants mean the U.S. Department of Education will have little energy for new initiatives, American Enterprise Institute education director Rick Hess wrote on his blog.

Entitlements Limit Education

“The size of the deficit, the GOP majority in the House, the need to deal with Pell [Grants], the impending costs of the Affordable Care Act, and the rest mean that there won’t be big new dollars for education initiatives, no matter how often the president says nice things about edu-investment and workforce initiatives,” Hess wrote.

Federal debt has now surpassed U.S. gross domestic product, the total of goods and services its citizens produce in a year. The debt equals approximately $51,000 per U.S. citizen, including schoolchildren. During the campaign, Obama reiterated his support for current federal programs, such as Pell Grant subsidies for college students, and touted proposals to increase education spending.

U.S. education spending has doubled in real dollars in the past 40 years. The national teacher-student ratio is 1 to 15. Forty years ago, it was 1 to 22.

Suspicious of Choice

Romney sparkled nationwide conversations with his proposal to send federal education funding with students to any school their parents choose to have them attend. Obama’s win means the federal government will support only government school options.

“The president has been a big champion of parent choice in public education” but opposes vouchers because parents might use them to send children to private schools, Schnur said.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Mixed Results on States’ School Ballot Initiatives

Georgia: Approved Independent Charter Schools
After a bitter, lawsuit-filled campaign, Georgia voters approved a measure that would let a statewide commission, not just local school districts, approve charter schools. Proponents argued local school districts often unfairly reject charters because charters compete for students and funds.

Idaho: Overturned Technology, Union Reforms
By a two-thirds margin, Idaho voters overturned a new law requiring every high school student to take two online classes and giving every high school student a laptop computer. Voters also repealed limits on collective bargaining, bonuses to teachers who fill high-need positions, and linking teacher evaluations to student test scores.

Indiana: Defeated Incumbent Tony Bennett
In an upset, Indiana Superintendent Tony Bennett lost to union-backed challenger Glenda Ritz, an Indianapolis-area former teacher and union official. Bennett had championed substantial reforms and managed the state’s growing portfolio of school choice, which includes vouchers, education tax credits, and a thriving charter school ecosystem.

Michigan: Rejected Collective Bargaining
After the most expensive ballot campaign in the state’s history, Michigan voters rejected a measure to constitutionally protect union agreements. The amendment would have overturned 170 state laws, the state attorney general said, and given union-negotiated agreements precedence over all state law.

South Dakota: Overturned Teacher Reforms
By a two-thirds margin, South Dakota voters overturned Referred Law 16, which tied half of teacher evaluations to student test scores and, based on that, offered the top 20 percent of teachers a $5,000 bonus. The rejected law also limited tenure for new hires in fall 2016 and gave $2,500 bonuses to math and science teachers.

Washington: Allowed Charter Schools
The fourth time was the charm for attempts to get Washington voters to allow public charter schools: They narrowly passed Initiative 1240, with 51 percent of voters approving and 49 percent rejecting. The measure was backed by millions of dollars from the likes of Bill Gates and Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton. Washington is the 42nd state to allow independently managed public schools.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Students Complain Lunch Rules Leave Them Hungry

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Students nationwide are brown-bagging lunches, writing lawmakers, and making YouTube videos about the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, complaining its rules leave them, well, hungry.

The 2010 law limits lunches starting this fall to 850 calories for high school students, with tighter restrictions for younger students. Meals include more produce and limit meat.

The law was the biggest item of complaints to U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp’s office (R-KS) in August, he told School Reform News.

“Parents, administrators, cooks alike, I haven’t found one yet that said, ‘No, let’s keep the regulations, we love it,’” he said.

Students in Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are among those protesting. Before HHFKA, the federal government spent approximately $11 billion yearly on the school lunch program. HHFKA added an annual $1.4 billion. Thirty-nine percent of public school students receive the subsidies.

One-Size Lunches

The No Hungry Kids Act, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Steven King (R-IA), would repeal HHFKA, prohibit the U.S. Department of Agriculture from capping calories or limiting meat, and prohibit schools from interfering when students bring their own lunches.

“[HHFKA is] a mistake, and most parents that I’ve visited with and the school cooks in particular say it’s a very bad idea,” said Huelskamp, the bill’s cosponsor.

Some students are 100-pound girls and others are football players, and different students need different lunches, notes Linda O’Connor, an English teacher at Wallace County High School in Sharon Springs, Kansas. Students who need more food often raid vending machines, consuming candy and chips, she said.

“It’s been a counterproductive piece of legislation,” O’Connor said. “[Students] weren’t eating half as much junk food last year as they are this year.”

Viral Lunch Video

O’Connor and another teacher led their students in making a video that has logged nearly a million YouTube views and netted nationwide media coverage. It began when a teacher posted a photo of a school lunch on Facebook and received numerous comments from parents and neighbors surprised at the meal’s lack of protein, O’Connor said.

The video portrays students collapsing from hunger during athletic practices and filling lockers with junk food. About 20 high school students and a first-grade class participated. It wasn’t hard to find student volunteers, she said.

O’Connor said she didn’t expect attention, or criticisms she and the students didn’t care about nutrition.

“We’re excited about more fruit and vegetables. Who wouldn’t be?” she said. “We’re not proponents of junk food. [But] because they are hungry, they’re eating more junk food.”

“Creating a Class System’

Students who don’t have spare change for the vending machines are going hungry, King said.

“It’s creating a class system in the schools. The kids that have money can go back and buy more food, and that stigmatizes the kids who can’t,” King said.

For some kids, school lunch is their only substantial meal, Huelskamp said.

“One of the main culprits...is broken families,” Huelskamp said. “And the people in schools have the best interest of the kids in mind, and they know far better than someone in the USDA or the White House,” King said.

School lunch is not making kids fat, King said. Inactivity, low junk food self-control, and broken families are the main culprits.

“We’re far better off filling them up with meat and potatoes and vegetables,” King said.

Children who don’t eat dinner with their families often raid refrigerators and purchase junk food, he noted.

“We’ve become an inactive society. We’ve become a culture where we encourage kids to play on electronics instead of going outside,” Huelskamp said. “It’s not a school problem. It’s a cultural problem.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.

“It’s been a counterproductive piece of legislation. [Students] weren’t eating half as much junk food last year as they are this year.”

LINDA O’CONNOR, ENGLISH TEACHER
WALLACE COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL, SHARON SPRINGS, KANSAS

INTERNET INFO

“We Are Hungry,” YouTube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IB7NDUSBOo

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Education Funds Wasted on Master’s Degrees

By Ashley Bateman

Although research finds no link between master’s degrees in education and better instruction, states spent nearly $15 billion in the 2007–08 school year on the “master’s degree pay bump,” according to a summer report. “The Sheepskin Effect and Student Achievement” puts numbers to a long-studied difficulty. Though some research has shown the instruction of math and science teachers improves when they earn a master’s degree, 90 percent of teachers who hold master’s degrees are no more effective than those without them.

The economic research demonstrating this has been clear for a long time, says Jason Richwine, a Heritage Foundation senior policy analyst. “The real contribution [the report] adds is it quantifies how much money is actually being spent on the master’s [pay] ‘bump,’” Richwine said. “We’ve known for a while that the master’s degree is not a useful thing for the teachers to get. It’s making education reform a bipartisan issue.”

The pay bump artificially increases the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds the number of master’s degrees, the authors found, and soaks up funds.

“Right now what we do is precisely backwards,” said Marcus Winters, a Manhattan Institute senior fellow and author of Teachers Matter. “We have a system that makes it difficult to become a teacher and then we compensate them based on credentials and years in the classroom, versus how effective a teacher actually is.”

Instead of requiring years of teaching credentials statistically proven to be useless, Richwine said teacher training should focus on apprenticeships. These have proven more effective and less costly, he said.

People might expect earning a master’s degree to make a difference in teacher quality. But this doesn’t happen in education because most education master’s degrees do not focus on improving instruction. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality found only 15 percent of the education schools in a representative sample provided teaching students with even minimal exposure to the science of reading.

“Right now what we do is precisely backwards. We [make] it difficult to become a teacher and then we compensate them based on credentials and years in the classroom, versus how effective a teacher actually is.”

Huge Spending Spike

Report authors Raegen Miller and Marguerite Roza first studied master’s bumps in 2003–04, finding they caused districts nationwide to allocate an extra $8.6 billion. Since then, that extra spending has grown 72 percent.

“What was most startling to me was how much it grew in the time span [from when] we did the first analysis to the second,” Roza said. “We’ve always known it’s been a problem, and while we ignored it, it doubled.”

A recent influx in master’s degree earners means states have continued to pour money into step pay systems, which compensate employees according to length of service and credentials. “Right now we do is precisely backwards,” said Marcus Winters, a Manhattan Institute senior fellow and author of Teachers Matter. “We have a system that makes it difficult to become a teacher and then we compensate them based on credentials and years in the classroom, versus how effective a teacher actually is.”

“Right now what we do is precisely backwards. We [make] it difficult to become a teacher and then we compensate them based on credentials and years in the classroom, versus how effective a teacher actually is.”

Some states reacted defensively to the initial study, Roza said, but Illinois, Oregon, and other states used the results to begin pinpointing wasted spending and improve funding decisions.

“The higher education institutions reacted very [strongly] the first time we published the study. Many felt threatened at the potential incentive to end teachers’ getting a master’s degree,” she said. “This time around it seems like states have a big push to improve education.”

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

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“The Mad, Mad, Mad World of Climatism

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Michigan House to Consider Parent Trigger

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

If a bill before the Michigan House of Representatives passes, parents whose children attend the state’s worst public schools could insist on one of four potential reforms by signing a petition. Senate Bill 620 would allow a petition with signatures from either 60 percent of the school’s parents or 60 percent of the school’s teachers and 51 percent of its parents to trigger the changes.

Parents could require the school be converted into a public charter school, adopt new teaching strategies, remove the principal and half the teachers, or shut down.

The bill, known nationally as a Parent Trigger law, passed in the Michigan Senate in June. It would apply only to the state’s lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.

“The bill fits with our desire to create more choice and opportunity for parents and students,” said state Sen. Phil Pavlov (R-St. Clair), chairman of the Senate Education Committee. “The thinking with the Parent Trigger is ... to get the schools that have been continually [among the lowest-performing schools in the state and] create a pathway for parents and teachers to reconstitute the school to what the parents and students need.”

Five states currently have Parent Trigger laws. The issue has received national attention since the first Parent Trigger became law in California in 2010 and a Hollywood movie touting the concept, “Won’t Back Down,” was released in theaters September 28.

Criteria for Failure

Restricting the trigger to the lowest 5 percent of schools gives those schools an incentive to improve before parents pull the trigger, Pavlov said.

“I would hope that if you’re on the bottom 5 percent list, you are working very diligently to get off that list,” he said. “It doesn’t require a whole lot of improvement to move from 5 percent to 6 percent.”

“If they are serious about reform, they would not be on the low list,” he added.

If school choice is important to lawmakers, the law shouldn’t be limited to just the lowest 5 percent of schools, said Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

A school just above the 5 percent line would not be subject to the trigger under the proposed bill, giving children who attend it few options despite their school’s also-poor performance, he said.

“You might have parents in schools just above that threshold, or farther above that threshold, that are extremely unsatisfied with their schools.” Van Beek said.

The lowest-performing schools tend to serve lower-income students, and socioeconomic status has a large impact on academic achievement, he noted.

This means states should allow parents at any public school to pull the trigger, he said.

Choice Bests Turnaround

Of states with Parent Trigger laws, none requires the signatures of as many as 60 percent of parents, notes B. Jason Brooks, director of research for the Foundation for Education Reform and Accountability. He says he is skeptical of the option for teachers to trigger reform.

“I don’t see teachers ever voting in favor of pulling the trigger. Maybe they put it in there to make it more palatable to the union, but I think [the union] will see through it,” Brooks said.

The bill’s two federal “school turnaround” options—shifting teaching strategies or replacing staff—have poor track records, Brooks said.

Only 4 percent of schools marked for turnout made progress over a three-year period, he noted, and “progress” could mean merely increasing reading proficiency from 20 to 25 percent of students.

“The best option would be shutting down the school and opening a new charter school in its place that’s not required to have the teachers union,” Brooks said. “If you really want to improve student achievement, you have to include things like vouchers; give the students options to attend other schools.”

Most parents cannot afford private school tuition, he noted, and those schools have the capacity to serve more children through vouchers.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.

Free Online College Textbooks Are Approved in California

By Ashley Bateman

California state university students enrolled in the 50 highest-enrollment general education courses will soon have access to free, open-source textbooks online.

Until Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed Senate Bills 1052 and 1053 in September, California had not approved online textbooks. Once the textbooks arrive, they can save students between $2,000 and $3,000 in the first two years of college, said bill sponsor state Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento).

“Browse through any college bookstore and you’re hit by sticker shock,” he said. “Students [had] to spend more on books than on annual tuition and fees at a California community college.”

SB 1052 requires the state to pursue competitive bids to develop the textbooks. It requires the state Board of Education to create a council by April 1, 2013 consisting of California college faculty to develop the course list, accept bids, and review the results.

SB 1053 creates an online library for the materials.

Books $200 and Up

The recession has hurt families struggling with skyrocketing college costs, Steinberg said. Rental and used textbooks don’t offer the same savings as digital textbooks, which will be free to students in this case.

“The proliferation of ‘new’ editions is driven by publisher profits more than by a need to update content,” Steinberg said.

The council also can approve existing digital textbooks.

K-12 Adoption Slower

Colleges are moving more quickly into digital textbooks than are K-12 schools because the K-12 market is more bureaucratic and many schools do not have enough computers for all students to use simultaneously, said Joshua Khani, a spokesman for CK-12, a nonprofit open-source textbook publisher.

Many K-12 digital textbooks are poorly designed, said David Daniel, a psychology professor at James Madison University.

“There tend to be a lot more distractions in the digital textbooks,” he said. “Publishers are doing everything they can to make sure [digital textbooks] take off, except for doing the research to make sure they’re good learning tools.”

The California law does not require faculty to use the materials.

Transitional Period

Research on the effects of digital learning materials is mixed. E-books offer similar learning results, but reading screens takes longer and tires people faster, Daniel said.

Opinion studies on digital materials often contradict each other. This has happened in every industry hit by the digital revolution, said Andi Sporkin, an Association of American Publishers spokeswoman.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.
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Sequestration Unlikely to Harm Education

By Rachel Sheffield

If mandatory federal budget cuts, called sequestration, take place starting January 2, most federal education programs will be cut by 8.2 percent, according to a new Office of Management and Budget report.

Such cuts could have “destructive impacts,” said Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) in a hearing this summer. Testifying before the committee in July, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asserted: “It would be hard to overstate the devastating impact of sequestration.”

Despite such strong statements, others suggest cuts to federal education spending would in fact benefit both taxpayers and children.

“Federal education programs ... should be abolished with or without sequestration,” said Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. He says the programs have been “a complete waste of money.”

“The federal government has spent roughly $2 trillion on K-12 education since 1965, and test scores near the end of high school are flat in reading and math and have actually declined a little in science over that period,” Coulson said. Federal education spending has taken “$2 trillion out of the productive sector of our economy ... thereby slowing economic growth.”

Per-pupil, inflation-adjusted federal education spending has tripled since the 1970s, notes Lindsey Burke, an education policy fellow for The Heritage Foundation. She says federal education spending “has been on an untenable track for decades,” creating “numerous duplicative and ineffective programs.”

Burke also notes the compliance burden attending federal dollars. For example, a 2006 OMB report found No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, added 7 million man-hours of paperwork for states, at a cost of $141 million.

“Reducing bureaucracy and federal intervention ... could ultimately put more money in the hands of local school districts,” Burke said.

Federal dollars tighten central control without improving education, says Derek Monson, director of public policy for the Sutherland Institute.

“Accepting dependence on federal funding” does not improve education, he said. The best way to strengthen education, he said, is by “trusting and empowering the parents, teachers, and principals who know children the best to do what they want most: help children learn.”

That means allowing options such as digital learning, charter schools, “a tax system that rewards educational self-reliance,” and ending “intrusive” government regulation at all levels, he said.

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

Nearly All Michigan Teachers Still Rated ‘Effective’

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Principals still rate more than 99 percent of Michigan teachers in large districts “effective” or “highly effective” this year despite low student achievement, a recent survey shows.

“It’s very consistent with what we’ve seen from around the country, and it’s very much why we’ve seen this big push to overhaul teacher evaluation requirements,” said Sandi Jacobs, vice president for the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Under a 2011 law, Michigan is implementing new, mandatory teacher evaluations. Beginning in 2013, administrators must include student performance as part of the evaluations. This year, teachers received one of four ratings: highly effective, effective, minimally effective, or ineffective.

The Education Trust-Midwest surveyed schools in Michigan and found 99.6 percent of teachers were rated at least “effective,” and only two in 1,000 were rated “ineffective.”

‘Unfair to Teachers’

“They ended up that way for a couple of reasons,” said David Zemen, director of communications for Education Trust-Midwest. “A lot of these districts that we surveyed have not had a lot of experience putting together a sophisticated teacher evaluation system.”

If school administrators had more detailed descriptions of what each rating meant from the state, Zemen said, they could have evaluated teachers more effectively—and consistently.

“If you’re an administrator or principal, your idea of what ‘effective’ or ‘ineffective’ means might be different,” he said. “That’s unfair to the school district, and that’s unfair to teachers, because they’re all coming up with their own definitions.”

School administrators also should take evaluations more seriously, said Michael Van Beek, director of education policy studies at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. “It’s disappointing,” he said of the findings. “Evaluating teachers accurately is beneficial for everybody involved—teachers included, obviously. It’s evidence that school districts are not meeting that need.”

Teacher evaluations are intended to help teachers improve in the classroom, Zemen said.

“This isn’t about getting tougher on teachers or using this as an opportunity to fire teachers. This is about helping all teachers get better,” he said.

Counting Student Performance

In 2013, student performance will be a mandatory part of teacher evaluations, constituting 30 percent of 2013–14 evaluations, 40 percent in 2014–15, and 50 percent in 2015–16. School administrators will decide whether to use tests or grades to measure student performance, and which tests to use, Van Beek said.

“That will sort of automatically create a better system than the rubber stamp that this one appears to be,” Van Beek said. “That said, those can be done very poorly as well.”

A competitive environment would give administrators greater reason to evaluate teachers more realistically, Van Beek said, making them benefit more for identifying top-performing teachers.

“It’s really important that Ed Trust-Midwest has shown a spotlight on where districts are now, so that we can see how far they have to go to be in line with the new law,” Jacobs said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Education Accounts Are Called ‘Way of the Future’

By Rachel Sheffield

The optimal education system would deposit government K-12 spending in an account for each child that parents control and can split among various offerings or save for college, according to a new report published by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Arizona’s governor first signed education savings accounts into law for disabled students in 2011 and signed a 2012 expansion to include children attending failing schools, foster children, and military dependents. That expansion takes effect in 2013.

“ESAs turn the perspective Americans have had about education for the past 100 years on its head,” said Jonathan Butcher, education director at Arizona’s Goldwater Institute, which helped write Arizona’s ESA law.

Comparison to Vouchers

ESAs expand upon the original voucher concept. Approximately 212,000 children are eligible for vouchers in 2012, and 700,000 or more will be in 2013, according to the foundation and School Reform News estimates.

Funding students directly and giving families both choice and power is the best way to save critical taxpayer dollars and create a custom education for every child, concludes “The Way of the Future: Education Savings Accounts for Every American Family,” authored by Matthew Ladner.

“Americans use debit cards to shop for health care, cars, food, you name it. ESAs’ unique use-restricted debit card gives parents that same ability in education.”

JEFF REED
FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION
FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

“School vouchers allow children to transfer between participating public and private schools, and take the form of a coupon,” Ladner said. He noted parents can use ESAs to pay for private school tuition, online classes, tutors, college courses, and future higher-education expenses.

ESAs represent education’s new direction, says Butcher: “not ‘where’ a child is educated but ‘how.’” Ladner said he expects voucher programs to take the shape of ESAs in the future.

“Just as the first generation of cell phones started as something that could do one thing [and transformed] into iPhones that could do many things, voucher and tax credit programs will evolve into ESA programs,” he said.

How ESAs Work

Arizona parents who choose an ESA sign an agreement that they will provide their child an education in reading, grammar, science, math, and social studies. Parents then receive 90 percent of state per-pupil education funding for their child in a savings account and are issued a debit card that allows them to access the funds for the purposes the law specifies.

“Americans use debit cards to shop for health care, cars, food, you name it,” said Jeff Reed, a Friedman Foundation spokesman. “ESAs’ unique use-restricted debit card gives parents that same ability in education.”

In 2013, approximately 20 percent of Arizona public school students will be eligible for an ESA, according to the Goldwater Institute. Seventy-five students first participated in 2011, and now 400 do.

The Arizona School Boards Association and Arizona Education Association, a union—what Ladner calls “the usual suspects”—have sued to stop the program. In January, a judge upheld it, and the plaintiffs have appealed. Ladner said he expects the program to “grow steadily once the courts settle the case.”

Savings and Innovation

Besides allowing families maximum flexibility to shape their child’s education, ESAs “create powerful incentives for innovation,” the report states.

“Whereas education bureaucrats liberally spend dollars that aren’t theirs, ESAs incent parents to be judicious with their children’s public education funds, as those dollars can be saved for higher education,” explained Reed. “That will bring much-needed cost control to education.”

Ladner says the incentive for parents to “judge education providers by quality and cost” is the “key difference with ESAs and the reason they set the stage for innovation.”

Most importantly, ESAs boost parental involvement and open more possibilities to students, he said.

“Nothing will get parents more involved than giving them full control over the education of their child down to the last penny,” said Ladner. “Properly designed ESA programs will open a world of opportunity for disadvantaged children, giving them the opportunity to thrive in a customized education designed to meet their individual needs. In addition, the opportunity to save for higher education expenses will be a game-changer for many families.”

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

INTERNET INFO


Pennsylvania Legislators Divided Over Charter Update

By Ashley Bateman

The Republican-led Pennsylvania legislature has backed off from a proposal to create an independent charter school authorizer, despite Gov. Tom Corbett’s support.

The state Senate passed a bill by a two-thirds majority that would have required regular financial audits and other beefed-up oversight for the independent public schools, but the House refused to take up the measure before adjourning in October.

In negotiations, legislators split over allowing an independent entity, in addition to local school districts, to sponsor charter schools. Of the 41 states that allow charters, approximately 18 offer viable multiple authorizers to applicants hoping to open the schools, which are fully public but given freedom in matters such as curriculum, budget, and staffing in return for a higher likelihood of closure and tighter oversight.

Legislators agreed to form a commission to study funding inequities, commission annual independent school audits, require state education officials to assess academic performance, and mandate that charters establish teacher evaluation systems, according to a summary Senate Republicans provided.

A few days later, House Republicans could not agree to that, either, so leaders refused to bring the bill up for what would have been a failed vote.

“The best way to have high-quality and strong charter schools is to have strong, fair, and consistent authorizers,” said Bob Fayfich, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS).

Those agreements have yet to be worked into Senate Bill 1115. Pennsylvania charter laws have not been updated for nearly 15 years. In September, hundreds of charter school students and supporters visited the state capitol to lobby for the proposed reforms. Forty-four thousand students sit on Pennsylvania charter school waitlists, according to the PCPCS.

Committee, Not Authorizer

The bill would create a 17-member Charter School Entities Funding Advisory Committee to ensure impartial and transparent funding processes, provide for direct charter funding, create bond provisions, and extend the renewal limit for new charters from three to five years and established schools from five to ten.

Extending those time periods gives financial institutions more confidence when investing in charter school bonds, Fayfich said.

Pennsylvania charters operate on an average of 30 percent less taxpayer funding than traditional public schools, according to PCPCS.

An independent charter authorizer would help address the conflict of interest in having administrators of traditional schools hold veto power over charter schools, Fayfich said. Because charter schools can compete with traditional schools for students, some school districts are reluctant to authorize them.

An independent authorizer would “prevent conflicts of interest for folks administering a charter school,” said Priya Abraham, a senior analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives.

Outdated Funding Formula

“There’s been a lot of outcry that charter schools are getting too much [money]. What charter schools get is about 80 percent of the average per-pupil spending in Pennsylvania.”

The state’s outdated funding formula is the real source of inequity, she said. “The funding formula … doesn’t follow enrollment trends very well,” she said. “Some school districts are growing, so that funding formula isn’t keeping pace.”

Parent Trigger Hold-Up

One cause for the legislation’s limbo is debate over including a Parent Trigger law, Abraham said. House lawmakers generally oppose the idea of letting a majority of parents have the power to require their child’s school be converted to a charter school, while Senators generally approve it.

“Our think the Parent Trigger would be a great option,” she said.

The Parent Trigger debates and independent authorizer provisions, the most liberating for families and local communities, were central in holding up the bill, Abraham said.

“It does boil down to politics a lot,” she said. “Part of the issue is the Senate wants a strong Parent Trigger in the bill. … It’s very unlikely they’re going to get that, at least this session, and that means that charter school reforms aren’t probably all going to go, either.”

Leaders in both chambers said they will not hold votes when lawmakers return mid-November.

Priya Abraham (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Williamsburg, Virginia.

Uranium: CAN YOU DIG IT?

In 1982, the Virginia General Assembly imposed a moratorium on uranium mining. Now there’s renewed interest, thanks to a large uranium deposit in the commonwealth and the continued demand for uranium by the U.S. nuclear industry — which currently imports more than 90 percent of the uranium it needs.

Can mining be safely resumed? Yes. That’s the conclusion of this Policy Brief after examining the environmental and regulatory issues involved.

Uranium Mining in Virginia: Environmental and Safety Considerations
By Jay Lehr Ph.D., science director of The Heartland Institute
42 pages, forthcoming
free download at heartland.org.

PODCAST INFO

Special Ed Can Do More with Less

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

More special-education spending doesn’t necessarily mean a better education for disabled children, a new Fordham Institute study found.

Special-ed funding varies widely from district to district, and if high-spending districts spend the median amount, taxpayers would save $10 billion, the study found.

The report called for an end to federal “maintenance of effort” laws, which require schools not to spend less on special education than they did the previous year.

“[School districts] can save a ton of money and not hurt program quality,” said Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Fordham Institute, who coauthored the report’s introduction. “There’s some specific advice in here for schools about how to do special ed cost-effectively.”

Difficult Conversation

It’s difficult to discuss special-ed funding efficiency, Petrilli said, because it’s often seen as attempting to shortchange special needs students. But cutting costs doesn’t necessarily mean reducing quality.

“This is not third-rail,” Petrilli said. “We are committed to quality, but it’s okay to also be committed to cost-effectiveness.”

Schools can care for special-needs children without endless expense, said Jonathan Butcher, education director of the Goldwater Institute.

“There are better ways to serve these kids than to just pour money into a system that hasn’t changed for 100 years,” Butcher said. “There are ways to give parents more options, to give kids an experience that is more tailored to what they need.”

‘Alternate Universes’

The study followed ten pairs of school districts with similar demographics: socioeconomic populations, sizes, and percentages of special-needs students.

“In each pair, one district’s special-needs students achieved more learning than the other district’s students … while spending the same or less than the district with lesser results,” the study said.

The biggest surprise, Petrilli said, was how much the expensive districts spent above the median and the huge variations in costs between districts.

“You see differences for regular education: class sizes, for example. Some school districts are wealthier, or whatever,” he said. “Those differences are dwarfed when it comes to special education. It’s like the school districts are living in alternate universes.”

Different approaches to special ed account for much of the variation, he said. A co-teaching program is “incredibly expensive,” he noted. In some districts, special-ed teams prescribe more speech therapy, and thus will employ more speech therapists, he said. He chalked this up to “tradition and habit.”

Federal Regulations Wasteful

Because more spending doesn’t mean better education, the study calls for an end to federal “maintenance of effort” requirements. These limit schools’ and lawmakers’ ability to respond to individual student needs, Butcher said.

“That’s just not going to get us anywhere except to more spending,” he said. “They’re a burden on taxpayers.”

Tom Parrish, managing research scientist for the American Institutes for Research, agrees, saying local districts should work toward special-ed efficiency by keeping costs stable while improving their programs, he said.

“The report author] was saying there’s no reason why special ed should be held harmless while other programs aren’t, and I understand that sentiment,” he said. “If federal legislators want to take this on, fine, but I don’t see this as a very likely path.”

If the “maintenance of effort” requirement doesn’t change, Parrish said, districts should focus on producing more without increasing expenditures.

State lawmakers could financially incentivize programs that net higher-than-predicted results, he suggested.

Mislabeling Kids

Students without learning disabilities are often labeled special-needs when traditional schools serve them poorly, Butcher said.

“It is not uncommon for state policymakers, those that are interested in a choice program, to start with attempting to pass a program specifically for kids with special needs. I think they start there because, politically speaking, there tends to be less opposition,” Butcher said.

“Even the traditional schools recognize that students with special needs often need more than they can offer, and they need something very specific,” he said. “I think the downside of that is that often it ends there. You’ll pass a voucher program for students with special needs, then not follow up the next year.”

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.

Idahoans Challenge Fees for ‘Free’ Public Schools

By Vicki Alger

More than 280,000 students and their guardians are suing Idaho and all its school districts for charging kids fees to attend “free, common schools.”

Former Idaho superintendent Russ Joki is leading the charge. He had to pay $90 to enroll his two granddaughters in kindergarten in 2012 and $85 to register his grandson at Meridian High School.

Anecdotal evidence suggests this practice is increasing nationwide, but precise figures are hard to come by, says Joshua Dunn, a political science professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

The Wall Street Journal documented districts in Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, and Ohio charging fees for registration, lockers, student identification cards, technology access, graduation, and certain courses.

If the lawsuit succeeds, school districts will have to refund or the state must appropriate money to pay the previous year’s fees, an estimated $2 million.

“Some school districts, not only in Idaho but across the country, instead of cutting back in the light of economic conditions, are just finding new ways to squeeze money out of Idaho school patrons,” said Wayne Hoffman, executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation. “No amount of money is ever enough.”

Vicki Alger, Ph.D. (heartlander@vickialger.com) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.

“I would say the most important thing is that it’s a visible way to get lawmakers to respond to individual student needs,” Butcher said.

That’s just not going to get us anywhere except to more spending,” he said. “They’re a burden on taxpayers.”

Tom Parrish, managing research scientist for the American Institutes for Research, agrees, saying local districts should work toward special-ed efficiency by keeping costs stable while improving their programs, he said.

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Parents Influence Education More than Capital

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Parents have more power over their child’s education than schools do, a new study shows.

Researchers from three universities compared social capital at home and school and found Family social capital better predicted academic excellence.

Social capital is “the connections you have with other people” and how those connections benefit you, said Mikaela Dufur, study coauthor and an associate professor of Sociology at Brigham Young University.

For example, she said, “Two parents, if they’re standing on the sidelines at a soccer game for the kids and talking about school, they can talk about which kindergarten teacher is better.”

The information, obligations, and norms adults pass along influence children for the better—and family connections matter more than teacher connections, the study showed.

The research team plans to study how schools can substitute for the social capital students lack, Dufur said. Family capital is so important it’s unlikely schools could replace it one-to-one, she said, but further research could help schools do better.

Shifting Reform Efforts

The study should remind education reformers to keep families in mind, said Bill Jackson, CEO of the school information network GreatSchools.

“Don’t forget the family,” he said. Reformers could shift some of their focus to parent involvement, he said.

“We need to invent new kinds of models to engage and support and inform parents,” he said. “Social entrepreneurs and philanthropic investors ought to be looking out for these kinds of opportunities.”

What Teachers Can Do

To improve home capital, teachers can invite parents in, Dufur said.

“If teachers ask parents to do things, [parents] will usually do it,” Jackson said. “They may not want to set up for the school play, but if you say, ‘I really need you to read to your child at least five nights this week,’ parents will often do it.”

Brandi Brauker, a fine arts teacher at Mount Pleasant Public Schools in Michigan, said she’s seen a strong correlation between parent involvement and student achievement.

“I try to get parents involved as much as possible ... because [children’s] parents know them a lot better than I do,” she said.

Some of her students have difficult family situations, and she tries to help fill their emotional needs in such cases.

“I do see a lot of those kids. I get kids crying in my office because of what’s happened [at home]. I try to be there as a parental figure for them, if they don’t have anybody like that in their lives,” she said.

Some students call her “mom” a lot, she said.

The study’s findings shouldn’t cause policymakers to make teachers parent, Dufur said.

Parents: Show Up

Parents who want their children to excel academically should be involved in their children’s education.

“A lot of this isn’t advanced, in terms of what parents can do,” Jackson said. “Be involved in your child’s life.”

Parents can build connections with “key people in their kids’ lives,” Dufur said, such as coaches, advisors, people at church, and parents of their children’s friends.

“If all the adults are talking together and on the same page, those norms get reinforced and they affect the students’ behaviors,” she said.

Children will value education if they think their parents do, said Toby Parcel, study coauthor and North Carolina State University sociology professor.

“Anything parents can do to promote discussion about what goes on at school—checking students’ homework, attending school meetings—when par-

New Kentucky Report Targets Wasted Education Spending

By Jim Waters

A new report on efficiency in public school spending further dispels the myth that poverty prevents students from preparing for college and careers and indicates taxpayers often don’t get much bang for their education bucks.

“Bang for the Buck 2012” reveals Kentucky’s school spending system is “out of whack” with the state average.

Innes generated a Score-Spending Index (SSI) where the average school system performing at state average for efficiency gets an SSI of zero. Districts above average get positive scores, and those below the state average score negatively.

Owsley County School District had the worst SSI in Kentucky, at -40.57. Owsley spent a whopping $16,000 per pupil—$6,000 more than the state average—yet students netted, on average, only a 16.8 ACT composite score, two full points below the state average.

Beechwood Independent Schools, on the other hand, is nearly 53 percent more efficient than the average Kentucky district. It spends $1,166 less than the state average.

Research shows providing a quality education “is not just throwing more tax dollars, but in making better uses of available resources,” Innes said.

The institute recognized four districts—Graves, LaRue and Mason counties, and Eminence Independent—at a news conference for “doing notably better than average at getting kids ready for college and careers at an efficient cost,” Innes said.

Interviews with those districts’ superintendents revealed common priorities: relationships, technology, and retention.

Teachers in Mason County visit every child’s home to build rapport. Grave County has a Bring Your Own Device policy to encourage students to use technology at school. Mason County has an initiative to give all students iPads. Eminence Independent district has a bus equipped with wi-fi so dual-credit students can use while commuting.

Graves County has targeted dropouts,
Schools

By Mary Petrides Tillotson

Kristine Paulsen, who led a school resource room on a Michigan Indian reservation, once purchased a computer game to help fifth- and sixth-grade students learn about American history.

It didn’t last long.

“I realized that [students] were getting points for killing Indian kids,” she said. “I was horrified and took it back.”

Then Paulsen tried another approach, adopted from an anti-obesity program. She created Take the Challenge – Take Charge, which culminates in a screen-free week, when students turn off their cell phones, TVs, video games, and computers.

Older students lead up to that week by using technology to research its effects.

The first year, researchers noted a 55 percent reduction in aggressive behavior on the playground during the screen-free week. A local youth correctional center implemented the program for middle and high school-age students and saw a 46 percent reduction in aggressive incidents, Paulsen said.

In elementary schools, students scored higher on state assessments when screen-free week coincided with testing week.

“We were kind of shocked,” Paulsen said.

Watching the Monitors

Researchers say technology’s effect on education depends on how it’s used.

“It’s not that technology is bad. [Students] need to be in control and not spend too much time on it,” Paulsen said. “The more TV you watch, you don’t do as well academically and physically.”

Young children are most vulnerable to media, said Lauren Rubenzahl, program coordinator at the Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children’s Hospital. What toddlers most need is to interact with other people and physical objects, not screens, she said.

At Waldorf private schools, students don’t use computers in class until middle or high school, and home screen use is discouraged.

Waldorf schools are not against technology but rather emphasize “the right tool for the right time,” said Patrice Maynard, leader of outreach for the Association of Waldorf Schools.

“My students at Waldorf schools learn the math that makes computers possible before they use computers,” she said. “They’re not dependent on the machine to do the work … and they can avoid an addiction or dependency.”

Technological Distraction

While some schools encourage laptop use, these may distract students during class. Rubenzahl compared the situation to a student hiding a comic book inside a textbook.

“I don’t know that it’s anything new for kids to be looking for distraction in that way, if the classroom setting is not fully engaging them,” she said.

Technology can sideline important activities. For example, children may send text messages instead of sleeping or watch television when eating meals, Rubenzahl said.

Screens can distract even if people aren’t using them directly, she said.

“Our brains respond to things changing in our environment. With a screen flickering in a restaurant, it’s really hard not to keep looking at it,” she said.

Critical Thinking about Technology

When media exposes children to violence, they can become desensitized, frightened, and more aggressive, Rubenzahl said. How much so depends on the child.

“All media are educational,” she said. “It’s just what they teach that varies.”

Many parents “have no idea” how media may hurt their children, or they feel awkward approaching a topic where younger people dominate, Paulsen said. But research shows parents who limit screen time and content “have a lot of influence on their children,” she said.

Attentive parents can help their children choose wisely, Paulsen said.

Parents can start productive conversations by assuming children will be the how-to experts, but not the self-control experts, Rubenzahl said.

“A teenager could say, ‘You could do this on Facebook,’ but a parent could bring the fully developed brain in,” she said. “They can say, ‘How do you decide what to post on Facebook?’ and talk through it with them.”

A Neutral Tool

The positive or negative impact of media on kids depends on what kind they use, how often, and its context, Rubenzahl said.

Programs designed for children often do children less good than advertised.

“Media are not inherently bad or good. As with every other tool … it’s a matter of how you use it,” Rubenzahl said.

Mary Petrides Tillotson (mary.c.tillotson@gmail.com), a former Michigan reporter, now writes from Front Royal, Virginia.
Nevada Voters Reject Schools Tax

By Kyle Gillis

Nevada voters in the nation’s fifth-largest school district rejected a 21-cent property tax increase school trustees said was necessary to repair and modernize 41 schools.

Clark County School District’s plans for spending the tax increase money frequently and significantly differed from its public talking points. Voters apparently noticed: It was the first time since the 1980s they had rejected a school-repair-labeled tax increase the district requested.

“The district needs to repair or replace critical infrastructure,” said district officials in a pre-election press release, “such as air conditioning, heating, plumbing, electrical and security systems at some of CCSD’s older schools.”

The money would have gone for upgrades at 18 schools, replacing six schools’ heating and cooling systems, plumbing backups, and unsafe floors. All the proposals combined, however, would have affected just 13 percent of the district’s 311,000 students.

Doubling Gyms

The proposed initiative included constructing gyms at high schools that already have gyms—while other schools, with more pressing needs, went lacking.

The proposed initiative included constructing gyms at high schools that already have gyms. These were projected to cost $11.9 million each.

For comparison, the University of Nevada Las-Vegas’s massive new Mendenhall Center, a 38,000-square-foot state-of-the-art gymnasium comparable with facilities at Duke and Louisville, cost $11.6 million.

Heating, Air Neglected

Yet schools such as Pat Diskin Elementary—where in September a failure of its heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) system forced the school’s closure—did not make the list.

Diskin, built in 1973, was not among the seven schools named on the district “needs” list for complete HVAC-system replacement. All of those schools were built in the early 1990s.

For example, Grant Sawyer Middle School, built in 1993, received a $10 million HVAC overhaul just four years ago, yet was on the district’s “needs” list to receive an $8.8 million replacement. And Greenspun Middle School, built in 1991, received a $1.9 million HVAC upgrade in 2009, according to CCSD records, yet it too was slated for an $8.8 million upgrade.

When the Clark County Debt Management Committee met on June 7, other schools were cited as in dire need of repair. One was Lois Craig Elementary in North Las Vegas. It was not on the “needs” list.

Maintenance Deferred, Luxuries Bought

School district staff “have deferred maintenance and deferred maintenance to where they go out to Lois Craig and take duct tape to hold up conduits for refrigeration and put plywood to hold up the damn steps to the portables,” County Commissioner Tom Collins told committee colleagues.

Collins, who won reelection handily in November, was influential in adding a second gym for Moapa Valley High to the “needs” list.

West Prep has 25 portable buildings for 400 elementary school students, and school advocates have been trying to get a new building since 2006. West Prep wasn’t included in previous improvement plans but was finally listed to receive a $12 million “complete conversion.”

CCSD estimates converting a 400-student elementary school will cost only $100,000 more than a new high school gym.

Parents, Students Complained

Parents and students brought Gibson Middle School to the board’s attention. During a February 24, 2011 meeting, students complained of roof leaks, plumbing backups, and unsafe floors.

“I bet you don’t have to deal with old plumbing in your building,” a Gibson student told the board during the meeting, a reference to the district’s $14.5 million administrative building, frequently referred to as “The Pink Palace.” It has tiled showers, marble floors, and remote-controlled curtains.

“From the outside, things might look functional, but you never really know what’s going on, on the inside,” said Trustee Lorraine Alderman in May. “With a lot of these older buildings … the walls are still sturdy but the air conditioning’s not working, the roofs need replacing.”

Paying Twice

Basic High School, which has received $28 million in renovations since 1994, including a $2.3 million gym addition, was targeted to receive another $27 million from the new tax. By comparison, five elementary schools slated for “major modernizations” under the new tax would each have received less than the cost of the planned gyms.

Many schools on the list were scheduled to receive money to repair problems supposedly fixed with previous bond money. Thirteen schools were listed as needing “electrical system upgrades” ranging from $700,000 to $2.1 million. Ten had already received money for “electrical upgrades” from previous capital improvement plans.

Beckley Elementary received a total of $421,665 in electrical upgrades from the 1994 and 1998 plans, and McWilliams Elementary received $257,961 from the 1998 plan. Culley Elementary received $604,935 from the 1998 plan, but was listed to receive another $700,000 from the proposed 2012 plan.

The district launched a “multimedia advertising campaign” consisting of 250,000 mailers, several community meetings, and door-to-door efforts promoting the tax increase.

The tax initiative would have raised property taxes another 21 cents per $100 of assessed valuation.

Kyle Gillis is a reporter for Nevada Journal, a publication of the Nevada Policy Research Institute. Nevada Journal’s Karen Gray contributed to this report, which is adapted from Nevada Journal with permission.
By Vicki Alger

Idaho voters overturned three education reform laws in November’s elections, sending Republican lawmakers back to the drawing board over online learning, teacher evaluations, and merit pay.

Gov. Butch Otter and state Superintendent Tom Luna made the laws, which they called Students Come First, a policy centerpiece for the past two years. Idaho’s legislature in 2011 passed the three laws limiting collective bargaining, implementing teacher performance bonuses, and requiring online learning.

“Our kids will continue to lag their peers elsewhere,” said Idaho Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman in the wake of the law’s defeat.

The laws’ chief opponent was the Idaho Education Association, a National Education Association-affiliated union. The NEA donated $1.1 million to the campaign. Opponents outspent proponents by approximately $3.6 million to $2.8 million, according to the latest Secretary of State filings.

Many Idahoans voted for Republican candidates but against this signature policy of prominent state Republicans. Sixty-five percent of Idaho voters chose Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Voters told the Idaho Statesman they were suspicious of forced technology and heavy emphases on testing. Some said parents, not the state, should buy children laptops, others that teachers unions have “too much power.”

Reform Trifecta

Proposition 1 concerned the law limiting union negotiations with local school boards to one year and requiring a union to prove it represents at least 50 percent of employees. It required schools to reduce staff according to teacher qualifications, instead of seniority, prohibited closed-door negotiations, and required parent input on staff evaluations. Fifty-seven percent of voters rejected it.

Proposition 2 concerned a performance pay system that made teachers eligible for bonuses worth up to $8,000. Fifty-eight percent of voters rejected it.

Proposition 3 concerned the law requiring school districts to post annual budgets and labor contracts online and the state education department to post online a fiscal report card for each district. It also let postsecondary institutions operate charter schools, required all high school students to take two online classes, and promised to provide every high school student a laptop. Sixty-seven percent of voters rejected it.

“The union [is] afraid that technology will lead to the unions no longer [having] a stranglehold on the availability of education content.”

WAYNE HOFFMAN, PRESIDENT
IDAHO FREEDOM FOUNDATION

By Wide Margins, Voters Dump 3 Idaho Reform Laws

New Way of Business

The Students Come First reforms, introduced by state Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde (R-Coeur d’Alene), put Idaho on a twenty-first century trajectory, said Melissa McGrath, a spokeswoman for the Idaho Department of Education. Because the reforms were so new and comprehensive, “it is natural that people would have lots of questions,” she said.

“The repeal will send our education system backwards,” she said.

The Idaho Education Association wrote its members in February that opponents should focus on Proposition 3 because “it’s easier to get the public riled up about laptops and online classes than contract issues.”

“The union wants Idaho parents to believe that children will be given smashed laptops to replace their fired teachers,” Hoffman said. “And they’re afraid that technology will lead to the unions no longer [having] a stranglehold on the availability of education content.”

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Arizona’s Education Savings Accounts Turn Two

By Jonathan Butcher

This fall, Arizona’s unique system of education savings accounts turned two years old. After beginning quietly with 75 children in September 2011, the program enrolled more than 400 students this school year.

In 2013–14, 200,000 children will be eligible for the program. As the accounts, called Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, draw more attention and enrollees, lawmakers will need to pay attention to how to improve them and prevent fraud.

Qualifying families use ESAs for their child’s education. The state deposits the student’s portion of state education funding into the account, and parents can use the money for a host of education expenses, including private school tuition, tutoring, educational therapy, and college savings plans. The accounts are similar to health savings accounts for medical expenses, except deposits come exclusively from the state.

Gov. Jan Brewer (R) signed the original law, directed toward special-needs students, in 2011. In 2012 she signed a law expanding eligibility to students from failing schools, active-duty military families, and those adopted out of the state foster care system.

Data regarding the accounts’ effectiveness are already issuing from two critical areas: how parents are spending the money and how to prevent fraud and abuse in the program.

How Parents Use ESAs

Families with an education savings account receive debit cards, just as anyone would after opening a checking account. The accounts are distinct from vouchers, which are certificates or checks the state sends to private schools on behalf of parents. With the savings accounts, parents have the flexibility to make purchases online, such as buying textbooks from retailers such as Amazon, for example, or to pay school tuition.

Just three months into the 2011 school year, the Arizona Department of Education reported parents used ESAs to pay more than $182,000 in tuition, $2,500 on textbooks, $10,000 to educational therapists, and $3,200 for tutoring services. In addition, $600 was deposited in college savings plans.

Those expenses are a remarkable departure from the way families use vouchers or tax credit scholarships. Once students from failing schools begin to use ESAs, it is likely parents will continue to use the accounts for different alternatives such as online classes and tutoring, in addition to private school tuition or homeschooling curricula.

Parents have even created their own “buyer’s guide” message board on Yahoo, com where parents ask questions such as, “What reading programs does the International Dyslexia Society recommend?” or “How do I transfer to an online virtual school?” The site allows families to exchange ideas, find answers to common questions, and develop community knowledge.

State Oversight

The state department of education audits the accounts quarterly and plans to complete the first annual audit before the end of 2012. Each quarter, parents must send receipts to the department for what they have purchased using account money, and department staff cull through the records to make sure money goes only for educational expenses.

Although this model is not scalable because staff are bound to be overwhelmed as more children use the accounts, the department already has identified misuses of the funds and addressed those with families. In most cases, parents simply didn’t understand the rules. One way to improve the process would be outsourcing audit responsibilities and conducting random reviews. The department also could use common mistakes to produce an online factsheet parents can reference.

Lawmakers can learn from the mistakes administrators made in their oversight of programs such as food stamps and Medicaid that made these systems susceptible to abuse. For example, posting a telephone hotline for fraud reporting would be a good first step.

Education savings accounts radically rethink education, and change can be uncomfortable in a school system that has seen little in the way of innovation for more than a century.

Kentucky Offers Charter School Lookalikes

By Joy Pullmann

Although Kentucky is one of just nine states that do not offer charter schools, a new 2012 law does allow school districts the freedom to operate similarly to the autonomous public schools.

“We want schools of innovation not to look like anything we’ve ever seen before, at least in public schools in Kentucky,” said David Cook, the Kentucky Department of Education’s director of innovation.

School districts can ask the state Department of Education to designate them a “District of Innovation,” which would free them from any state policy except civil rights regulations, minimum graduation requirements, and academic standards. Districts could restructure around competency-based learning—which awards credit according to mastery, rather than time logged—extending the school day and year, and learning outside school walls.

The program will begin in 2013–14.

Districts could apply to the state to operate all their schools under the new system, or designate a few. At least 70 percent of the district’s teachers must approve a district’s proposal.

State education officials said they expect five to ten of the state’s 174 districts to apply in the program’s first year.

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Lots of people talk about school reform, but how much change actually occurs?

Here’s an idea that actually has promise: the Parent Trigger. If a majority of parents and guardians of children at a particular school sign a petition demanding reform, then the school district must do as the parents ask.

This Policy Brief looks at the Parent Trigger laws already in place and how they have worked in practice, and it offers suggestions to parents and elected officials for crafting their own legislation.

The Parent Trigger: A Model for Transforming Education
By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann
October 2012, 49pp., $7.95
free download at www.heartland.org
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