Colorado District to Opt Most Kids Out of Common Core Tests — 3
Unions Spend Big on Midterm Elections — 14
KIPP Announces Ambitious Enrollment Plan for Los Angeles — 13

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L.A. Superintendent Deasy’s Exit Facilitated by Teachers Unions

By Heather Kays

John Deasy has stepped down after more than three years as Los Angeles schools’ superintendent and is facing mixed reviews.

Like many reform-minded superintendents, Deasy had a lot of enemies, namely the teachers unions.

Amid criticism for two poorly executed technology rollouts, Deasy’s accomplishments have been somewhat overshadowed. Student test scores, graduation rates, and attendance improved since he took over in 2011. A new classroom breakfast program fed 200,000 students. But Deasy fought for big changes, often butting heads with United Teachers Los Angeles and the school board.

Deasy’s policies involved teacher evaluations, stricter requirements for gaining tenure, and administrative solutions to improve struggling schools, such as creating charter schools and completely replacing staff in some cases.

Reformers’ ‘Short Shelf-Life’
The fate of his policies and what his legacy will

DEASY, p. 4

Mich. Teacher, Veteran Fights Union and Wins

By Chris Neal

Adam Neuman, a teacher at Brighton High School in Michigan, scored a right-to-work victory after challenging the state teachers union.

Neuman, a war veteran who served in Afghanistan, found himself disagreeing with some of the Michigan Education Association’s (MEA) antiwar activism. When the proper time came, he decided to opt out of the union in accordance with state law.

“In recent years, I became much more vigilant in who/what issues the MEA and [National Education Association] were supporting,” Neuman recounts. “I came to realize that many of the issues and candidates that they supported did
CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The 4th International Conference on School Choice & Reform (ICSCR) will bring together researchers, policy specialists, practitioners, and organization leaders from around the world who are interested in school choice opportunities and policies that recognize the central roles of parents and teachers. Understanding that school choice functions best within a policy framework that seeks to guarantee equity and effective education, while safeguarding school autonomy, the conference welcomes presentations that are critical as well as supportive of school choice. Please visit the event website to register and/or to submit your proposal for a presentation.

The ICSCR is sponsored by the Journal of School Choice and hosted by the National Institute for Educational Options at Nova Southeastern University and is in cooperation with the European Association for Education Law and Policy. ICSCR brings together individuals with varied experience and responsibilities who are concerned with educational freedom in its various forms: (1) the freedom of families to choose schools that they think are best for their children, (2) the freedom of educators to create and maintain distinctive schools, and also (3) the sensitive role of government in promoting such freedoms while ensuring that every child receives an adequate education.

Deliberately designed for around 120 participants to encourage discussion, ICSCR seeks to stimulate new thinking and foster international collaboration. By drawing representatives of governments into that discussion, ICSCR encourages development and implementation of effective and equitable policies.

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Researchers, scholars, K-12 policy specialists, and practitioners interested in research related to school choice and reform of primary and secondary education.

Co-Chairs: Charles L. Glenn (Boston University) and Priscilla Wohlstetter (Teachers College, Columbia)

Event website: regonline.com/icscr15 Read research papers, view photos and listen to a plenary session podcast on Common Core Standards presented at the last event: or fischlerschool.nova.edu/nieo
Colorado District Removes Most Students from Common Core Testing

By Chris Neal

Colorado Springs School District 11 struck a blow against Common Core State Standards by voting to remove the majority of its students from the new, mandatory standardized tests.

District 11, which has nearly 30,000 students, announced it plans to randomly test the minimum number of students needed to meet the federal requirement, allowing the rest to opt out.

The school board passed the resolution unanimously, and as a result, only a small number of students will have to take the tests. The resolution also allows parents to opt their child out if randomly assigned.

Teaching Core Still Required

This measure is a transitional compromise while the district looks for new ways to test students’ progress, according to the school board. Supporters of the resolution hope teachers will have more freedom and flexibility to work in the classroom without the need to put emphasis first and foremost on teaching to the test.

Author and education expert Jesse Rhodes, an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, says he is not entirely convinced this resolution marks a significant change.

“At first blush, this would seem to address parents’ frustration with the increasing influence of standardized testing in schools,” said Rhodes. “In reality, however, it wouldn’t: because a randomly selected group of students would still have to take the tests, and teachers would have to continue to teach Common Core-related materials to all students to ensure that any randomly selected sample would do well.”

Neal McCluskey, an education research fellow at the Cato Institute, echoed that worry, noting although the new policy will make many students and parents happy, it will not allow for more innovative teaching.

“I think they went with that because it kept with the spirit of testing—assess how the district is doing—without burdening every student and school with onerous, disruptive testing,” McCluskey said.

“It’s not at all surprising that research suggests that the more state and federally mandated testing there is, the more distanced parents feel from their local schools. It’s because they are more distanced; they have less input over what is taught, how it is taught, how it is assessed, and what it means for their children.”

Fear of Punishment

Colorado parent Anita Stapleton, a grassroots activist with Colorado Against Common Core, says she is furious Colorado “sold out” to the federal government even though its unique state constitution allows for local control. Like many parents, she fears an uphill battle with Common Core, partly because parents believe they will be punished for taking a stand against standardized tests.

“The Colorado Department of Education has been lying to our district about the state statute that mandates the testing, telling districts they don’t have the parental refusal right,” said Stapleton, who encourages other parents to refuse to let their kids take standardized tests. “An opt-out option is better, because then the schools have to develop alternative testing models. Refusing to test is a form of civil disobedience, and parents are being punished for this.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
“Deasy will be remembered as someone who tried to fight the teacher unions but lost out to a more powerful opponent.”
LANCE IZUMI, PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Teachers Unions Facilitate L.A. Superintendent’s Exit

Continued from page 1

be remain unclear.

“Think it depends on who does the remembering,” said Larry Sand, a retired teacher, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, and a frequent contributor to School Reform News. Sand said Deasy’s departure was really only a matter of time.

“The more reform-minded a superintendent, the more likely they are to have a short shelf life,” said Sand. “They are sure to run afoul of the unions and school boards, which the unions have a lot of influence on.”

Sand says the union made a strong case against Deasy by stating teachers had not received a raise in six years, claiming testing was overtaking teaching, and that Deasy was too friendly with “billionaire outsiders.” The strategy worked, leading the union members to deliver a vote of no confidence by a margin of 10 to one.

Dispute Over Accountability

“Deasy’s resignation is a reflection that this top-down, my way or the highway, competition-driven, test-score-fixated way of doing schooling is not working,” Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), said in an interview according to the Los Angeles Times. “The John Wayne strategy does not work.”

School choice advocates expressed disappointment with the unions’ campaign against Deasy.

“People want accountability within the government education system,” said Lance Izumi, senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute. “The Vergara [court] decision showed that far from having a ‘John Wayne’ system of accountability, as AFT boss Randi Weingarten claims, the reality is that the system is more like Tammany Hall, with jobs for incompetent and even criminal adults far outweighing raising the learning and achievement of children in the classroom.”

Sand agreed the Vergara decision, which changed teacher tenure and other job protections in California, shows the unions have been inflexible.

“Randi is very good talking about collaboration, but typically what the union wants and what benefits kids are two different things,” said Sand. “Case in point: the Vergara case. The unions don’t want to give an inch on tenure, seniority, or the dismissal statutes.”

“Deasy will be remembered as some one who tried to fight the teacher unions but lost out to a more powerful opponent,” said Izumi. “Some of his initiatives were not well thought out, such as giving out iPads to all students, and that detracted from his record. However, his testimony in the Vergara case, explaining how hard and expensive it is to fire a single ineffective teacher, was critical in setting the stage for the judge’s ultimate ruling that the state’s teacher tenure and dismissal laws created classroom disasters that ‘shocked the conscience.”

Other Reformers Ousted

Deasy is not the first reform-minded superintendent to suffer the wrath of a teachers union and school board. In Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Texas, and other places across the country, superintendents have faced pressures including teacher strikes, lawsuits, and losing their jobs.

Sand says any superintendent who is a reformer will ensure pushback from teachers unions. He says the best and most poignant example was the AFT’s case against Deasy in Washington, DC, eventually succeeding.

Izumi continued. “The board changes to a pro-union, anti-reform majority, and the superintendent is then ousted or resigns, like Deasy. This is why reform superintendents often last only a few years.

“Deasy supported charter schools and wider public school choice,” Izumi explained. “The unions cannot abide giving children an escape ticket out of the regular public school monopoly, so that’s another big reason Deasy was such a target. I hope that Deasy, in light of his treatment at the hands of the unions, uses his newfound freedom to fight to give all parents and their children the opportunity to choose the public or private school that best meets their needs.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow of The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
Jindal’s Controversial Teacher Tenure Law Upheld

By Tom Gantert

A two-year battle in Louisiana over procedures for removing ineffective school teachers ended October 15 when the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld the state’s efforts to change tenure laws.

Louisiana was one of several states around the country addressing how to deal with the difficulty of terminating poor teachers. Teacher tenure laws were a major issue in California, New Jersey, and New York in 2014. Michigan changed its tenure laws in 2011.

Kevin Kane, president of the Louisiana think tank Pelican Institute for Public Policy, says New Orleans struggled for years with what to do about low-performing teachers. It was very difficult to get rid of them, he says.

“Now, if teachers are not performing, they lose their tenure and you can get rid of them,” he said. “It’s tying tenure to performance, which I think makes a lot of sense.”

New Tenure System

Under the new law, known as Act 1, a teacher in Louisiana loses tenure if he or she receives a performance rating of “ineffective.” The teacher can then choose to go through a grievance procedure to regain tenure. A teacher can also reacquire tenure by being rated “highly effective” five times in a six-year period.

A key provision was the appeal process for teachers who want to fight loss of tenure. The new law allows a review hearing before a disciplinary hearing officer. That hearing officer can reverse the superintendent’s decision to terminate and restore the teacher to duty. The hearing officer must be a mediator approved by the American Arbitration Association or Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, an attorney, or a retired member of the judiciary.

The law gives the school board the right to challenge in court the arbitrator’s ruling if the arbitrator finds the superintendent’s actions were “arbitrary or capricious.”

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) union initially expressed concern about the tenure hearing. The union states the law originally called for a three-person panel that would make a recommendation to the superintendent.

“In other words, the three-person panel conducts nothing more than a ‘feel good’ event, and then makes a recommendation that the superintendent (who has already terminated the teacher anyway) has the right to reject,” wrote Larry Samuel, general counsel for LFT. “The outcome is that this law is a farce. It is a sham. It is an insult to every educator in this state.”

But Barry Landry, director of public affairs for the Louisiana Department of Education, says the teacher groups and legislators worked out their concerns.

Union Expresses Satisfaction

The union and legislators worked together during the 2014 legislative session to address concerns by adopting Act 570, effective June 9.

Now, an independent arbitrator will hear discipline and dismissal cases, not a three-person panel.

“Act 570 should serve as a model for future cooperation between educators and lawmakers,” the union wrote in a statement posted on its website.

“The legislation gives principals and superintendents freedom from politics to do the right thing for children, to honor effective teaching, and to make common-sense decisions about those who serve our children in the classroom,” Landry said in an email to School Reform News.

“Our children are as smart and capable as any in America. They deserve an education system in which adults make decisions based on merit and high expectations,” he continued.

Union Sought to Block Law

The debate on tenure was brought before the Louisiana Supreme Court because the union claimed bundling several education issues under one bill violated the “single object requirement” for legislative bills in New Orleans.

Kane said education reform was a big issue for Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) in 2012.

“Rather than a dozen separate bills to steer through [the] legislative process, they put up a couple of big bills,” Kane said.

The supreme court ruled the law didn’t violate the state constitution because there was a “natural connection” among all the provisions that dealt with improving elementary and secondary education through tenure reform and performance standards of teachers.

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Michigan Teacher, Veteran Fights Union and Wins

Continued from page 1

not reflect my values, and some issues had nothing to do with education. When the right to work legislation passed, I made up my mind to leave the union. However, I had to wait until the current contract expired to do so."

Just the Beginning
Neuman thought that would be the end of it. However, MEA insisted Neuman still had to pay dues for release time, a union procedure that grants public employees taxpayer money while they are doing work for their unions.

“I was initially quite frustrated that I was going to be expected to still pay for the union president’s release time. I had opted out of the union, but heard I was still going to be required to do so because I was still considered a member of the ‘bargaining unit.’ A couple of sympathetic staff members informed me they had heard this,” Neuman said.

Neuman brought up the issue with the school administration, and the administrators wanted nothing to do with it, he recalls.

“I went to the building principal and was referred to the superintendent of the district. He in turn said that this was a union dues issue, and that I would need to contact a union representative, as the district did not handle those things. He suggested a Mr. Bill Bell, the area MEA director,” he said.

“The next day, before I initiated contact, I actually received an email from Bill Bell, and in it he confirmed that because I was still a member of the ‘bargaining unit,’ I would indeed be required to pay the $80.00 for the president’s release time,” Neuman said.

“I then decided not to accept the situation and started to look for assistance outside the district.”

Preparing to Fight
Neuman contacted the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, as he was aware of its pro-reform efforts in other districts in Michigan. Upon hearing his case, Mackinac was eager to support Neuman.

“We took up this case because it was a clear violation of Adam’s freedoms under Michigan’s right-to-work law,” said Mackinac Center spokesman Ted O’Neil.

“This case is important because we’ve found several other contracts in school districts around the state that contain language that raises serious policy and legal questions,” O’Neil said. “The Michigan Education Association and its affiliates have tried in many ways to sidestep Michigan’s new worker freedom law, and the Mackinac Center Legal Foundation will continue to provide pro bono services to teachers and other school employees harmed by those actions.”

Union Called Suit ‘Baseless’
The legal team found the contract included legal language that conflicted with Michigan’s right-to-work law, which stipulates the expenses for release time fall solely on those who choose to stay in the union.

“During the initial days after the suit was filed, the union president and the superintendent claimed that there was no basis to the lawsuit, that they had never intended to collect this money from those who opted out,” said Neuman. “The union also warned that the Mackinac Center and I ‘had better check our facts’ before filing ‘baseless’ lawsuits.”

Although the union protested the lawsuit at first, once it realized the contract did in fact contain illegal language, it quickly conceded defeat, says Neuman. Unfortunately, he still endured backlash from the union’s local branch.

Union’s Efforts to Stigmatize
“I kind of expected that once the suit was settled, meaning the union and district agreed to correct the language issue, there would be some fallout. I was not mistaken in my suspicions. The [Brighton Education Association] put out its monthly union newsletter, early, with a front-page article on how much of a traitor I was,” Neuman said.

“They then went on to publish a list of all of the individuals who had opted out of the union. In addition, all union members received a shiny new red button in their staff mailbox with ‘I Opted IN’ on it. Yet another example of their priorities when it comes to spending dues money, I guess.”

Now that the suit is over and Neuman is free from paying dues, he is able to focus on the job he loves, teaching social studies at Brighton High School.

“ Brighton Area Schools is a great district with some really good professional educators. I would not have come back to teach in the district I graduated from if I didn’t truly believe that,” said Neuman. “I have made a point to say this to all of the media representatives I correspond with. This was not an attempt to ‘break the union,’ nor was it an attempt to embarrass the district. I was standing up for my legal rights and those of the other teachers who chose to opt out of the union. While I am disappointed in the union’s behavior during and since the lawsuit, I am still glad I stood my ground.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) is a freelance writer based in New York, New York.
Preschool Creates No Lasting Achievement Gains

By Bruce Edward Walker

A new study has found the current state of research on the effectiveness of universal preschool does not justify government intervention to establish such programs.

In “The Evidence on Universal Preschool: Are Benefits Worth the Cost?” Dr. David J. Armor, a George Mason University professor emeritus of public policy, concludes, “Before policymakers consider huge expenditures to expand preschool, especially by making it universal, much more research is needed to demonstrate true effectiveness.”

Armor’s study was prompted by President Barack Obama’s 2013 announcement he would seek implementation of universal preschool and provide $75 billion of federal startup funding.

“Any program that could cost state and federal taxpayers $50 billion per year warrants a closer look at the evidence on its effectiveness,” Armor wrote in his study. “The most methodologically rigorous evaluations find that the academic benefits of preschool programs are quite modest, and these gains fade after children enter elementary school.”

Armor’s research reveals results of such federal programs as Head Start and a Tennessee-based universal preschool program are negligible. “[T]he most rigorous studies of contemporary preschool programs … show no lasting gains for preschool students after they enter regular grades,” Armor wrote. “According to these studies, by the time children reach the early elementary grades, the average preschool student has learned no more than children who were not in preschool.”

Welfare for the Wealthy

Obama’s universal preschool proposal is a 10-year plan, Armor notes, and he predicts far more than $75 billion will be needed to create a viable education program. He bases his prediction on current spending on students attending U.S. public schools, which exceeds $12,000 per student when funding from all sources is taken into account.

“With approximately 4 million students enrolled in public kindergartens, states could be spending nearly $50 billion per year to fund universal preschool, assuming that spending levels for preschool are similar to those for higher grades,” he wrote.

Christian N. Braunlich, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, a research facility specializing in early childhood education and other school issues, compares universal preschool education to corporate welfare.

“If government funds the program for everyone and at some point needs to make cuts, it’s the wealthier parents who know better how to game the system,” he said. “Those on the lower income end will be the first hit, and wealthy and middle-class families will continue to receive something they can afford on their own. It’s dangerous.”

Braunlich says preschool may or may not provide lasting benefits for students, but he says his personal research indicates it is beneficial for students from low-income families and families who speak English as a second language. “If you accept that preschool helps some students, you then must question whether government should provide it universally for all students, including those from the middle- and upper-class,” he said.

 Inferior Methodology Found

Armor’s paper evaluates research from the past decade on the success of preschool programs. Although many media sources tout the conclusions of such studies, Armor’s study notes problems with the methodology of previous research.

“None of these studies used experimental designs, meaning randomized assignment of children to preschool and non-preschool conditions,” he wrote. “Instead, all of these studies used regression discontinuity designs, or RDD. The treatment group consisted of children just starting kindergarten who completed preschool the year before, while the control group consisted of children just starting preschool; testing was done at the beginning of the school year for both groups.”

Armor added, “RDD also assumes that these two groups are identical except for their age and the fact that one has completed preschool while the other has not.” In addition, he notes these studies violate criteria established by the Institute for Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education, which say standards for RDD studies “must be met in order to make a valid causal inference about treatment effects.”

“At least one of these standards, and perhaps two, has been violated by the published RDD studies of preschool,” Armor said. Specifically, Armor notes two oft-cited studies fail to report on student attrition. “The attrition problem is particularly important for RDD studies because attrition occurs only for the treatment group. … Program dropouts, whether due to mobility or difficulty with the preschool program content, are likely to have lower test scores than those who remain in the program, and therefore scores of the treated group can be biased upward by an unknown amount,” Armor wrote.

 Confirms Other Skeptical Findings

“The Cato brief reinforces the finding of several other studies that most of the academic gains from preschool programs disappear after third grade,” said James Paul, senior policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

“Furthermore, David Armor’s research explains how flawed methodology—both in terms of sample design and external validity—has been used to support the modern pre-K programs,” Paul said. “Although there may be instinctive appeal for expanded pre-K, the evidence suggests that such a large-scale public investment would be unwise.”

Bruce Edward Walker (bwalker@heartland.org) is a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute.
How Testing May Discourage Parent Involvement

By Tom Gantert

Saying there was little research about how extensive testing in education impacted parental attitudes toward education, Jesse Rhodes studied the issue in early 2012.

Rhodes, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, found parents in states with more extensive assessment systems had more negative attitudes about education and were less likely to become engaged in their children’s learning.

Rhodes’ study, released earlier this year, comes at a time when the nation’s education community is embroiled in an emotional debate about Common Core State Standards, a movement to unify educational standards across the country.

The Common Core Connection

Rhodes says his research was completed before Common Core rose to the national consciousness, but another expert says Common Core can’t escape being linked to a study on the impact of high-stakes testing and accountability systems.

“Common Core reforms are inextricably linked to those testing and accountability systems,” said Kevin Welner, director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Forty-three states and Washington DC have adopted Common Core. Rhodes’ study found parents in states with more extensive assessment systems had significantly lower trust in government and much more negative attitudes about their children’s schools.

They were also significantly less likely to engage in some forms of participation in their children’s education.

Common Core affects what students will be taught in math and language arts from grades K–12. Initially, states signed up for the standards in hopes of attaining funding from Race to the Top, a federally funded program that requires states to make certain changes to education policy in order to have a chance to win funding.

Criticism of the standards continues to grow. Indiana and Oklahoma have repealed the standards, and Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina have adopted legislation to review them.

“Given the advanced state of standards, testing and accountability policymaking, these findings are cause for serious concern, if not alarm,” Rhodes wrote in his study.

Parents Frustrated with Schools, Govt.

Rhodes says states should implement a major reassessment of standards, testing, and accountability policies, and standards-based reforms should be redesigned to engage parents more directly in the process.

In his study, Rhodes says current policies don’t give parents much of an opportunity for input. That could send a message to parents that government places a low value on parental input.

“Even though school reform has been debated by politicians and the media for several decades, many parents still feel mystified by standards, testing, and accountability and express deep ambivalence about the effects of these policies for their children’s education,” Rhodes told School Reform News.

“They also feel left out of decisions that affect their children in a deep and fundamental way. This dissatisfaction leads to feelings of frustration and alienation, not just with schools but with government in general.”

Rhodes said his study is among the first to raise such concerns.

Going Overboard with Testing

Welner said people should be cautious about inferring causal relationships between high-stakes testing and the study’s findings.

“But it does raise red flags that call attention to an area we should keep an eye on,” he added.

Welner said he agrees with Rhodes that as long as testing and assessments are perceived as being done to children instead of being done with and for the children, parents will respond negatively.

“I think that’s an important lesson for all of us, across the political spectrum.” Welner said.

Kyle Olson, CEO and founder of the Education Action Group in Michigan, where Common Core is one of the most controversial topics facing the state, said he is not aware of research that shows extensive standardized testing could drive parents away.

“I could see that,” Olson said. “I’ve never heard that. It makes sense.”

Olson said standardized testing is important, but states may be going overboard with it. “I fear there is going to be a backlash,” Olson said.

Tom Gantert (gantert@mackinac.org) is senior capitol correspondent for Michigan Capitol Confidential, a daily news site of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

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North Carolina School Voucher Fight Continues

By Alexander Anton

North Carolina’s school choice program, Opportunity Scholarships, will face scrutiny from the Supreme Court of North Carolina following a battle between the state and education organizations.

In the first challenge by the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) in late August 2013, Superior Court Judge Robert Hobgood ruled the law authorizing school choice violated the North Carolina Constitution. The ruling halted distribution of funds already awarded to thousands of students who had just started the 2013–14 school year.

Terry Stoops, Ph.D., director of research and education policy studies at the John Locke Foundation, explained, “The plaintiffs in the case represent some of the most powerful and well-funded education advocacy organizations in North Carolina, and they will do everything in their power to put an end to North Carolina’s small voucher program for low-income children. Why? They oppose the voucher program because the public school monopoly that they represent—and all of the money and power that comes with it—is at risk.”

Hobgood’s ruling was challenged by Attorney General Roy Cooper (D), who asked the Court of Appeals for an emergency release of the funds to the students to whom scholarships were already granted. The appellate court obliged, but grants awarded after Hobgood’s ruling would not be distributed.

Fighting for Educational Equity

The Opportunity Scholarships program was funded with $10 million for up to 2,400 students, for a maximum of $4,200 each. Those who oppose the law argue the money will be used in schools that can discriminate in their admissions because they are private and don’t have the accountability or standards of traditional public schools.

Supporters note the scholarships allow parents in poor neighborhoods the opportunity to send their children to private schools, because the scholarships help subsidize an otherwise too-costly education.

“Wealthy parents can afford to pay private school tuition or buy a residence in an area with good schools. Low- and middle-income parents do not have those same opportunities unless the state provides a taxpayer-funded voucher, education savings account, or tax credit.”

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“Wealthy parents can afford to pay private school tuition or buy a residence in an area with good schools. Low- and middle-income parents do not have those same opportunities unless the state provides a taxpayer-funded voucher, education savings account, or tax credit,” Stoops said.

In a news release, North Carolina Rep. Paul Stam (R), one of the law’s original sponsors, said he is confident the program will remain in place and be allowed to expand, “allowing more parents to send their children to the school of their choice.” The North Carolina State Constitution does not have an Establishment Clause or a “compelled support” clause as some other states do—such a provision prevents governments from supporting sectarian organizations. North Carolina funds many private schools (K–12 and universities) and did so even before the Opportunity Scholarships program began.

Seen as a Win for Now

Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina (PEFNC), an advocacy group for school choice, interpreted the Court of Appeals’ judgment that released the funds previously stopped by Hobgood as a win for now.

Darrell Allison, president of PEFNC, said the outcome of the case was a “big relief.”

NCAE also expressed happiness with the decision, but for a different reason. “We are pleased that the Court will not allow future taxpayer money to be used to fund private education while appeal of the case is pending,” Rodney Ellis, president of NCAE, stated in a press release.

Charter schools in North Carolina are some of the best schools in the state, according to Schooldigger.com.

School director Lori Roy of the Cape Fear Center for Inquiry attributes the high rankings for her school to the flexibility not found in traditional public schools. “I would just love to see counties and charter schools start working together, instead of this us-versus-them mentality,” Roy said.

The backlash against school choice by education associations has been fierce all across the country. “Competition for student dollars forces laggards to improve or close,” which is one reason the fight continues, says Stoops.

The Supreme Court of North Carolina is expediting its appeals schedule and will make a final judgment in the coming months.

Alexander Anton (alexanderanton.heartland@gmail.com) writes from Palatine, Illinois.
History Curriculum Scrutiny Draws Protests in Colorado

By Bruce Edward Walker

Temperatures flared in Jefferson County, Colorado after a school board member proposed increased scrutiny of the district’s Advanced Placement U.S. History curriculum.

Opposition to school board First Vice President Julie Williams’ resolution prompted national education figures such as Diane Ravitch to disparage it, teachers throughout the district to call in sick from work, and hundreds of students to skip school for organized protests.

Williams introduced her resolution at a school board meeting on September 18. The second paragraph of her resolution read, in part, “[I]nstructional materials should present positive aspects of the United States and its heritage. Content pertaining to political and social movements in history should present balanced and factual treatment of the positions.”

Board Secretary John Newkirk offered a revised resolution omitting that second paragraph. Another version of the resolution lacking Williams’ original wording passed at a contentious three-hour meeting on October 2.

The committee will review the AP History curriculum and offer suggestions to the school board.

Education Locally Controlled

There are 19 high schools in Jefferson County, which is adjacent to Denver County. Dan McMinimee, Jefferson County Superintendent of Schools, says Colorado public-school education is locally controlled, as opposed to education in Texas, for example, which is state-run.

According to the September 6 board minutes, Williams introduced a motion, seconded by Newkirk with revisions, to appoint a committee “to study Common Core, [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers] assessments and Advanced Placement United States History.” She withdrew the motion at the request of board President Kevin Witt, who asked her to introduce a resolution at a special board meeting on September 18.

An audio file of the meeting posted on the school board’s website reveals immediate objections by two board members despite the deletion of what one termed “chilling” language in the resolution.

“Obviously the resolution wasn’t perfect,” McMinimee said, adding, “Several people found the language used objectionable. The board took no action that evening and tabled the topic.”

Student Protests and Teacher Sick-Days

Students subsequently walked out of classes to engage in protests against Williams’ original resolution, which was never adopted. Their activities became a cause célèbre in such periodicals as The New York Times and the United Kingdom’s The Guardian. Both publications cheered the students for skipping classes. Neither publication, however, noted the revised language of the adopted resolution.

Similarly, prominent school choice opponent Diane Ravitch posted an incendiary statement on her blog on October 5, writing, “By a vote of 3–2, the school board of Jefferson County, Colorado, passed its controversial proposal to adopt an American history curriculum that removes references to dissent and social disorder and anything else that diminishes a sense of patriotism. This idea was cooked up by a radical rightwing majority that took control of the board at the last election.”

Teachers also challenged the resolution before and after the compromise. The Guardian reported two district high schools, Golden and Jefferson, respectively experienced 73 percent and 81 percent of teachers taking sick days the Monday after the 3–2 school board vote.

Inclusive and Transparent

“I’m thrilled with the compromise,” said Williams. “My primary goal was to give taxpayers a chance to weigh in.”

McMinimee added, “Our district has several curriculum-related policies in place, and we’re following them,” he said. “Based on the final action taken last Thursday, we will establish a board committee rather than a district committee, to ensure more transparency. Using district policy as a framework, each of our five board members will appoint two members to the committee, which will also include students, teachers, and curriculum experts selected by the district.”

The Denver ABC network affiliate credits McMinimee with the resolution that was eventually accepted. Despite the compromise, students and some of their parents are organizing a campaign to recall the three supporters of the resolution, Williams, Newkirk, and Witt.

“We’re listening, we’re making adjustments, and we’re moving forward in an inclusive and transparent fashion,” McMinimee said, predicting the AP curriculum issue will be resolved by spring 2015.

Bruce Edward Walker (bwalker@heartland.org) is a policy advisor for The Heartland Institute.


Jefferson County Board of Education Meeting Minutes and Audio: http://www.jeffcopublicschools.org/board/minutes.html


The Wildly Contentious History of Public School Teaching in the U.S.

By Jay Lehr

The Teacher Wars is aptly titled, compressing 150 years of warring efforts to create and control a government public school system amid the women’s suffrage movement and the rise of trade unions and the Communist Party in the United States.

Dana Goldstein, a journalist whose parents were dedicated teachers, has written the definitive history of the subject.

With so many characters, so much time to cover, and chronologies that switch back and forth, this is not always an easy book to read, but it is well worth the effort. Goldstein offers 273 notes on her 11 chapters and a bibliography of 108 books. Her thoroughness is exemplary. I have never been a fan of the U.S. Department of Education, and I think the author has unintentionally made an excellent case for disbanding it.

She starts her book in 1815 and profiles early proponents of broad education in the nineteenth century, including Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann and black educators Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Early teachers were all men, even including the famous American authors Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau. By the 1870s, teacher colleges called “normal schools” were established, and the majority of teachers soon were female.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, politics controlled public education, and little attention was paid to black public schools. Power to teachers, Goldstein tells us, began with the founding of the Chicago Teachers Federation in 1897, the “precursor to today’s American Federation of Teachers which aggressively advocated for higher teacher pay and for teacher’s freedom on lesson planning and student discipline.”

Persistent Problems

It is clear some of today’s student problems existed a century ago. In 1909, a survey asked 500 child laborers who had dropped out of school whether they would drop out if financial necessity were not a factor; 412 answered yes, commonly characterizing school as a joyless place of ethnic bigotry, corporal punishment, and mindless memorization.

Today’s overemphasis on student testing to evaluate teachers has its roots in the 1920s, when educators began to adapt innovative business practices. IQ tests of questionable validity came into vogue in the 1930s to assign students to different academic tracks.

Union Power

On the other side of the coin, Goldstein summarizes Al Shanker’s life story and ascent to the head of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). UFT led 1,000 strikes between 1960 and 1980. Goldstein recounts too many of these strikes and battles, however, weighing the book down with unnecessary detail.

In 1967, The New York Times opinion of Shanker was as follows: The union chief “gets the most he can for his teachers, even if it means sacrificing the needs of the school system.” This attitude still seems to prevail in the nation’s teachers’ unions.

Goldstein shows her political colors when she describes Ronald Reagan’s run for the presidency, labeling him a “B list actor.” She notes Reagan promised to end President Jimmy Carter’s new Department of Education, and this reviewer wishes he had been successful, especially in light of the newest battle: Common Core standards for K–12 education. The standards cost taxpayers $18 billion to develop and are inferior to the best state standards. Many states are beginning to reject them. Goldstein, however, speaks only positively of Common Core.

Goldstein’s opening rant in Chapter 10, however, describes well the reaction to the current passion for standardized testing:

“To many American teachers, the last decade of value added school reform has felt like something imposed on them from outside and from above—by politicians with little expertise in teaching and learning, by corporate philanthropists who long to remake education in the mold of the business world, and by economists who see teaching as less an art than science. ... Dissident teachers and their unions are winning support from parent activists who are protesting the increased number of standardized tests, the time spent on test prep, and the lack of instructional time for projects, field trips, art, and music. Testing is a part of any functional educational system, but in recent years it has often seemed like the horse of school improvement has been driven by the cart of collecting student data to be used in teacher evaluation.”

These protests show the state of U.S. education as troubled as ever.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director at The Heartland Institute.
Does Paying Students for Achievement Work?

By Herbert J. Walberg and Joseph L. Bast

Access to money, even play money, becomes increasingly important as students get older and discover that meeting many of their wants requires having money.

Part-time jobs begin to compete with school and homework as students enter middle and high school, making pay for academic achievement one way to fight back. However, this is not the only way and unless done carefully can fail to produce the desired results.

Rewards to Motivate Students

A particularly intriguing example of paying middle-school students is the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), a nationwide collection of open-enrollment college preparatory schools commonly located in urban and poor communities.

These schools rely heavily on financial and nonfinancial rewards to motivate students who might not otherwise experience a rigorous education. KIPP students typically receive 60 percent more instruction than students at other schools due to a longer school day and attend mandatory summer school and a wide range of after-school activities. Keeping students focused during these long school days can be a special challenge.

At the end of each week, each middle-school student receives a paycheck in “KIPP dollars” to reward effort, good behavior, and completed homework. KIPP dollars are not real dollars, can be used only within KIPP schools, and are used exclusively to reward effort and not for getting good grades or passing tests. Students’ pay may be “debited” for misbehaving. The paychecks can be used to purchase notebooks, writing supplies, snacks, and more from a school store as well as the right to participate in field trips to such places as Washington, DC and the Grand Canyon.

According to a report on the reward program from the University of Southern California’s Center on Educational Governance, “The Paycheck Program has achieved its primary goal, improving student behavior and communication between students and faculty. When the principal hands out the paychecks on Friday afternoon, positive conversations usually result. Reinforcement of the students’ behaviors makes them think about consequences and better understand expectations, the staff members have said. Communication with parents has been amplified as well. Weekly feedback on a child’s behavior prompts regular dialogue between parents and teachers.”

Using Rewards and Incentives

In an interview with PBS, KIPP co-founder Mike Feinberg explained why the schools use rewards and incentives: “Well, it goes back to the general premise that ... when you do the right thing, good things happen and when you do the wrong thing, bad things happen. I know it doesn’t always work out that way in life but it usually follows that pattern and we want the kids to learn that valuable life lesson,” Feinberg said.

He continued: “[C]hildren who are at public schools ... don’t feel the sense of earning things which we know exists beyond education out there in the real world. They’re entitled to their desk, they’re entitled to books, they’re entitled to the breakfast and the lunch, they’re entitled to have a teacher in front of them, they’re entitled to be in a school building that’s somewhere in their neighborhood. ... [W]ithout teaching the value that things need to get earned, you can create a situation where kids grow up thinking that this is going to keep happening, that they’re going to be entitled to a college education, they’re going to be entitled to become a lawyer, doctor, architect, engineer, whatever they want to do in this world.”

Herbert J. Walberg and Joseph L. Bast are chairman and president, respectively, of The Heartland Institute and authors of Rewards: How to Use Rewards to Help Children Learn—and Why Teachers Don’t Use Them Well (2014; ISBN 978-1-934791-38-7). This article is excerpted from Chapter 7, “Rewards in Secondary Schools.”

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Joseph Bast, President, The Heartland Institute

The author of Take Me to Your Government, James Payne (“Count Nef”) has taught political science at Yale, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, and Texas A&M. His recent books include A History of Force (2004) and Six Political Illusions (2010).

For more information and to request examination copies visit www.PrincessNavina.com
Fla. Teachers Union Re-Files Slightly Altered Lawsuit

By Chris Neal

The Florida Education Association (FEA), the state’s primary teachers union, is reviving its failed lawsuit against expansion of the state’s tax credit scholarship program aiding special-needs students.

A circuit court judge said the original lawsuit did not have legal standing and struck it down. It was one of two suits recently filed by FEA.

The union has since tweaked its complaint, claiming the expansion steals funds from public schools, and adding three parents as plaintiffs, in addition to the original plaintiff, social studies teacher Tom Faasse. The new complaint still implies school voucher money is being taken out of public funds.

The new Personal Learning Scholarship Account (PLSA) program is part of the existing tax credit scholarship program, through which corporations receive a state tax credit worth a certain percentage of what they donate to nonprofit organizations offering private school scholarships to low-income families. Thus, all scholarship funds come from private donations.

Uncertainty Created for Parents

“We are disappointed the FEA wants to continue this lawsuit, as it creates more uncertainty for parents of special-needs children that have accepted and intend to use the new Personal Learning Scholarship Account program.”

Patrick Gibbons
Public Affairs Manager
Step Up For Students

“We are disappointed the FEA wants to continue this lawsuit, as it creates more uncertainty for parents of special-needs children that have accepted and intend to use the new Personal Learning Scholarship Account program.”

The expansion also allows foster-care children to keep their scholarships if they are adopted, and it permits a small increase in the scholarship amount.

An Attack on Educational Choice

Patricia Levesque, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, expressed frustration over FEA simply adding three parents to the same lawsuit.

“It was not surprising, but no less disappointing, that the Florida Education Association continued its attack on educational choices for Florida’s most vulnerable families,” Levesque said.

“More than 70,000 children are going to have an improved opportunity to succeed in life thanks to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts. The FEA claims this threatens injury to three parents and a social studies teacher.

“It’s hard to fathom the callousness of an attempt to take these life-changing opportunities away from children,” she said.

FEA’s other lawsuit, made in an alliance with a handful of other organizations, challenges the overall constitutionality of Florida’s tax credit scholarship program, claiming it provides public funds to religious institutions.

The union’s lawsuit also says the program does not maintain “a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education,” as the state constitution dictates it must.

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.

INTERNET INFO


KIPP Plans to Double Enrollment in Los Angeles

By Ashley Bateman

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools have a lofty plan for expansion in one major city, doubling enrollment over the next six years.

In a plan published in October, KIPP-Los Angeles announced a goal of operating 20 schools serving 9,000 students by 2020. The organization currently runs 11 schools serving 4,000 students.

“California has more than 160,000 student names on waiting lists for charter schools, one of the highest in the country,” said Todd Ziebarth, senior vice president for state advocacy and support at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

“KIPP’s expansion in Los Angeles will benefit the students and help alleviate the unmet demand of families in the area. California also has a strong charter school law, ranking ninth nationally, making it inviting for charter school networks such as KIPP to open schools in the state.”

Todd Ziebarth
Senior Vice President for State Advocacy and Support
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

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

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Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@gmail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Teachers Unions Spent Big Money on Elections

By Alexander Anton

Teachers unions spent big money during this election season: an estimated $40 million by the National Education Association (NEA) and $20 million by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

NEA’s “super” PAC spent $12.5 million through September, almost $3.5 million more than in 2012. The spending comes at a time when parents and taxpayers across the country are calling for change in the education system.

Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute, says one needs only to “look at the ballots.” In Washington, voters approved Initiative 351, authorizing a $4.7 billion funding on the ballot, unions will come in force to support them,” Butcher said.

At the Second International Summit on the Teaching Profession, hosted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), AFT President Randi Weingarten spoke with The Nation, describing AFT’s efforts as pivotal in this year’s race. Weingarten said gubernatorial, state, and local races “need a lot more of our focus.”

The political-funding organization of AFT, the Solidarity Fund, spent $9.7 million through September for this election cycle, whereas in 2012 it had spent only $1.1 million at the same point in the election cycle.

In a statement to Education Week, NEA political director Karen White said the union had long planned for the increased spending for this election year. “Since the 2010 election, we have been building back against the right-wing and tea party governors and officeholders that got elected at the local and state level.”

Alexander Anton (alexanderanton. heartland@gmail.com) writes from Palatine, Illinois.

Maria Kaupas Chicago Center Mentors At-Risk Young People

By Carmen Ontiveros

As a major part of its legacy in the Chicago Lawn neighborhood, the Sisters of St. Casimir established the Maria Kaupas Center, named after Mother Maria Kaupas.

The sisters saw it fitting to name the community center after the strong, forward-thinking woman who in 1907 founded their order dedicated to teaching youth of their community in a religious setting. Their work over the decades illustrates how a highly dedicated private organization can successfully provide help to urban students in difficult circumstances.

The Sisters of St. Casimir created the Kaupas Center to continue its mission of serving at-risk children of the Chicago Lawn area. Housed in the sisters’ former convent, the center provides opportunities for success by 2015.

Maria Kaupas Chicago Center provides services by 2015. The center staff estimates close to 1,000 students and adults will benefit from services by 2015.

Maria Kaupas Chicago Center is a place where youth can be affirmed, valued, and loved. It responds to Maya Angelou’s poignant observation about “the ache for home that lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” The boys and girls want to succeed and belong, and they know the Maria Kaupas Center provides opportunities for success and a home away from home.

Carmen Ontiveros (COntiveros@ mariakaupascenter.com) is executive director of the Maria Kaupas Center.
The Trouble with Teacher Tenure

The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research recently released a series of infographics that explain how, historically speaking, teachers unions once made sense.

However, as time has gone on and labor and job protection laws have improved, unions have become unnecessary in many states.

Despite this reality, teachers unions have amassed a massive amount of destructive power; it is now almost impossible to remove an incompetent teacher from the classroom in many cases and failing schools in significant need of reform continue to be money pits for taxpayers.

Source: American Enterprise Institute

For more information, visit www.aei.org/policy/education
The teachers unions are spitting venom at the Philadelphia School Reform Commission (PSRC).

PSRC—an appointed body—was established in 2001 as a response to overall school district ineptitude. It didn’t help much. In fact, just a year ago, I wrote about the school system’s ongoing incompetence and corruption, using a snippet from a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that spelled out a few of the gory details:

“Philadelphia’s schools are a textbook case of chronic, systemic failure. Woeful finances and academics compelled the state in 2001 to install a five-member School Reform Commission. Test scores have improved but are still pitiful. Last year only about 40% of students scored proficient or above in reading on the state standardized test, but 99.5% of teachers are rated satisfactory. …

The district last year had to borrow $300 million, and this summer two dozen schools were closed and 3,000 employees laid off (including about 600 teachers) to bridge another $300 million deficit. While the union blames state budget cuts, pay and benefit increases resulting from its last collective-bargaining agreement accounted for half the budget hole.”

Teachers Union Contract Cancelled

So the kids aren’t learning, the taxpayer is taking it in the shorts, and the teachers unions couldn’t care less.

After 21 months of negotiating and failing to produce a compromise, PSRC abruptly cancelled the existing teachers union contract. PSRC chairman Bill Green said the move will save the district $54 million this year, $30 million of which would be quickly pumped into schools beset by large class sizes and reductions in arts and Advanced Placement classes.

He added the money “will be invested directly in classrooms, with principals empowered to use the cash as they see fit—to hire a full-time counselor and nurse … or to pay for more supplies or after-school programs.”

Additionally, the cash-strapped city will experience some fiscal relief. The new plan dictates that teachers start paying, in part, for their own health insurance—between $21 and $71 per month.

Teachers Unions React

So the lot of taxpayers and kids is improved; who is griping? The teachers unions, of course.

Listening to their leaders’ responses, you’d think the apocalypse was nigh. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Jerry Jordan angrily described the actions as “union busting.” He then groused, “We are not indentured servants.”

Predictably, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—PFT’s parent union—charged into the fray, calling the move “a war on teachers.” Weingarten further pontificated, “Three weeks before the gubernatorial election, this surprise early-morning School Reform Commission meeting, lawsuit, and notification to employees imposing a contract and compensation cuts can only be characterized as Gov. [Tom] Corbett’s (R) well-planned Hail Mary ambush.” Corbett lost his re-election bid.

Weingarten’s overwrought comments are hardly surprising given her enmity toward Corbett, but other PSRC supporters include former Democratic governor Ed Rendell and Democrat Michael Nutter, mayor of Philadelphia, who remarked, “The action, unfortunately, was necessary, given the fact that the system is broken. There is no more money to be had from anywhere.”

In the midst of all the huffing and puffing, it isn’t clear PSRC’s move is even legal. Whether Act 46, the state takeover law, gives PSRC the power to cancel union contracts remains to be seen.

The situation in Philadelphia could have national implications. Should the courts validate PSRC’s action, it could set off similar motions in other cities across the country.
California Parent Trigger Law Is Showing Signs of Success

By Ben Boychuk

Nearly five years after California passed the nation’s first “parent trigger” legislation, parents at only a handful of failing schools have taken advantage of the law’s potent remedies in the face of ferocious opposition.

How are the kids at those schools doing?

The answer is not as clear-cut as the law’s supporters might like. The available data are limited, and the outcomes are mixed. That should come as no surprise: State education officials and their friends at the California Teachers Association (CTA) and California Federation of Teachers (CFT) would have it no other way.

The Parent Empowerment Act of 2010 allows parents with kids at schools with persistently low academic performance index scores to petition for certain changes, such as converting the school to a charter, replacing the principal and staff, tweaking the curriculum, extending school hours, and closing the school. If at least half of the parents sign on, the school district must comply.

Finding good data these days can be tricky. Ordinarily, we would look at reading and math scores, but the legislature last year ended the California Standards Test to clear the way for a new test aligned with the controversial Common Core State Standards. It did so at the urging of State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, with the blessing of both CTA and CFT.

So we don’t have school-wide reading or math scores to compare, but we do have fifth grade science scores, the last vestige of the old testing regime—and that’s only because Common Core’s Next Generation Science Standards have yet to be implemented.

Charter Achievement Successes

What do the scores show, limited though they may be?

Good news for charter schools. The 24th Street/Crown Preparatory Academy, a hybrid public charter school in Los Angeles, showed significant gains between the 2012–13 and 2013–14 academic years. Before the school’s transformation in 2013, just 21 percent of fifth graders scored proficient or advanced in science. One year later, 65 percent of fifth graders scored proficient or better.

Desert Trails Prep, the first school in the state to convert to a charter under the law, showed greater gains in science, though with a smaller group of students. In 2012–13, 12 percent of Desert Trails fifth graders scored proficient or advanced in science. One year after the Adelanto school became a charter, 47 percent of fifth grade “scholars” (as they’re now known) scored proficient or better.

It’s a different story for three other schools that opted for “in district” reforms under the law instead of going the charter route.

Parents at Weigand Elementary in Watts ousted the school’s principal in May 2013, which led to an exodus of teachers. Parents at Lennox Middle School and Haddon Avenue Elementary in Los Angeles used signed petitions as leverage to persuade administrators to make changes in the curriculum and improve school security. All three schools’ fifth grade science scores remained flat or declined slightly.

Dismissing the Data

The objection is obvious, so let’s dispense with it already: A year’s worth of data focused on one grade level with small sample sizes from five schools aren’t exactly progress worthy of busting out the champagne. But something is better than nothing.

Until now, the best supporters of the parent trigger law could muster were a few loopy-goosey parental satisfaction surveys, which the skeptics might not find especially persuasive. Hard data—any hard data—form the foundation for a more compelling case for the law’s utility. Or maybe not.

After Los Angeles-based Parent Revolution released the numbers last week, CTA spokesman Frank Wells was quick to dismiss them. “Even with more data,” he told Education Week, “we may still end up with an apples and oranges comparison based on student population shifts that come after a divisive trigger battle.” We have the union to thank for the divisive battles.

Even without union resistance, turning around a failing school is notoriously difficult. Generally speaking, 25–30 percent of turnarounds succeed, and then only after several years of grueling effort. As one analysis put it, “successful efforts at the school level must be supported by corresponding changes at the system level.”

Overcoming School Board Opposition

But changing a “system” is even more politically fraught than trying to change a school. One rap against the parent trigger is that parents who avail themselves of the law sow needless division. Why not go through the school board, these critics ask?

The answer, as we’ve seen time after time, is that school boards often line up against the parents. Perhaps, then, the best way to change the system—if it can be changed at all—is from within.

One of the leaders of the effort to make Desert Trails into a charter school hopes to do just that. Doreen Diaz, a mother of two former Desert Trails students and past president of the Desert Trails Parent Union, is one of 13 candidates vying for three seats on the five-member Adelanto Elementary School District Board. Diaz and fellow candidate Bartolla Del Villar were plaintiffs in the 2012 lawsuit seeking to force the district into complying with the parent trigger law.

Diaz has no money—she couldn’t even afford a statement for the ballot—but she has hard-won experience. If she wins, it will be another step for the parent empowerment movement toward real political power.

Ben Boychuk (bboychuk@city-journal.org) is associate editor of the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal.
Charters Fly, Fail, and Outperform in 2014

By Ashley Bateman

Additional access to charter schools is driving increases in student achievement in some of the nation’s toughest locales for education.

Charter schools in Washington, DC, for example, achieved minimal gains in 2014, but they did increase in multiple categories. The city’s charter schools face tough authorizing requirements and expectations while functioning at a lower per-pupil cost than traditional city schools. They outperformed traditional public schools again this year: 2014 is the ninth year public charter schools in the city outperformed their traditional counterparts while increasing achievement; public charters in the city outperform their traditional counterparts while increasing achievement.

common result of a healthy charter school environment indicates a healthy system. Some schools fly, while others fail. Accountability is monitored, measured, and marked; charters that fail to thrive after a typical trial period of three years are shut down and the system moves on.

Some Are Top-Ranked

Public charters in some cities outperformed top-ranked national and international schools.

Juniors at Liberty Common High School in Fort Collins, Colorado posted a 2014 average score of 28.63 out of 36 on the ACT, breaking the state record high. That record accounted for new high scores in each area of testing. The school was founded in 2010 and has been on the fast track to success by “accentuating math, science and engineering” in a classical liberal-arts curriculum. The state’s previous record holder is another charter, the Vanguard School, in Colorado Springs.

BASIS Tucson North, a public charter school in Tucson, Arizona, outperformed 40 countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment when last administered in 2012, averaging a math score of 618, 131 points above the average for all U.S. schools. The school is one of the top five in the nation, according to The Washington Post and U.S. News & World Report.

BASIS’s DC school boasted an overall increase of 3.8 percentage points in this year’s DC CAS standardized test, with students scoring 82.9 percent overall.

KIPP DC’s public charter school had proficiency scores of 94.5 and 71 in math and reading, respectively.

Double-digit score gains at Imagine Hope PCS-Lamond and Friendship PCS-Collegiate Academy showed improvement, and several other charters increased their scores by double-digit percentage points.

In addition, the Center for Reinventing Public Education and Mathematica Policy Research found charter students enjoyed higher graduation rates and college matriculation, plus higher-paying careers.

Current Policy Climate

Updating and recognizing charter policy is necessary to adequately serve a growing demand; more than 6,000 public charters schools serve 2.3 million students nationwide.

Current priority states for charter reform, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, are Kentucky and Oklahoma. Kentucky is one of eight states in the country with no law supporting charter schools, and Oklahoma’s law is judged weak; only a small fraction of districts allow charters, funding is largely inequitable compared with traditional public schools, and there is no statewide authorizing board.

A federal bill sponsored by U.S. Reps. George Miller (D-Calif.) and John Kline (R-Minn.), chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, would allow new charters to receive funding without a proven track record of success. The Success and Opportunity through Quality Charter Schools Act will streamline charter success by replicating proven quality and innovative practices from public charter schools.

Charter Expansion

Washington, DC’s first Rocketship charter school will break ground this year, set to open its doors in 2015.

The DC Public Charter School Board unanimously approved applications for two schools serving 650 students each. Rocketship is currently refocusing expansion into four regions of the country, including the nation’s capital.

Ashley Bateman (bateman.ae@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Check out The Heartland Institute’s blog, SomewhatReasonable.com

There you’ll find news, commentary, and analysis from Heartland staffers and scholars on the latest in policy, politics, and culture.

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Giving Parents Power

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

Here’s an idea that 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: Justification and Design Guidelines
By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann
October 2012, 49pp., $7.95
free download at www.heartland.org
For more information about the Parent Trigger, visit theparenttrigger.com

Introduction

Sometimes, it seems as though the debate over school reform takes place in an alternate universe where time passes and nothing really changes. Complaints about the quality of public education were widespread in the 1980s and even in the 1950s and before, and they sound surprisingly similar to those heard today.

Thankfully, new ideas occasionally penetrate the fog of politics. One such idea is the Parent Trigger, the notion that if a majority of parents and guardians of children attending a particular public school sign a petition demanding reform, then the school district must act as the parents ask. Seven states have adopted some version of the Parent Trigger and some 20 states have seen bills introduced.

Parent Trigger laws vary according to what schools can be the subject of the trigger. Some laws specify that only schools that are “failing” according to some existing or new set of criteria can be the subject of the Parent Trigger.

For more information about the Parent Trigger, visit theparenttrigger.com

Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................ 1
1. Why Empower Parents? ................. 3
2. The Parent Trigger ....................... 11
3. Choosing Reform Models .......... 17
4. Avoiding Common Pitfalls .......... 24
5. Appendix A: Model Legislation .. 40
6. Appendix B: Model Petition ....... 40
7. Appendix C: Bibliography .......... 42
8. Author’s Notes ............................. 49

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