By Rachel Sheffield

Cash-strapped state education budgets have another fiscal burden looming: the cost of implementing Common Core standards.

Based on a range of state estimates, a reasonable estimate of the total nationwide cost “would be $30 billion,” said Liv Finne, director of the Washington Policy Institute’s education center. Forty-five states and Washington, DC have adopted the standards in the past two years, largely in attempts to receive Obama administration grants.

Many states have not evaluated the cost of

Ohio Eyes Vouchers for Low-Income Families

By Joy Pullmann

An Ohio legislator has offered a bill to grant low- and middle-income students school vouchers.

The state already offers vouchers to some special-needs students and those in the state’s lowest-performing schools. House Bill 136 would offer school choice also to low-income families.

The program would be the second in the country, after Wisconsin’s recently expanded vouchers, to allow current private school students to receive the scholarships.

“[Ohio’s current voucher] systems are determined by what I call the ‘failing school model,’” said bill sponsor and state Rep. Matt Huffman (R-Lima). “It’s a false premise because a school that’s deemed failing can for a variety of rea-
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Florida to Consider Parent Trigger

By Jim Waters

Parent Trigger bills have been filed in both houses of the Florida Legislature.

Senate Bill 1718 and House Bill 1191 would add the trigger to current school turnaround options, which include replacing staff and administrators, bringing in outside educators, and closing schools, said Jaryn Emhof, communications director for the Foundation for Florida’s Future, an education think tank chaired by former governor Jeb Bush.

The bills would require a turnaround, charter conversion, closure, or outside management if 51 percent of parents with children in that school sign a petition calling for that action.

Along with California, where the nation’s first Parent Trigger law passed in January 2010 by a single vote in both houses of the legislature, Connecticut, Ohio, and Texas have passed similar legislation. A dozen other states are considering the law.

Gov. Scott Considering

Several media outlets reported the trigger would be part of Gov. Rick Scott’s (R) legislative agenda for the 2012 session.

The trigger was listed on a rough draft of “potential priorities” composed by previous members of Scott’s administration and “leaked to the media,” said Lane Wright, Scott’s press secretary.

“The governor has nothing to do with Parent Trigger legislation that is out there, but he does “believe in school choice, that parents and students should be able to have more options, which just makes everybody—public schools, charter schools, private schools—better,” Wright said.

Wright said the governor needed more information before endorsing or rejecting the trigger proposal, because it “gets a little beyond the choice issue.”

Michelle Rhee, a former Washington, DC schools chancellor who is now Scott’s education advisor, supports the trigger. In 2010, Rhee founded Students First, with a stated mission including empowering parents “to trigger the turnaround of a failing school.”

“A Unique Session’

Florida’s 2012 legislative session began in January, instead of the usual March opening, so legislators can attend to the state budget and redistricting.

“This year’s going to be a very different year,” Emhof said. “It will be a unique session. Nobody really knows what that will mean for education policy.

Converting Failing Schools

The first attempt at using the trigger resulted in a litany of legal battles after hundreds of parents signed a petition in fall 2010 to convert McKinley Elementary, a failing school in Compton, California, into a charter school.

The suit resulted in a new charter school near McKinley. More than 30 percent of the former McKinley parents who signed the trigger petition enrolled their children in the charter.

Although Florida has one of the broadest offerings of school choice in the nation, we see the trigger option as a way for parents to be involved, especially if their children are trapped in failing schools,” Emhof said.

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Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
Forty-eight percent of U.S. public schools failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010–11 under federal No Child Left Behind mandates, despite Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s predictions early in 2011 the figure would be 82 percent, according to a Center on Education Policy study.

Duncan and the Obama administration used the latter figure as a major justification for waiving the largest federal education law despite protestations from Congress, which has been due to reauthorize it since 2007. Eleven states have submitted waiver applications, and 28 more have said they plan to apply by mid-February.

“While this will make interstate comparisons of data more difficult because each state will have its own system, we cannot compare present AYP results between states either, because states are currently allowed to use their own tests and their own definitions of proficiency to determine AYP,” said report author Alexandra Usher.

NCLB required states and schools to meet ever-increasing proficiency targets until 2014, when it required all states to rate “proficient” or face sanctions ranging from tutoring requirements to school closures. In response, many states simply lowered their proficiency standards for state tests.

Since AYP depends on state tests and the rigor of those varies by state, a high AYP failure rate in a state may indicate tougher tests rather than worse schools, Usher said.

In 2009–10, 39 percent of U.S. schools failed to make AYP.

“Comparisons within a state [to previous years] are more valid than comparisons between states, but trend lines are still not 100 percent constant over time even within one state,” Usher said, because states have increased or decreased requirements for student proficiency since NCLB went into effect in 2002.

This will likely be the last school year AYP can be used, the Center on Education Policy report says, because the waivers allow states to develop different accountability systems.

To receive a waiver, states must adopt “college- and career-ready” standards, tie state tests to those standards, propose interventions for the lowest-performing 15 percent of schools, and include student growth in teacher and principal evaluation systems.

The report’s figures are based on what states reported by the end of 2011. The official tally will be released later in 2012.

— Staff Reports

INTERNET INFO


A LESSON PLAN FOR HIGHER ED

Reforming higher education – getting costs under control and improving the quality of the education students receive – is one of the key public policy issues of our day. Are taxpayer subsidies to higher education justified? Should institutions of higher education focus more on core curriculum? Why do students study less than they used to? How can colleges become more efficient? This booklet, the tenth in a series from The Heartland Institute, provides policymakers and civic and business leaders a highly condensed and authoritative yet easy-to-read guide to the debate.

Ten Principles of Higher Education Reform
The Heartland Institute, 2011.

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Michigan Lifts ‘Arbitrary’ Cap on Charter Schools

By Sally Nelson

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) signed a bill to remove the cap on university-chartered public schools and allow community colleges to authorize charters beyond their districts.

Senate Bill 618 is part of a long-term effort to shift to a performance-based educational system that includes recent teacher tenure reforms. Now Public Act 277, the law also requires charters to make contracts public and comply with state education accountability requirements.

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With more competition from charter schools, traditional schools will have to improve to avoid losing students to charters, he said.

Attracting Needy Students

State Rep. Mike Calton (R-Nashville) is one of five House Republicans who voted no on the bill. He says he does not think charter schools provide a good education, citing 15 years of experience on a school board and years of dealing with charters.

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Implementing Common Core Could Cost States $30 Bil.

Continued from page 1

implementing the standards, notes a 2011 McGraw-Hill education brief, but will be working through implementation in the next three years, so by 2014 most changes will be in place.

In the state of Washington, the total cost of implementing the standards—which includes changes to textbooks, teacher training, and state tests—will likely be more than $300 million, according to the state’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. For larger states such as California, the cost will be much higher.

“The California Department of Education estimates that it will cost the state almost $760 million to implement the Common Core,” said Lance Izumi, senior director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute. “EdSource, a respected Northern California-based education-research organization, estimates the cost to be up to $1.6 billion.”

‘Fiscal Madness’

In the current stagnant economy, piling on another major cost “will play havoc with California’s deficit-ridden budget,” Izumi said.

The California Legislative Analyst’s Office just released figures showing General Fund revenues for the 2011–12 fiscal year will be $3.7 billion below projections. The shortfall will cause $2 billion in cuts to state programs and a $3 billion deficit at the end of the fiscal year, Izumi said. The state also faces a $10 billion deficit in 2012–13.

“Adding up to a billion-and-a-half-dollar expenditure to implement national standards under these circumstances is fiscal madness,” Izumi said.

State budget deficits totaled approximately $103 billion in the 2011–12 fiscal year, according to an American Enterprise Institute report, and a substantial portion of those deficits relate to education since it is one of states’ major expenditures and includes pensions for teachers, one of the largest government workforces. The state of Washington currently faces a $2 billion budget deficit.

Seen as Federal Encroachment

Beyond the financial burden, state governments and analysts express concern about the federal government’s involvement in the standards push and the encroachment on state authority. Texas and South Carolina legislators refused to adopt the national standards for this reason.

The Obama administration has made receiving federal dollars, including Race to the Top grants, contingent on states adopting the standards, referring to them as “college- and career-ready” standards and then declaring the Common Core as the only set fitting that designation.

The president’s Blueprint for Education Reform would require adopting the Common Core for states to receive Title I funding for low-income schools. Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently said he would require states to adopt college- and career-ready standards as a condition for waivers of the largest federal education law, No Child Left Behind.

Such federal involvement is a slippery slope to federal control of education standards nationwide and “eviscerates what remains of state and local authority over education policymaking,” Izumi said. “National tests will be aligned to the national standards. A national curriculum will be aligned to the national tests and the national standards. Instead of locally elected school board members and state legislators making decisions, power will be transferred to faceless, unelected federal education bureaucrats.”

Bill Evers, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution in California, voices a similar concern.

“National standards will impose a template of uniformity on American classrooms and will block innovation,” he said. “Decision makers in DC are too far from classrooms to be dictating curriculum, and teachers and children will be ill-served by the resulting inflexibility.”

“Students need an individualized education, not one dictated by educrats 2,000 miles away in Washington. When it comes to education, state and local autonomy are vital for student success.”

MATTHEW PICCOLO
POLICY ANALYST
SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE

Poor Quality Standards

Beyond the high cost to states and poor fit for individual students, some experts report the standards are of poor quality.

The Common Core Language Arts standards “will lead to a lower level of literacy for all high school students,” said Sandra Stotsky, a professor in the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform, who sat on a Common Core review panel. “College readiness standards are simply language skill sets, and [the Common Core’s] grade-level standards are mostly language skill sets, with little substantive content.”

The standards cannot “serve as the basis for tests that can assess readiness for authentic college-level work,” Stotsky said.

Cost of Ceding Authority

In addition to the fiscal costs of implementing the Common Core, states are weighing the perhaps even greater cost of ceding education authority to federal control.

“Utah has already spent millions of dollars on training teachers and updating assessments and curriculum to align with the Common Core,” said Matthew Piccolo, a policy analyst at the Utah-based Sutherland Institute. “Worse, though, it is getting on a bandwagon that could lead to a federally mandated national curriculum.”

Instead of centralizing education decisions, Piccolo says local control is the best approach.

“Students need an individualized education, not one dictated by educrats 2,000 miles away in Washington,” Piccolo said. “When it comes to education, state and local autonomy are vital for student success.”

Rachel Sheffield (rachel.sheffield@heritage.org) is an education research assistant at The Heritage Foundation.
U.S. Charter School Enrollment Surpasses 2 Million

By Ashley Bateman

More than 500 new public charter schools opened for the 2011–12 school year, bringing the number of students enrolled in charters to more than 2 million, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools announced.

These new charters enrolled approximately 200,000 students. More than 400,000 students are on charter school waiting lists across the nation.

"Several states have made huge progress this year in terms of lifting caps, heightening accountability requirements, and aiming for quality," said Stephanie Grisham, a NAPCS spokeswoman. "It is great to see state legislatures listening to the voice of parents who are demanding more for their children. There is still much work to be done, though, especially with states such as West Virginia that have no charter law at all."

Leading States

NAPCS reports California had the most charter enrollment growth, adding 47,000 new students. It now has 983 operating charter schools.

"What I think we are seeing in California is that the broader public is becoming far more aware and supportive of charter schools," said Jed Wallace, CEO of the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA). "That is leading [to] communities across our state coming to existing charter schools and saying, 'Can you please do more?'"

Los Angeles County has the most charters in the state, currently operating 261 with 30 additions this school year, but "every major county in the state experienced significant growth," according to the CCSA.

"All five states [with the most charter growth] have strong charter laws that allow for opening and replicating high-quality charter schools," Grisham said. "Additionally, these states are among the first to have charter school laws, so that is certainly an additional reason for the number of schools and strong policy environment."

Michigan recently passed legislation uncapping the number of charters allowed in the state and creating requirements for tests and accreditation.

Accountability Equals Improvement

California announced plans to close ten charter schools. Over the past year the state closed 34 charters, the highest number of all the states.

"We are trying in California to have a level of accountability that should be found throughout the public school system," Wallace said. "We have too many charter schools that are persistently underperforming."

Realistic preparation before opening is often the biggest trouble spot for charter schools, though that difficulty has eased through assistance from state authorizers and national organizations, Grisham said.

School Funding Inequality

"On average, charter schools are funded less per pupil than traditional schools," Grisham said. "So if they had more equitable treatment, facilities, transportation, etc., the hurdles would be a bit easier to overcome in the beginning."

While parent and community demand is a recognized factor in charter school growth, state policies are vital to improving and sustaining the schools.

"To operate a new charter school in the state, you embrace taking less money and you don't receive your facility," Wallace said. "In California, if we could assemble the fair funding, fair facilities, and healthy authorizing arrangements, then the charter school movement would be set up to have a level of impact that would be far, far greater."

Continued Expansion Expected

"We're moving from an era of assignment to an era of choice," said James Goenner, president and CEO of National Charter Schools Institute. "They're a vision of schools without boundaries where the money follows the kid—innovation within public education that says, 'You can choose.'"

Grisham said charters will continue to expand in states with robust laws, such as California, Arizona, Colorado, and Minnesota.

"We envision more replication of high-quality schools as demand continues to rise and parents continue to understand and take a more active role in their children's education," Grisham said. "You've got a number of states that are opening up the education sector to more choice and competition. We're going to see more and more people embracing the option to do things differently."

Wallace said charter schools will continue to be recognized as an essential way to improve individuals' prospects and the nation's economy.

"American education doesn't need incremental improvement; we need breakthrough performance," Goenner said. "Those that can do it and replicate it will be in high demand."

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

Number of Charter School Students in 2010-2011

Number of Charter Schools in 2010-2011

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
Still Mediocre Results on 2011 Nation’s Report Card

By Jim Waters

Math proficiency for U.S. fourth and eighth graders poked up just one point over 2010 on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), to 40 and 35 percent respectively, while fourth grade reading proficiency stayed at 34 percent and for eighth graders notched up two points to 34 percent.

“Not to sound flippant, but I don’t really care what our [education] goals are as a nation or locally as long as we have fewer than 40 percent of our students able to meet proficiency standards that are arguably less rigorous than the NAEP of old,” said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform. “While it’s still the gold standard and exposes state tests for being inflated, NAEP has had its own rollbacks, so even a point here or there is nothing to cheer.”

Proponents of No Child Left Behind, the largest federal education law, have pointed to smaller white-minority achievement gaps in recent years as evidence the law has done good. However, the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey notes this gap is still at least 20 points wide and pre-NCLB NAEP scores showed similar or better periods of gains. Forty-two states have shown no significant improvement in NAEP scores since 2009.

“We’ve jumped over a molehill in the prairie while the Colorado Rockies lie before us,” said Richard Innes, an education analyst with Kentucky’s Bluegrass Institute.

High Exclusion Rates

Several states have made questionable progress by excluding high numbers of students from groups that often bring scores down, including learning-disabled students and English Language Learners (ELL).

Maryland and Kentucky lead the states in NAEP gains by learning-disabled children from 2003 to 2011—the years all states participated in the test—on a list compiled by Matthew Ladner, senior advisor for policy and research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Five of the top ten gainers—Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Georgia—violated the 2011 NAEP requirement of including at least 85 percent of all learning-disabled students. Maryland and Kentucky included only 30 to 39 percent of such students. Forty states excluded less than half the proportion of learning-disabled students that Kentucky, Maryland, and New Jersey did in 2011.

Distorting Test Results

Excluding high numbers of ELL and learning-disabled students raises doubts not only about reported NAEP progress but also about whether an apples-to-apples comparison can be made between these states and others that more closely conformed to the inclusion standards.

“Can we imagine that very high exclusion rates for ELL students will not heavily bias the Hispanic number?” Ladner asked. “Or that sky-high special-ed exclusions won’t inflate a variety of subgroup scores? Or that excluding many of both of these subgroups won’t impact your Free and Reduced Lunch-eligible sample?”

Disaggregating for a Fairer Comparison

Disaggregating scores by race and at-risk student groups likely offers a much more accurate picture of a state’s performance, Innes said.

On the eighth-grade math assessment, for example, “a simplistic ranking of scores” places California at number 48. Disaggregating by race while honoring sampling errors, by contrast—as NAEP encourages—reveals white students in California scored comparatively much higher, Innes said.

Huge demographic differences between states like Kentucky, where 84 percent of public school students are white, and California, where 26 percent are white and 52 percent Hispanic, result in distorted state-to-state comparisons.

Complacent Majority

“The complacency that plagues more advantaged Americans has an impact on our ability to fix the problems with our disadvantaged citizens,” Allen said. “As long as a majority believes its schools are great, no bold policy proposals that do away with failure once and for all will gain any meaningful traction.”

The consequences are not limited to American students, Innes pointed out. “There’s enough evidence in the NAEP to say we’ve had a small amount of progress, but it’s very small and it’s not coming fast enough,” Innes said. “At the rate we’re talking about, we’re talking about 50 to 100 years before we get proficiency rates up. And the Chinese aren’t going to wait for us to catch up.”

Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is vice president of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
A Colorado court order calling for massive education funding increases has roiled constitutional scholars and set the stage for a state supreme court ruling after the governor, state education commissioner, and state Board of Education have announced their appeal.

Denver District Court Judge Sheila Rappaport declared Colorado’s school finance system was “not rationally related” to the state constitution’s “thorough and uniform” Education Clause. Her ruling in Lobato v. State requires legislators to spend on K-12 education an additional $2 billion a year above its current $9 billion.

Attorney General John Suthers “was disappointed in the decision, but frankly not surprised,” said his spokesman, Mike Saccone. “It clearly was tempting for the judge to wade into this public policy debate.”

Flawed Methods

Rappaport’s acceptance of the “professional judgment” and “successful schools” criteria to devise a total spending figure drew strong criticism from University of Colorado-Colorado Springs political science professor Joshua Dunn. “There are fundamental problems with both methods, and the court relied on both of these flawed methods,” said Dunn.

In 2005, a group of school districts in Colorado’s rural San Luis Valley and some parents, including the family of Taylor Lobato, then age 14, filed the initial lawsuit in the case, claiming the state did not spend enough money on education to ensure an adequate education. In another October 2009 case, the Colorado Supreme Court narrowly overturned two lower court judgments that school finance was a “political question” for elected representatives to decide.

Dunn says the judiciary should not write policy, because it is free to ignore competing demands for state-budgeted services. “Courts don’t have to consider opportunity costs. That’s why God gave us legislatures,” he said.

Beyond ‘Fast-and-Loose’

Five weeks of proceedings in Rappaport’s courtroom concluded in early September 2011. Large sections of her 189-page ruling, released December 9, were lifted directly from the plaintiffs’ official arguments.

Having surveyed and analyzed hundreds of school finance court rulings, Dunn identifies a uniquely disturbing quality in the Lobato order. Rappaport asserted she did not have to reconcile her decision with the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights and the Gallagher Amendment, voter-approved tax-and-spending limitations in the state constitution.

“I’ve seen decisions where the judge has obviously played fast and loose with the constitutional text,” Dunn said. “I’ve never actually seen a decision where the judge said they could disregard inconvenient portions of the constitutional text.”

If allowed to stand, the decision would compel the state legislature to increase education spending after the 2012 legislative session. Dunn says lawmakers could instead consider removing the judge based on her disregard for the state constitution.

“The judge’s decision provided little practical guidance on how the state should fund a ‘thorough and uniform’ system of public education,” Gov. John Hickenlooper (R) said in announcing his appeal. “Moreover, she did not reconcile this issue with other very relevant provisions of the Constitution.”

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Ohio Considers Vouchers for Lower-Income Families

Continued from page 1

sons be serving some students well. If we want it to be truly choice we should base it on the ability of someone to pay, not geography.”

‘Lightning in a Bottle’
The bill as passed by the state House’s education committee would have granted vouchers to families with annual incomes up to $95,000 or less than 4.6 times the federal poverty line (currently $103,000 for a family of four), whichever is less. The voucher amount would vary by family income, from approximately $2,300 to $4,600, up to a student’s home district per-pupil state funding. In higher-income districts, that amount would be only several hundred dollars.

To garner wider legislative support, Huffman in December promised to change the bill substantially, limiting participants to 1 percent of their home district’s enrollment, tying income eligibility to qualifications for state health coverage, and eliminating a provision allowing parents to spend unused voucher money on college.

“We’re wrestling with the amount of the voucher, source of those funds, and income limits,” Huffman said, “trying to get the right combination for votes. It’s like trying to catch lightning in a bottle to get everyone to agree on one thing.”

The bill also requires a value-added analysis of voucher recipients’ test scores year over year to determine whether the program benefits students educationally.

“In Ohio for the first time, this realizes that school choice is not available to families of limited means,” said Kaleigh Frazier, communications coordinator for School Choice Ohio (SCO), an advocacy group. “A lot of families are excited about the potential opportunities should this bill become a reality.”

Huffman said he expects the bill to pass the Ohio House because of its “strong school choice caucus.”

‘Next Logical Step Forward’
Approximately 10 percent of Ohio’s 1.8 million schoolchildren attend private schools, and 22,000 receive vouchers.

The number of slots in Ohio’s EdChoice program, which grants vouchers to students in low-performing Ohio schools, rose from 14,000 to 30,000 in 2011–12 and will increase to 60,000 in 2012–13 under 2010 legislation. Huffman’s scholarships would be apportioned from this pool, but his legislation also requires increasing the number of scholarships available by one-quarter if applications are more than 90 percent the available number.

“HB 136 is building on the success we have seen with [Ohio’s] other voucher programs,” said Jason Warner, SCO’s government affairs coordinator. “Now is the time to take the next logical step forward and move away from the performance of the building and move towards a need basis, where we’re looking at the financial ability of the parent to provide for a school regardless of where that family lives.”

Opposition from Status Quo
Opposing the bill are Ohio’s two teacher unions and the state school board and administrators associations. They claim it would financially devastate local districts and stick public schools with only the worst students.

“It’s not the job of the public school superintendent to balance the budget of Ohio but secure funds for his district, so I wouldn’t expect him to say, ‘Go ahead and give kids other options to leave this district,’” Huffman said. “It’s not my job to ensure one public school superintendent is happy, but to allow for parents and children to have the education the constitution mandates.”

Education should be arranged to best benefit each student, not systems or the adults who work in them, Warner said.

“There are an awful lot of well-performing school districts out there, but not all students are meeting those same standards in those high-performing public schools,” he said. “We’re trying to provide all students, regardless of where they live and the quality of their district, the opportunity to improve on their learning experience.”

School choice has, in Ohio and elsewhere, led to greater parental satisfaction, more fitting education for individual children, and better schools overall, Huffman noted.

“In the end, it’s about a market concept: When there is more choice, quality goes up and price goes down,” Huffman said. “That’s the fundamental premise here.”

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Setbacks for Pa. Vouchers, School Choice Legislation

By Joy Pullmann

The Pennsylvania House’s Republican majority could not find enough consensus on a voucher bill to bring it to the floor for a vote before lawmakers suspended the session for Christmas. On the same day, the House rejected education tax credit and charter school expansions by a 105–90 vote.

Gov. Tom Corbett (R) had designated vouchers one of four priorities for the two-year legislative session. Pennsylvania’s legislature meets throughout the year, so the intra-party disagreements may mean a vote on the voucher bill may be held off until after the 2012 elections.

The state Senate passed both proposals in October in Senate Bill 1. Corbett’s press secretary said the governor still expects school choice bills to pass this session.

“Legislatively, nothing is ever dead,” said House Republican spokesman Stephen Miskin. “Right now, the votes on either side of the aisle aren’t there.”

SB 1 included vouchers for low-income families in the state’s 144 lowest-performing, largely urban schools, but the House GOP caucus could not muster majority approval in a closed-door meeting even on an amendment limiting that proposal to a five-year pilot for approximately 60 schools.

“For a second straight year, Pennsylvania legislators put their petty internal squabbles above the children’s needs,” said Marc Oestreich, an education policy advisor to The Heartland Institute. “In a state where not one but several school choice proposals were offered, the governor was vocal in his support, and education is in desperate need of a helping hand, politicians faltered.”

A Myriad of Issues

Caucus members raised a variety of objections to the voucher proposal, Miskin said. These included a sense public schools in their districts were successful, concerns over removing funds from public education directly after federal education funding cuts, and disagreements over the state’s current school funding formula.

“I defy anybody to say this is one problem—it’s a whole myriad of issues,” Miskin said. “When you fix this one issue here, all of a sudden you turn off seven other people over there. That’s one of the reasons the approach we were trying to take is not having an omnibus bill.”

In addition to introducing vouchers, SB 1 created a state charter school authorizer, addressed teacher evaluations, and expanded the state’s tax credits for business donations to private school scholarships.

Suburbanites and Special Interests

Jay Ostrich, public affairs director for the Harrisburg-based Commonwealth Foundation, fingered two other reasons for the stalemate: Republican representatives’ constituencies, and special interests.

“Republican representatives are from suburban, not urban failing districts,” he said. “Their schools are working, they believe. They’re hearing from their constituents, ‘Our schools are working. We don’t want to change.’ [But] the failure in some of our schools, whether in your district or not, is costing your constituents dearly.”

At the schools where the voucher bill would have applied, two in three students were not proficient in math or English on state tests. In the class of 2010, 34,000 Pennsylvanian students dropped out, which will cost them $8.4 billion in lifetime earnings. The schools averaged one act of violence every 17 minutes, Ostrich said.

“Our special interests are so deeply rooted within the political scene in Pennsylvania, we have legislators who seem like they are willing to sacrifice the interests of children on the altar of self-interest,” he continued.

‘Educational Lifeline’

Pennsylvania reformers have been trying to implement vouchers since the mid-1990s. Corbett has made the reform a priority of his administration since arriving in office in 2010. Pennsylvania legislators will likely keep the issue afloat.

“This could drag out until the end of session,” Miskin said. “I don’t think it will—nobody wants it to. We’re trying to get it done, but need to get a consensus among ourselves. That will take as long as it takes.”

While legislators dicker, Pennsylvania’s poorest schoolchildren wait, Ostrich said.

“We’re asking for any legislator to answer a few questions. [W]ould they allow their son or daughter to attend these schools? [W]hat are these children supposed to do if we’re not going to throw them an educational lifeline?”

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

Rethink the Structure of Schools, Reports Urge

The basic structure of the U.S. education system has for decades stymied efforts to improve student learning beyond marginal gains, according to a series of reports from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Center for American Progress.

The reports call for rethinking the country’s system of K-12 governance—including per-pupil funding, school boards, school districts, tests, and mayoral control—with the goal of promoting “more profound” education reform.

“Local control should be reinterpreted as vesting control in schools rather than districts, much like charter schools give people a choice among schools,” said Chester Finn Jr., Fordham’s president.

School boards, for example, govern the vast majority of public schools but are often elected at unusual times and usually only by those who have a great interest in their composition, Finn said. This undermines local control in education, giving priority to adult interests such as custodial and teacher unions.

The theory sounds right, but the practice doesn’t keep up with it,” he said.

— Staff Reports

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“We’re asking for any legislator to answer a few questions. [W]ould they allow their son or daughter to attend these schools? [W]hat are these children supposed to do if we’re not going to throw them an educational lifeline?”

Jay Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Hoover Rates 2011 Best and Worst in Education

By Rachel Sheffield

The best education development in 2011 was a school choice “reinvigoration” through vouchers and opportunity scholarships, and the worst was misreporting of the Atlanta cheating scandal that excused guilty teachers and administrators, says a report from Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

“American education is certainly not living up to its potential,” said Williamson Evers, a Hoover research fellow and the report’s coordinator. “We’re one of the highest spenders among the industrialized countries of the world and we’re mediocre in our performance.”

Hoover released the second annual “Best and Worst in American Education” report, compiled by the 11 members of its Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. They propose, debate, and vote to rank the top five positive and negative developments in education each year, aiming to inform the public and shape education reform.

More school choice programs were introduced or expanded in 2011 than in any previous year. The “revival of the almost dead DC program” was particularly notable, Evers said.

“Reauthorization will continue to allow students to leave some of the nation’s lowest-performing public schools,” said Virginia Walden Ford, founder of DC Parents for School Choice. “Expanded school choice programs around the nation will allow students to improve their achievement in “schools that meet their needs.”

Indiana implemented the nation’s largest voucher program, limited collective bargaining, and lifted its charter school cap.

“States that are truly successful look at all aspects of education to move forward,” said Leslie Hiner, a vice president at Indiana’s Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. She praised state legislators for their “child-centered” attitude.

Negative events demonstrated the need for continued reform, Evers said.

“The [Atlanta] scandal itself was horrendous, but also the news media excused it,” he said. “That was troubling, because people will do this again.”

The 2012 presidential elections will offer “a national stage on which to debate education policy,” said task force chairman Chester Finn Jr.

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By Joy Pullmann

A Florida state representative is considering filing legislation to regulate private schools that accept vouchers for disabled students, in light of a scandal involving millions of tax dollars spent fraudulently.

In June 2011 the Miami New Times published information from Florida Department of Education inspector general reports that detailed fraudulent programs the DOE had discovered in the course of its accountability measures for private schools receiving John M. McKay tax-funded scholarships for disabled students. Most of the fingered programs were shut down, or key administrators removed, after the DOE discovery and before the New Times exposé.

The New Times article listed instances such as when “the woefully cash-strapped Florida Department of Education” paid $2 million in McKay vouchers to a school crowding more than 200 children into condemned buildings and, when ousted, taught in public parks.

Administrators at other voucher-receiving schools had criminal records for dealing cocaine, kidnaping, and burglary. Some parents swindled the program by falsifying their children’s test results or school history to gain admission. In total, the DOE had investigated 38 schools and substantiated claims against 25, or 2.5 percent of the 1,013 schools currently participating in the program.

Calls for More Regulation

The report has led one of the program’s sponsors, state Sen. Stephen R. Wise (R-Jacksonville), to call for legislative hearings and state Rep. Rick Kriseman (D-St. Petersburg) to consider sponsoring legislation more heavily regulating McKay recipient schools. Florida’s 2012 session runs January 1 to March 9.

Kriseman wrote to Florida House K-20 Innovation Subcommittee Chair Kelli Stargel (R-Lakeland) on November 29, 2011, as that committee’s ranking Democrat, suggesting several new regulations, including site inspections of all new McKay schools; DOE review of all required school staff background checks; requiring all McKay schools to be public-school-level accredited; that all teachers at McKay schools be state certified; and state review of participating private schools’ curriculum and textbooks.

“It’s been presented as if these are Wild West schools out on their own, and this isn’t the way it works,” said Robert McClure, president and CEO of the Florida-based James Madison Institute. “We turn [McKay private schools] into glorified public schools, Florida’s vast education growth in the past decade will be stunted.”

Freedom-Generated Achievement

McClure highlighted Florida’s dramatic rise in graduation rates and reduction in white-minority achievement gaps within “one of the most dynamic K-12 populations in the country” during the past decade of expanded school choice in the state. Florida hosts the largest digital learning enrollment in the country, tax credit scholarships, and a robust charter sector. It publicly posts grades for all public schools and forbids social promotion for third graders.

Current McKay laws require recipients to be classified disabled by their local public school, as marked by having an Individual Education Plan or 504 Accommodation Plan, both of which are federally defined “disabled student” statuses, and be currently enrolled in a state public school. Schools receiving McKay funds must currently certify all staff having direct contact with students have had background checks and filed fingerprint screenings, meet all applicable state and federal health and safety laws and regulations, and adopt ethical policies for teachers and administrators.

Participating and approved schools must resubmit this compliance information every three years. The Florida DOE also conducts about 10 random inspections of McKay schools each year, said Michael Kooi, director of the state’s Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice.

“When you have programs like this that involve private actors, individuals, or entities, you’ll always have some that try to take advantage of those programs for criminal purposes,” he said.

Fraud in Non-Voucher Schools

Research and history both demonstrate that is true also of public officials and schools, McClure notes. In a 2007 study of school scandals, researchers Greg Forster and Matthew Carr found misconduct slightly more likely in public schools than private schools, despite the comparatively strict regulation of public schools.

A 2011 study of the McKay program by Jay Greene andMarcus Winters found the program reduced the likelihood of over-diagnosing students with a disability and increased academic achievement in public schools. A 2009 report from the same pair concluded McKay restrained special-education funding growth, and earlier research noted it accomplished this to 93 percent parental satisfaction and a 50 percent increase in student needs adequately met over public schools.


Danger of Excess Regulation

Kooi said implementing Kriseman’s suggestions “would require a great deal more resources than what we currently have, particularly the curriculum review.” Reviewing private school curricula, especially in the 65 percent of participating schools that are religious, would “certainly create some excessive state entanglement with religious entities,” he said.

Instead, he notes, the legislature could consider requiring McKay recipient schools to undergo an annual audit and test students yearly, as the Florida Board of Education has already recommended as legislative priorities and is required for the state’s tax credit scholarship program. He also suggests allowing the DOE to inspect participating schools not at random but upon reasonable suspicion or complaint.

“One you start getting engaged in ‘How qualified are their teachers?’ and ‘Is their curriculum acceptable?’ you’re starting to treat them like public schools,” Kooi said.

Joy Pullmann (jpullmann@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News and a research fellow in education policy at The Heartland Institute.
Charter School Unions Mimic Traditional Unions

By Ashley Bateman

Collective bargaining with charter schools, though said to be more flexible and innovative than that with traditional public schools, offers too few advantages to outweigh the restrictions it creates, concludes a recent study.

Currently, teachers in about 12 percent of charter schools have formed unions to negotiate wages, salaries, and work conditions through collective bargaining.

Describing traditional union contracts as “getting larger and more unwieldy,” report author Mitch Price studied whether charters could offer streamlined collective bargaining agreements. He examined nine charter schools with unions and compared their data to that of traditional public schools. Although some charter agreements had creative and unique attributes, the majority mirrored traditional union contracts, Price found.

Autonomy Concerns

Price is a legal analyst for the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Charter leaders prompted the December report, citing concerns about unionization upsetting charter school autonomy and creating a more restrictive, less pioneering environment.

“Teachers and students in charter schools have a very close and well-integrated relationship where teachers share power regularly and are closely involved in important decisions,” said Terry Moe, a Hoover Institution senior fellow.

He continued, “Collective bargaining contracts are designed to promote the occupational interest of teachers by restricting what managers can do, and therefore [the system] becomes more formal and bureaucratic. The best schools are informal, flexible, cooperative, and interactive.”

Charter Union Innovations

In the report, “Are Charter School Unions Worth the Bargain?” Price found labor grievances are often processed more quickly at unionized charter schools than in traditional public schools. Two of the nine charter schools studied did so in fewer than 50 days.

“Improvement and experimentation can still occur, but only after dealing with the provisions of the contract,” said Mike Antonucci, an Education Intelligence Agency specialist. “It won’t happen on a wholesale level until we have many more charter schools.”

Nearly 80 percent of the charter schools Price studied considered performance evaluations when laying off employees, compared to just 25 percent of traditional contracts.

The charter unions directly involved teachers in schools’ organizational decisions and offered broader and more informal resolution processes.

“All but one of the charter school contracts require at least eight-hour workdays, and unspecified ‘professional hours’ are typical, whereas 82 percent of district contracts limit the workday to less than eight hours,” the report noted. Charter contracts tend to have more flexible workdays and school years six days longer than traditional contracts.

“Most charter school contracts involve the employees at a single school, while most traditional public school contracts involve many employees at many schools,” Antonucci said. “If every charter school in a state had to operate under a common contract, there wouldn’t be much room for blanket application of progressive contract language.”

Unionizing Charters

According to the report, 44 percent of traditional public schools converted to charters are unionized, but only 9 percent of “start-ups” are.

Conversion schools often maintain the contracts they already had as traditional public schools, Price said. “Some charter schools are required by federal law to have collective bargaining, some are designed to have them, and others, teachers voted.”

Price found most teacher-voted charter unions had negative origins.

“It was often there was some kind of loss of trust between the management and the teachers,” Price said. “It seemed [unionization] was a reaction to that.”

In other cases, new charters wanted a more systematic teacher evaluation system or to formalize teachers’ role in decision-making.

However, Price noted, “You don’t need a collective bargaining agreement to do that.”

Green Dot Forerunner

States, charter authorizers, teachers, and charter operator Green Dot Public Schools are all factors in charter school unionization.

“Green Dot sought to circumvent union opposition to charters by embracing unionization in its schools,” Antonucci said. “If it works for Green Dot, more power to Green Dot, but if all charter schools followed suit they would soon be indistinguishable from traditional public schools.”

Green Dot operates 17 charter high schools in Los Angeles and has created its own collective bargaining agreement.

“This is collective bargaining with none of the trappings,” Moe said. “They adopted a collective bargaining agreement that is 30 pages long, while most are 200. The teachers didn’t even have tenure.”

Seeking a Foothold

Nonetheless, labor deals between unions and charter schools tend to resemble traditional collective bargaining agreements. Price found this was more common among conversion schools than charter start-ups.

“A lot of people from the unions are coming from the traditional public school system and are bringing that mindset and that template,” Price said.

Charter school unions start off minimal because unions are seeking a foothold in the charter sector, Moe said. Unions are not integral to charter schools, as charters are designed to function outside of traditional restrictions, he said.

“If charter school unions are affiliated with the [National Education Association] and [American Federation of Teachers], they already are traditional public school unions,” Antonucci said. “If their collective bargaining agreements look different, it’s because charters are different, not because the unions are.”

Eventual Effects

“The unionization of charter schools is a bad idea,” Moe said. “It can only lead to greater formalization and greater rigidity in the organizations and more adversarial relations between administrators and teachers. There’s nothing that positive they can accomplish that they can’t accomplish informally.”

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

INTERNET INFO

Ohio’s ‘Excellent’ School Ratings a Farce

By Ashley Bateman

A new study of Ohio’s school report cards reveals a great disparity in student achievement on the state’s ratings and those published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Although more than 40 percent of fourth graders scored at an accelerated or advanced level in reading and math according to Ohio state standards in 2011, the NAEP rated only 9 percent of Ohio’s students at an advanced reading level and 8 percent as such in math.

More than 50 percent of the state’s eighth graders scored at an accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 33.7 percent in math, according to Ohio’s assessment, but the NAEP score showed just 3 percent of eighth-grade students scoring at advanced levels in reading and 8 percent in math.

“States and districts have strong incentives to claim their students are performing at the highest level even when they are not,” said Paul Peterson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. “The problems in Ohio are hardly peculiar to that state. The responsibility of the federal government is to make sure the public is well-informed about the quality of its schools. This study shows that strong action is urgently needed.”

Defining Excellence Down

The study, “Grading on a Curve: The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio’s Schools,” was conducted by Ann Sheldon and Colleen Grady of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children.

“The districts [marked] excellent are getting a lot more money and saying they shouldn’t have to comply with new operating standards,” Sheldon said. “We didn’t have a clue [in 2009] how bad things were.”

The achievement gap widens on Advanced Placement exams. No students took AP exams in 67 districts Ohio rated excellent or excellent with distinction. More than 100 districts with these ratings had below-average ACT scores.

The study also reported 160 districts with these two rankings graduated fewer than 20 percent of their graduating class with honors and 136 districts rated excellent had college remediation rates above the state average.

Goal of ‘Minimum Competencies’

The ultimate authority on the report card system, the Ohio Department of Education, has kept NAEP scores under the radar.

“The NAEP ratings are pretty much buried in the [Ohio Department of Education] Web site,” Sheldon said. “The parents do not know, and the public at large does not know, so it seems as though we’re lulled into this false sense of things going all right, and that is not the case at all.”

ODE officials admit Ohio’s students are not doing as well as publicly reported.

“Our system had been designed to meet minimum competencies, and that is what we must change,” said Patrick Gallaway, ODE associate director of communications. “It is in the best interest of parents and taxpayers that we are providing educational opportunities with the end goal of college- and career-readiness for our students.”

Waiting for Change

Moving Ohio’s assessments online and adapting them to fit Common Core national standards is underway but will not be in place until 2014-15, Gallaway said.

The Common Core is a federally sponsored set of grade-level standards in language arts and math adopted by 45 states. Analysts have determined them less rigorous than many state standards, such as Massachusetts’, but more rigorous than other states’, such as Ohio’s.

“We are working to address the obvious deficiencies of this system,” Gallaway said. “At this point, we are assessing the capacity of school districts and schools to move forward in the project.”

Gallaway said a major focus is ensuring Ohio students are competitive nationally and globally after graduation. The ODE is working with the Ohio Board of Regents to toughen the remedial college work required of students entering state universities, he said.

Sheldon said she shared the study with policymakers, and they “looked at it in shock but did nothing.”

“I think it will have to come from the general assembly or outside pressure,” Sheldon said. “We’re a little organization. All I can hope to do is to put the issue out there and shine a light on the problem. We’ll need more to resolve this.”

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

The Next Steps for Congress

With a mandate for change from the American voters, Congress now must get to work. This booklet aims to bridge the gap between campaign promises and actual governance. In a series of essays, it offers some incremental but bold proposals that would improve public policy and increase individual freedom. Here are practical, positive, forward-looking ideas to protect the environment, improve health care, enhance education, and more.

“Good public policy comes from good ideas. This guide, we believe, provides a group of them.”

– Eli Lehrer

Editor

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The Higher Education Power Shift to Administrators

Review by Jay Lehr

In this heroic book, Benjamin Ginsberg, a political science professor at Johns Hopkins University, examines the great power shift to nonacademic administrators in higher education.

Were the author not such an esteemed academic at one of our greatest universities, this book could be taken as a humorous satire on how administrators are ruining some of our best institutions. As one with previous academic experience and current constant contact with same, however, for me this serious yet grimly funny read rings all too true.

Today, corporate search firms often select college presidents, hiring business managers and fundraisers instead of superior academics. Faculty have virtually no say over who is chosen and, later, little opportunity to judge their performance. In an extreme instance, Virginia Commonwealth University faculty were astounded to discover their administration had signed an agreement with a tobacco company prohibiting professors from publishing research without the company’s permission.

Decades ago, faculty at the University of Pennsylvania’s famous 1993 “water buffalo” episode at the University of Pennsylvania and the 2006 Duke lacrosse team’s tragic story. The book finely summarizes the ups and downs of tenure and offers a wonderful description of Larry Summers, President Bill Clinton’s secretary of the treasury, who was later drummed out of the Harvard University presidency by diversity rage.

Ginsberg also tracked 50 lobbying groups in Washington, DC representing the 5,000 institutions of higher education attempting to milk more and more money from federal taxpayers. Some of their successful lobbying has prevented the public from seeing universities for the businesses they are.

Much of the book reads like investigative journalism, documenting case after case of administrative malfeasance, including fraud, embezzlement, bribery, and kickbacks. Fraud, in fact, appears to be pervasive throughout nonprofits. One study estimated U.S. nonprofits’ theft and embezzlement totaled more than $40 billion per year.

University administrators employ diversity and civility as instruments of managerial power rather than philosophical principles, Ginsberg says. He goes into great detail on this topic, explaining how it has allowed administrators to gain more control over faculty hiring.

Ginsberg's book is a must-read for anyone interested in higher education, as well as those who support the institutions that are being undermined by these changes.

Jay Lehr, Ph.D. (jlehr@heartland.org) is science director of The Heartland Institute.
Fla. Gov. Considers Higher Education Incentives, Costs

By Joy Pullmann

Florida Gov. Rick Scott (R) has publicly released the salaries of all state employees, including state university professors, and requested detailed financial and enrollment information from all 11 state universities in preparation for higher education policy changes.

“I’d like to understand why our universities cost what they cost,” Scott said.

Of 16,000 state university professors, 336 make more than $250,000 a year, while the median professor salary is approximately $65,000. The median salary for all 52,000 state university employees is approximately $40,000. These numbers do not include benefits.

College tuition has nearly quadrupled in the past 25 years, outpacing inflation, growth in median family income, and prices for new cars, homes, and prescription drugs.

Graduates ‘Not Equipped’

Despite these spending increases, “Many university graduates are unable to find jobs in their field of study and many employers are concerned that university graduates are not equipped with the appropriate writing skills, critical thinking skills, and technical expertise needed to succeed,” Scott wrote in a letter to Florida’s state universities.

Scott requested data on how many students and classes top-earning professors teach, graduates’ employment rates, which programs had begun and been closed in the past ten years, the university’s cost and revenue per program, and whether the universities know how many graduates remain in Florida ten years after commencement.

“The only way to ensure increasing levels of performance is by measuring outcomes using objective, data-driven criteria in a fully transparent environment,” Scott wrote.

Linking Funds to Performance

Scott has shown interest in linking state university funding to performance. Earlier this year he noted comparisons in Texas between professor pay and students taught that caused a near-revolt among professors earning high salaries for light teaching and research loads.

“The governor feels like there needs to be transparency, and this is one way he’s made getting access to these public records easy for everybody,” said Lane Wright, Scott’s spokesman.

A panel of business and higher education leaders recommended performance-based higher education to Scott and the state legislature, which is expected to consider the recommendations in its 2012 session. The Higher Education Coordinating Council also recommended incentives for students to study science, technology, engineering, and math; cost and employment-demand studies on new course offerings; and letting colleges and universities operate charter schools.

Bureaucracy, Debt Growth

Between 1993 and 2007, the number of full-time administrators at the nation’s leading universities grew twice as fast as the number engaged in teaching, research, or service, notes a 2010 study from the Goldwater Institute.

Public colleges and universities have received an expected $6.2 billion in budget cuts by legislators in 2010 and 2011 as heavily indebted states attempt to reverse course.

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Internet Info

Florida State Employee Salaries: http://www.floridahasarighttoknow.com/search_state_payroll_info.html

SCHOOL REFORM NEWS

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American Education in the Year 2030: Vouchers Thrive

By Herbert J. Walberg

Informed by evidence as of 2011, this essay speculates on the rise of vouchers through 2030 from the perspective of 2040. For this article, a voucher means a scholarship awarded directly to families to pay private school costs.

Vouchers appropriately gave parents, because they know best and care most about their children, choice in education. Parents could choose their children’s schools just as they chose their names, food, doctors, and much else. No longer could government officials decide what was best for students.

Schools most appealing to parents thrived and multiplied; the least appealing shrank and closed. The voucher system put in place standards and accountability for both private schools and parents. Voters demanded that legislators remove dysfunctional programs and regulations unfairly advantaging some industries, firms, and public organizations over others.

The seemingly radical, vastly increased privatization fit traditional American ideals of freedom, individualism, and self-determination, harnessing Americans’ world-beating optimism and strengths in invention, entrepreneurship, and pragmatism. The private provision of schooling, as in other fields, produced much better achievement outcomes. Following stunning Asian examples of high achievement and fast economic growth, the American economy made commensurate economic strides.

Government-provided services and their agencies had been gigantically difficult to change constructively, efficiently, and peaceably. Dominated by special interests and subsidized to the point of monopoly, they lacked capitalism’s incentives to invent, improve, and compete to serve customers.

Voluminous evidence showed private organizations generally yield better results at lower costs. Privatizing government yielded better satisfaction from customers and employees. In the United States and other countries, studies of successful privatizations involved airlines, banks, bus service, debt collection, electric utilities, hospitals, insurance, railroads, savings and loans, utilities, and weather forecasting.

**Americans Reassert Themselves**

Public schools’ downfall accelerated in 2015 not only because of poor results and parent dissatisfaction but because they threatened America’s economy and society. Private and semiprivate schools predominated by 2030 because distinctively American traditions had reasserted themselves, including the exceptional American preference for individuals’ responsibility for their lives and prosperity.

Early one-room American schools run by nearby citizens befit the views of the American Founders and early immigrants who wanted freedom from centralized government control. Later immigrants came for the same reason. But beginning a century ago, control of schools became increasingly centralised and ruled by federal, state, and local officials often in conflict. In this complex and unaccountable system, powerful and sophisticated special interests, particularly public-sector unions, overpowered local citizens and parents’ interests and undermined student well-being.

Repeatedly failing public schools seldom closed. Similarly, multibillion-dollar federal school programs for poor, handicapped, and English-language learners continued largely unreformed for decades, though large-scale evaluations had demonstrated their failure.

**Shift in Public Opinion**

By 2015, citizens understood the public school crisis. National surveys showed they had astonishingly strong views about what to do, including demanding more accountability. Many thought students in repeatedly failing schools should be allowed to transfer; others saw a need for replacing faculty or closing such schools altogether.

Students also thought their schools lax. For example, a Public Agenda national survey of high school students showed three-fourths believed stiffer examinations and graduation requirements would make students study more.

Progress required substantial reforms, including innovative organizations geared to new technologies. By 2010, virtual schools served some 187,000 students in 24 schools, including 62,000 in the Utah Electronic High School and 54,000 in Florida’s Virtual School.

The most important evidence for K-12 privatization was that charter schools, private schools, and vouchers definitively promoted student achievement gains, cost efficiency, and parent satisfaction. Contrary to what some had feared or alleged, students in charter and private schools were no less “socialized” but rather more often participated in voluntary charitable activities such as tutoring younger and hospitalized children.

The potential of school choice and privatization had been underestimated, perhaps because the relatively small numbers of choice schools were insufficient to produce strong competitive effects on other schools.

**School Choice Spreads Worldwide**

Unlike the United States, several East Asian countries directly funded privately run schools of all types. Parents could choose their children’s schools regardless of ability, ethnicity, or socio-economic level.

New private schools grew in a broad cross-section of neighborhoods. Indicating bottled-up demand, the number of private schools rose fivefold. The new policy led to increased competitiveness, improved student achievement, and greater parental satisfaction.

It was ironic that, among Western countries, “socialist” Sweden rather than “capitalist” America successfully pioneered parental choice in education. But even in 2010 the United States had two huge advantages that would allow it to lead in K-12 education choice by 2030: the longstanding American preference for citizens’ self-determination over government control, and Americans’ spirit of innovation, inspiration, and entrepreneurship.

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